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CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

GOD OF FRIENDSHIP: HERMAN HOEKSEMA'S
UNCONDITIONAL COVENANT CONCEPTION

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF THEOLOGY

THEOLOGICAL DIVISION

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

BY
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THESIS APPROVAL

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“God of Friendship: Herman Hoeksema’s
Unconditional Covenant Conception.”

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the requirements for the degree of

Master of Theology

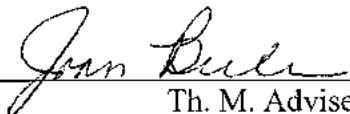
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Prof. Richard Muller, Supervisor

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August 1, 2014
Date

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DEDICATION

To Daniel, departed and in glory, whose parents rejoice in God's covenant promise "to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Genesis 17:7).

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the doctrine of the covenant of grace as developed by the Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965). In the thesis I will focus particularly on Hoeksema's teaching that the covenant of grace is unconditional, both in its establishment and its maintenance. I will demonstrate that already in the early 1920s, while yet a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, Hoeksema's understanding of the covenant was impacted by his convictions concerning election. Throughout his lifetime Hoeksema never wavered from his fundamental view of the covenant of grace in its relationship to God's sovereign, gracious decree of election.

Hoeksema formulated his views already in the early years of his ministry, especially in connection with his writing for the rubric "Our Doctrine" in the periodical of the Christian Reformed Church, the *Banner*. Hoeksema served as editor of this department and wrote regularly—nearly every week—for four years, from September 1918 through September 1922. In these articles, in which he traced the historical development of the kingdom of God, kingdom and covenant often intersect. Soon after he was terminated as an editor of the *Banner*, Hoeksema and others founded a new religious periodical, the *Standard Bearer*, of which he was editor-in-chief for some forty years. It was in the pages of the *Standard Bearer* that he continued to develop his understanding of the doctrine of the covenant, as well as his polemic against those who departed from the biblical and confessional line.

It was especially in his book *De geloovigen en hun zaad*, that Hoeksema first set forth his unconditional covenant view. The contents of this book originally appeared as a

series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* in 1927. Later the book was translated into English and published under the title *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*.

Hoeksema's position that fellowship with God is the essence of the covenant, that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, and that the covenant is established and maintained unconditionally, represented divergence from at least some of the instruction he had received in his seminary training, as well as the prevailing consensus among both Dutch and American Reformed theologians. This is not to say that there is no support for Hoeksema's unconditional covenant view within the tradition; as a matter of fact, there is strong support, as I will indicate. More importantly, however, as far as Hoeksema was concerned, he was convinced that his position was supported by Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

Hoeksema faced a significant challenge to his position in the controversy over the covenant that raged—not too strong a word—in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the 1950s. This controversy was precipitated by those in the PRCA who wanted to receive into the denomination the post-World War II immigrants to the United States and Canada who had left the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated). These immigrants and their supporters agreed with Dr. Klaas Schilder, who taught that the covenant is conditional and includes all the natural children of believers, and thus, more than only the elect.

Throughout his ministry Hoeksema remained committed to essentially the same doctrine of the covenant. Steadfastly he maintained that the essence of God's covenant of grace is friendship, that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, and that the covenant is unconditional. As I will demonstrate, although Hoeksema developed in his

understanding of the covenant throughout his nearly fifty-year career as minister of the gospel, professor of theology, author, and editor of a leading Reformed periodical, he did not deviate from the main lines of the covenant conception that he articulated already in the early years of his ministry.

In addition, I will demonstrate that in taking the position that the essence of God's covenant of grace is friendship, that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, and that the covenant is unconditional Hoeksema was consciously centering his covenant conception within the Reformed tradition. His view was not novel. He was not taking a position on the fringe, much less outside of the Reformed tradition. Rather, Hoeksema enthusiastically embraced a doctrine of the covenant that was developed by leading Reformed theologians from the Reformation onward and made it his own.

Chapter 1

The Covenant as a Bond of Friendship

Introduction: Covenant as the Structure of Revelation

No doctrine is more characteristically Reformed than the doctrine of the covenant. It is not an exaggeration to say that “Reformed theology is covenant theology.”¹ While it is undoubtedly true that “[b]iblical religion is covenantal religion” inasmuch as “[b]iblical history is punctuated by God’s covenants with individuals and with peoples, and the teaching of the Old and New Testaments is set in a covenant framework,” it is especially in the Reformed branch of the Christian church that covenant has come into its own.² More than a century ago, Dr. Geerhardus Vos asserted “[T]here is general agreement that the doctrine of the covenants is a peculiarly Reformed doctrine. It emerged in Reformed theology where it was assured of a permanent place and in a way that has also remained confined within these bounds.”³ Historically in Reformed churches, there has been “[s]uch an...emphasis on the scriptural doctrine of the covenant of grace as you find nowhere else.”⁴ Dennis Bratcher expresses the judgment that

[t]o none but Reformed people is the doctrine of the covenant so precious. It forms the spiritual and theological context into which they are born and nurtured. The covenant is the context from

¹ I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings*, second edition (New York: Reformed Church Press, 1988), 57.

² Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 2.

³ Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 234.

⁴ H. Henry Meeter, *The Basis Ideas of Calvinism*, sixth edition, revised by Paul A. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 48.

which they learn to understand God and His works, the Church, the world, and themselves.⁵

Although it is indeed true that “almost every variety of Christian theology admits that the biblical covenants establish a central framework that holds the story of the Bible together,”⁶ it is uniquely true that in Reformed theology the doctrine of the covenant has been given its due.

In his book, which serves as an introduction to the Reformed faith, R. Michael Allen devotes his second chapter to “Covenant.” He begins the chapter by stating that “more than any other major theological tradition, Reformed theology has insisted that the ways and works of God must be interpreted” from the viewpoint of covenant. He goes on to state that from the perspective of Reformed theology

[t]he doctrine of covenant permeates the Bible, appearing in various books and across the testaments, and has been employed by Reformed thinkers to describe the form of God’s fellowship with humanity. From the Hebrew *berith* to the Greek *diatheke* to the Latin *pactum*, covenant terminology has loomed large in [Reformed] biblical and theological scholarship.⁷

A bit later, Allen informs his readers that

[w]hile a certain brand of Reformed theology has oftentimes been called “covenant theology,” all Reformed theology involves attending to the nature of God’s covenantal life with humanity.... For some decades and across a couple of centuries, “federal theology” was the dominant form of Reformed theology.... To this day, many conservative Reformed churches continue to affirm [“federal theology”] as the most biblical approach to...Scripture.⁸

⁵ Dennis A. Bratcher, *The Concepts of Conditionality and Apostasy in Relation to the Covenant* (ThM diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1986), 1.

⁶ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 22.

⁷ R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology, Doing Theology* (London: T and T Clark, 2010), 34.

⁸ Allen, *Reformed Theology*, 34-5.

This is not to say that there have not been dissenting voices. There has been a vocal minority who took exception to making covenant the overarching dogma of Scripture. One dissenter was James Orr (1844-1913), the Scottish Presbyterian theologian whose *The Progress of Dogma* has been for many years a standard text and reference work for those studying the development of Christian dogma. Orr disapproved elevating covenant to the status of the organizing principle for all other fundamental dogmas of the church. He writes:

No doubt there is a Scriptural idea at the heart of the conception and it had the conspicuous merit of introducing the idea of historical progress into the study of the Biblical revelation.... But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the Covenant as an exhaustive category, and attempting to force into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds desirous of simple and natural notions.⁹

Not only was Orr opposed to making covenant the organizing principle for all of theology, but he was especially critical of what had come to be known as the “covenant of works.” “It is impossible,” wrote Orr “...to justify by Scriptural proof the detailed elaboration of the idea of a covenant of works in Eden, with its parties, conditions, promises, threatenings, sacraments, etc.”¹⁰

More recently Dr. John Stek, Professor of Old Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary, voiced his objections to those like Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, and Herman Hoeksema, who suggested that covenant should be exalted to so lofty a position that it serve as the organizational structure of all biblical revelation. He expressed his consternation in an article published in the *Calvin Theological Journal* with the title “‘Covenant’ Overload in Reformed Theology.” Stek begins his article by noting that

⁹ James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), 303.

¹⁰ Orr, *Progress of Dogma*, 303.

[t]he Reformed tradition has loaded ‘covenant’ with an enormous weight of theological freight. For this it is widely known, and in this it has taken considerable pride. It is the thesis of this essay, however, that in Reformed theology ‘covenant’ has been heavily overloaded.¹¹

Stek contends further that “[i]n a world not invaded by sin, there would be no need...for ‘covenants’.... Biblical covenants were ad hoc emergency measures occasioned by and ministering to human weaknesses—until the kingdom of God has fully come.”¹² And that is what Stek recommends as the replacement for covenant: kingdom.

In Scripture covenants are always ad hoc instruments for advancing God’s kingdom purposes among his stumbling people. God’s kingship (-dom) is the Bible’s *primary* and *pervasive* theme—from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. Let God’s kingdom take the central integrating role in Reformed theology and that theology will be more truly biblical. It was, after all, not Jesus’ will that his disciples pray, “Your covenant come,” but that they pray, “Your *kingdom* come.”¹³

What Stek overlooks is that, while it is indeed true that the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer is “Thy Kingdom come,” the covenant of grace is indicated already in the opening address of the prayer, in what the Heidelberg Catechism calls “the foundation of our prayer,” which address is “Our Father.”¹⁴

Dr. William B. Evans, a minister in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and Professor of Bible and Religion at Erskine College in Due West, South Carolina, has picked up and reiterated Stek’s complaint. In an article published in 2010 in the *Westminster Theological Journal* entitled “Déjà Vu All Over Again? The Contemporary Reformed Soteriological Controversy in Historical Perspective,” Evans bemoans the fact

¹¹ John Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload in Reformed Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29, no. 1 (April 1994): 12.

¹² Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload,” 40.

¹³ Stek, “‘Covenant’ Overload,” 41.

¹⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Q.A. 120, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 136.

that “conservative Reformed communities in America have been in large measure shaped by [the] late federal textbook tradition of Hodge, Dabney, and Berkhof.”¹⁵ He also expresses “dissatisfaction with certain concepts and schemas that have been taken for granted more recently by the federal theology tradition together with a sense that they have obscured rather than illuminated certain key scriptural themes.”¹⁶ He judges that

the history of the tradition shows that Reformed theologians have been arguing over issues of covenant definition, as well as the dialectic of covenant conditionality and unconditionality, for almost four hundred years, and these debates are not abating. There are also signs of fatigue within the conservative Reformed community over these problems.¹⁷

Evans’ conclusion on the basis of the ongoing debate over covenant among Reformed theologians is that “[t]here is...need for [more] careful reflection on the role and place of the covenant theme in Reformed theology,” suggesting that “any definition of conservative Reformed identity that implicitly or explicitly excludes Calvin [as apparently ‘covenant’ does in Evans’ view] is probably not sustainable.”¹⁸ In a later article included in the online web magazine *The Aquila Report*, entitled “Let’s Rethink this ‘Covenant’ Issue, Shall We?” beneath which is added, “On the other hand, we could just continue to rehash the same old issues in the same old ways,” Evans reiterates his concerns over the use of covenant to organize and prioritize biblical revelation. After expressing agreement with John Stek once again, Evans says, “I would argue that this pervasive covenantalism has in fact led to some serious problems.”¹⁹ Evans identifies what he considers to be four “serious problems” related to “pervasive covenantalism.” In

¹⁵ William B. Evans, “Déjà Vu All Over Again? The Contemporary Reformed Soteriological Controversy in Historical Perspective,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 72, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 137.

¹⁶ Evans, “Déjà Vu,” 139.

¹⁷ Evans, “Déjà Vu,” 150.

¹⁸ Evans, “Déjà Vu,” 150-1.

¹⁹ William B. Evans, “Let’s Rethink This ‘Covenant’ Issue, Shall We,” *The Aquila Report*, 1. <http://www.theaquilareport.com/lets-rethink-this-covenant-issue-shall-we/> (accessed August 20, 2013).

summary they are: 1) The question of the biblical support for pervasive covenantalism; 2) The simple problem of definition; 3) The problem of oscillation between legalism and antinomianism; and 4) The obscuring of the unity and concreteness of salvation in Christ.²⁰

Evans' article provoked a critical response by the Rev. Larry Ball, a retired teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America. In a rejoinder entitled "Are the Old Calvinists Giving Up Covenant Theology? Rejoicing in a revival of Calvinism but concerned that this Calvinism without covenant theology is insufficient," Ball expresses the judgment that "Calvinism without covenant theology still borders on theological poverty." He adds:

What is missing [in contemporary Reformed theology] is covenant theology that has traditionally distinguished Reformed Presbyterians from Reformed Baptists, and now distinguishes Reformed Presbyterianism from the Young, Restless, and Reformed.²¹ In my opinion, even though the church is much richer because of these movements, yet these movements miss the important mark of understanding and promoting covenant theology and thus leave the church and the Christian deficient.²²

Robert Duncan Culver is yet another contemporary theologian who objects to covenantal (federal) theology. Culver, retired professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, writing in his *magnum opus*—a hefty twelve-hundred-page tome, which is the fruit of a lifetime of study, teaching, and reflection—*Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, objects to those "especially in Reformed-Presbyterian circles, [who] have come to define much of their whole theology in terms of

²⁰ Evans, "Let's Rethink," 2-5.

²¹ Ball is referring to the Rev. Kevin DeYoung's blog maintained on behalf of the Gospel Coalition. DeYoung is the senior pastor of the University Reformed Church in East Lansing, MI.

²² Larry Ball, "Are the Old Calvinists Giving Up Covenant Theology?" *The Aquila Report*, 1. <http://www.theaquilareport.com/are-the-old-calvinists-giving-up-covenant-theology/> (accessed December 24, 2013).

‘covenant’.... There has always been a healthy section of Calvinists...who either ignored or rejected the distinctive features of what has come to be called ‘covenant theology.’”

Like Orr before him, Culver finds the teaching of the covenant of works especially objectionable: “No mention of any special ‘covenant’ of works...appears in [the] story in Genesis or any subsequent passage of Scripture....”²³

While granting that “[t]he unity of the Bible is...built upon a two-age, two-covenant conception, within which the individual covenants play their respective roles in the unfolding drama of a continuous history of salvation,” Scott Hafemann also hesitates to make “the ‘covenant relationship’...the one, central theme of the Bible.” His hesitation arises from his observation that “[t]he attempt to isolate such a theme has proved to be too specific to gain a consensus or too general to be of explanatory power.” He prefers to regard the covenant relationship as “provid[ing] the *structure* that serves to integrate the interrelated themes developed throughout the history of redemption delineated in the Scriptures.” The result is that

[l]ike the hub and rim of a wheel respectively, the old (establishment) and new (restoration and consummation) covenants define and hold together the different ‘spokes’ of divine revelation manifested in the words and deeds of redemptive history. In so doing, the covenant becomes the interpretive lens for seeing clearly the conceptual and historical unity of the Bible in the midst of its diversity.²⁴

Notwithstanding his hesitation, Hafemann does for all practical purposes identify the covenant as the central theme of the Bible, for it is his judgment that covenant unifies the diversity of God’s revelation in Scripture.

²³ Robert Duncan Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, 2nd ed (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 855.

²⁴ Scott J. Hafemann, “The Covenant Relationship,” in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 23.

The unity of the Bible is therefore built upon a two-age, two-covenant conception, within which the individual covenants play their respective roles in the unfolding drama of a continuous history of salvation. The various covenants and stages of redemptive history are distinguished by the increasing knowledge of God's unified purposes and the manner of their accomplishment, climaxing in the coming and return of the messianic Son of God.... This is reflected in the fact that the same covenant formula remains the purpose of God from the covenant with Abraham, through the Sinai covenant, to its consummation in the new covenant. Since this relationship is the means by which God reveals his glory. The specific content of the covenant provisions, stipulations and promises develops as time goes on, but there remains *one* covenant people, in two epochs, with *one* kind of covenant relationship that spans the individual covenants of redemptive history.²⁵

It is worth noting that Hafemann, too, is opposed to the traditional covenant of works doctrine. He writes that

the covenant stipulations that flowed from God's provision [for Adam and Eve], both positive and negative, were not opportunities to earn from God something they did not already have. Rather, they were an expression of what dependence on God would look like in view of his pronouncement that what he had made for Adam and Eve was 'very good' (Gen. 1:31), that is, sufficient to meet their needs.²⁶

In his view,

[t]he historical development within the Bible does not proceed from a creation order with humanity based on obedience to a qualitatively different order with Abraham based on faith, only to return to an obedience-based relationship with Israel. Rather, God's original covenant relationship with humanity before the fall based on creation is re-established with both Abraham and Israel as an act of redemption.²⁷

Despite the dissenters, it remains historically accurate to affirm that Reformed theology has generally given pride of place to the doctrine of the covenant. It has

²⁵ Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship," 29-30.

²⁶ Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship," 41.

²⁷ Hafemann, "Covenant Relationship," 47.

generally viewed “covenant” not only as a fundamental doctrine of Holy Scripture, but as *the* doctrine of all other doctrines. So far as Reformed theology is concerned, “covenant” is paradigmatic. The American Presbyterian theologian John Murray avers that

[c]ovenant theology denotes a development of theological thought and construction within the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition.... Covenant theology is... a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition because the idea of covenant came to be an organizing principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed.”²⁸

The eminent Presbyterian theologian and longtime professor at Princeton Seminary, Benjamin B. Warfield, considered the doctrine of the covenant to be the “architectonic principle of the Westminster Confession” and gave it the “dominant position as the most commodious mode of presenting the *corpus* of Reformed doctrine....”²⁹ The Presbyterian philosopher/theologian Gordon H. Clark expressed the judgment that “[t]he idea of a covenant permeates Scripture.”³⁰ In another place he asserts that the doctrine of the covenant is a distinctively Reformed doctrine.

Presbyterian and Reformed denominations have historically taught “Covenant Theology.” That is to say, these churches have viewed the Scripture as a developing revelation—developing from a less detailed to a more detailed form—of a single plan of salvation. This single theme, the Bible calls a covenant; and by this covenant between God and his people, the latter are prepared for and are brought to its complete fruition in heaven.³¹

In his book on the covenant of grace, *God of Promise*, Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary California, put it this way:

²⁸ John Murray, “Covenant Theology,” *Collected Writings of John Murray: Studies in Theology/Reviews*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 4:216.

²⁹ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 56.

³⁰ Gordon H. Clark, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man* (Jefferson: The Trinity Foundation, 1984), 59.

³¹ Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement* (Jefferson: The Trinity Foundation, 1987), 17.

While some friends and critics of Reformed kingdom theology have reduced Calvinism to “five points,” or further still, to predestination, the actual confessions, catechisms, and standard doctrinal works of the Reformed tradition all testify to a far richer, deeper, and all-embracing faith in the God of the covenant. *Reformed* theology is synonymous with *covenant* theology.³²

This was the view of the doctrine of the covenant held by the great nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). Bavinck’s judgment was that “covenant is the essence of true religion.”³³ And he judged that “[f]or dogmatics as well as for the practice of the Christian life, the doctrine of the covenant is of the greatest importance.”³⁴ “Basing itself on Scripture,” the Reformed faith “consistently viewed the true religion of the Old and the New Testament as a covenant between God and humans....”³⁵ In his book *Saved By Grace*, Bavinck spoke of “the deep and glorious concept of the covenant, which occupies such an important place in Reformed doctrine.” Whereas “[o]ther churches... ascribe to it merely a subordinate value,” the Reformed acknowledge its preeminence. And he concluded that “apart from this doctrine of the covenant, the Reformed confessions and Reformed theology cannot be understood at any point whatsoever.”³⁶ Reflecting on Bavinck’s regard for the doctrine of the covenant, Brian Mattson remarks that “[t]o reject Bavinck’s covenant scheme is to unwittingly jettison something of a *raison d’etre* of his entire theology along with it.”³⁷

³² Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 11.

³³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:569.

³⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:212.

³⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:212.

³⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Saved By Grace: The Holy Spirit’s Work in Calling and Regeneration*, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, ed. and intro. J. Mark Beach (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 66.

³⁷ Brian G. Mattson, *Restored to Our Destiny: Eschatology and the Image of God in Herman Bavinck’s Reformed Dogmatics* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 6.

The General Synod of Sneek-Utrecht (1939-1944) met in order to address growing tensions in the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) between the *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* factions within the denomination, including growing tensions over the doctrine of the covenant. In the statement that the synod issued, it affirmed the central importance of the covenant for the faith and life of the church. Despite whatever differences among theologians and members there might be, the importance of the covenant must be recognized by all.

- a. On the Covenant of grace.
1st. that the Covenant of grace is of such a fundamental significance to the life of faith, that the preaching of God's Word as well as any other labour in the church must have its starting-point in it, and that any presentation or practice that would strain the significance of God's Covenant should be avoided.³⁸

Even though Dr. Klaas Schilder differed sharply with Herman Hoeksema over the doctrine of the covenant, on the matter of the central importance of the doctrine he agreed with Hoeksema completely. They are mistaken, wrote Schilder, who suppose "that there can be a relationship between God and man without covenant of any kind."³⁹ Schilder went so far as to say that "every decree of the triune God is essentially a covenant decision."⁴⁰

The centrality of the covenant goes all the way back to the Reformation. Expressing the consensus opinion of Reformed theologians, M. Eugene Osterhaven has written that

[a]mong the many theological contributions that came to the church through the Reformation of the sixteenth century was the

³⁸ Quoted in J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), 119.

³⁹ Klaas Schilder, *Heaven: What Is It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 86.

⁴⁰ Schilder, *Heaven*, 97.

doctrine of the covenant. Undeveloped in the preceding centuries, it made an early appearance in the Reformed Church in Zwingli and Bullinger who were driven to the subject by Anabaptists in and around Zurich. From them it passed to Calvin and other Reformers, was further developed by the successors of the latter, and came to play a dominant role in much Reformed theology of the seventeenth and later centuries.⁴¹

Although, as all recognize, Calvin did not make covenant an organizing principle of his theology, he did place great importance on the doctrine both in his commentaries and theological writings, especially it would seem in his later years. In the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin begins his discussion of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments by saying that “[n]ow we can clearly see...that all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us.”⁴²

It is likely that the English Bible translator and Protestant martyr, William Tyndale, was the first in his day to propose viewing all of the doctrines of Scripture from the standpoint of the covenant. Although he never wrote a major theological treatise in which he implemented his proposal, in the “Prologue” to his translation of the Pentateuch, written in 1534, Tyndale advised his readers: “Seek therefore in the scripture, as thou readest it, chiefly and above all” to discern “the covenants made between God and us.... For all the promises throughout the whole scripture do include a covenant....”⁴³

⁴¹ Osterhaven, M. Eugene, “Calvin on the Covenant,” in *An Elaboration of the Theology of Calvin, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: A Fourteen-Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles* 8, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1992), 75.

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.10.1, 1:428.

⁴³ William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 1, ed. for The Parker Society by Rev. Henry Walter (Cambridge: The University Press, 1848-9), 403.

Heinrich Bullinger was the first actually to organize the whole of theology around the central doctrine of the covenant. Completed in 1533, but not published until 1534—as it turned out, an eventful year in the development of the doctrine of the covenant—Bullinger’s “A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God” (the original Latin title is *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno*) treats all the main doctrines of the Reformed faith in their relationship to the overarching doctrine of the covenant. Covenant is *the* subject of all Scripture: “The entire sum of piety consists in these very brief main points of the covenant. Indeed, it is evident that nothing else was handed down to the saints of all ages, throughout the entire Scripture, other than what is included in these main points of the covenant....”⁴⁴

It was on account of the work of these early Reformers that the doctrine of the covenant was inherited both by the Dutch and German Reformed, as well as by the Presbyterians and Puritans of the British Isles. But within both branches of the Reformed faith, there would be controversy among the beneficiaries—as is so often the case with substantial inheritances.

The Contemporary Resurgence of Interest in Covenant

In the last half-century, there has been a resurgence of interest in covenant theology. Contemporary biblical scholars, from a wide range of viewpoints and out of varying traditions, have come to recognize the important place of the doctrine of the covenant in the whole of Christian theology. The Swiss Reformed neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) is regarded by many as one of the most influential

⁴⁴ Heinrich Bullinger, “A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God,” trans. Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker in *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 112.

thinkers of the twentieth century. In his book *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, Barth notes the essential place of the covenant in theology and emphasizes the important role of the covenant in the structuring of all biblical revelation.

The Word of God is Gospel, that is, the good word, because it declares God's *good* work. In this Word, God's work itself becomes speech. Through his Word, God discloses his work in his *covenant* with man, in the history of its establishment, maintenance, accomplishment, and fulfillment. In this very way he discloses himself (both his holiness and his mercy) as man's father, brother, and friend. At the same time, however, he discloses his power and his eminence as the possessor, Lord, and judge of man. He discloses himself as the *primary* partner of the covenant—himself as *man's* God. But he also discloses *man* to be his creature, the debtor who, confronting him, is unable to pay. Man is lost in his judgment, yet also upheld and saved by his grace, freed for him and called by him to service and duty. He discloses man as God's man, as God's son and servant who is loved by him. Man is thus the other, the secondary, partner of the covenant. The revelation of the primacy of God and the station of man in the covenant is the work of God's word. This covenant (in which God is man's God and man is God's man) is the content of the Word of God; and God's covenant, history, and work with man are the contents of his Word which distinguish it from all other words. This Logos is the creator of theology. By it, theology is shown its place and assigned its task. Evangelical theology exists in the service of the Word of God's covenant of grace and peace.⁴⁵

In his introduction to the 1990 reprint of Herman Witsius' *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, J. I. Packer, a representative of the low church Anglican and Reformed traditions, asks the question, "What is covenant theology?"

The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretative procedure yielding a

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 19-20. The first five chapters of this book, including the chapter from which this quotation is taken, "The Word," were delivered in 1962 at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and were also delivered as "The Annie Kinkead Warfield Lectures of 1962" at the Princeton Theological Seminary. This was Barth's only visit to the United States.

consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself. Covenant theology is a case in point.⁴⁶

A bit later in the same article, Packer writes:

Similarly, we may, and I think often do, study such realities as God's promises; faith; the plan of salvation; Jesus Christ the God-man, our prophet, priest and king; the church in both testaments, along with circumcision, Passover, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the intricacies of Old Testament worship and the simplicities of its New Testament counterpart; the work of the Holy Spirit in believers; the nature and standards of Christian obedience in holiness and neighbor-love; prayer and communion with God; and many more such themes, without noticing that these relational realities are all covenantal in their very essence. As each Polynesian island is anchored in the Pacific, so is God's resolve to relate to his human creatures, and have us relate to him, in covenant—which means, in the final analysis, a way for man to relate to God that reflects facets of the fellowship of the Son and the Spirit with the Father in the unity of the Godhead. From this, perhaps, we can begin to see how big and significant a thing the covenantal category is both in biblical theology and in real life.⁴⁷

Graeme Goldsworthy, widely recognized as a leader of the present-day biblical theology movement, considers covenant to be the grand unifying concept of the Old and New Testaments. He writes:

This covenant, then, consists in being called the people of God. Every later expression of this [covenantal] relationship stems from the original covenant. We discover that this promise to the forefathers of Israel (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) becomes the basis of the relationship of *all* the people of God in the Bible. Even in the New Testament the concept of being the children of Abraham is transferred to those who by faith embrace the gospel (Galatians 3:29). Every Christian is a son or daughter of Abraham!⁴⁸

⁴⁶ J. I. Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology," in Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990 repr.), 1.i.

⁴⁷ Packer, *Introduction*, 1.ii.

⁴⁸ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1981), 53. Emphasis is mine, RLC.

In the same vein, R. C. Sproul observes that “Reformed theology has been nicknamed ‘Covenant theology,’” and goes on to say:

Every written document has a structure or format by which it is organized. Paragraphs have subjects and chapters have focal points. Reformed theology sees the primary structure of biblical revelation as that of covenant. This is the structure by which the entire history of redemption is worked out.⁴⁹

David McKay, in his book on the doctrine of the covenant, *The Bond of Love: God’s Covenantal Relationship with His Church*, asserts that “The theme of God’s covenant with his people runs all the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and relates in one way or another to every area of theology...the approach adopted by Covenant Theology serves to show the wonderful unity of God’s revelation to us, without in any way hiding its rich diversity.”⁵⁰

In their book *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe*, Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears express the view that the great purpose of God in the covenant is “to address the problem of the human race and of the entire created order. Across the Old Testament echo the promises and relationships in the covenants that will redeem God’s people and restore God’s sin-alienated creation to himself.”⁵¹ In their “Introduction” to the book of which they are the editors, *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives*, Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson judge that “Covenant spreads its wings throughout the Bible. It is a theme we cannot ignore if we desire to

⁴⁹ R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 99.

⁵⁰ David McKay, *The Bond of Love: God’s Covenantal Relationship with His Church* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), 7.

⁵¹ Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 178.

know the God of the Scriptures, because he reveals himself as a ‘covenant-making and covenant-keeping God’”⁵²

In his book on the doctrine of Holy Scripture, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God*, Timothy Ward expresses agreement with the Reformed consensus that sees covenant on the opening pages of Scripture and views God’s dealings with humankind from the very beginning as covenantal.

Although the word “covenant” is not used in these opening chapters of Genesis, it has commonly been thought that God relates to Adam and Eve in a *covenantal* manner, that is, according to the same pattern he will repeat constantly in his ongoing relationships with his human creatures, and that will become the fundamental characteristic of his redemptive relationship with humanity.⁵³

Ward goes on to demonstrate his thesis that Scripture is “the book of the covenant” and that it is in harmony with “the very nature of the covenant that God has established and revealed progressively through time that its stipulations and history, as a witness to God’s faithfulness to it . . . be written down.”⁵⁴ Thus, “[t]heologically Scripture is the means by which the Father presents his covenant to us, and therefore the means by which he presents himself to us as the faithful God of the covenant.”⁵⁵

Greg Nichols has served as instructor in systematic theology at Reformed Baptist Seminary for over thirty years. In the “Introduction” to his book *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God’s Covenants*, he begins by stating that

God planned salvation in eternity. He revealed it in a framework that he himself designed and formed. Christ’s person and work do

⁵² Jamie A. Grant and Alistair I. Wilson, ed., *The God of Covenant: Biblical, Theological and Contemporary Perspectives* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 14.

⁵³ Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 27.

⁵⁴ Ward, *Words of Life*, 104.

⁵⁵ Ward, *Words of Life*, 177.

not appear in a vacuum. God arranged the categories that form the backdrop, substance, and aim of his mission. Understanding these categories is essential to appreciating the significance of his person and work. Divine covenant is the broadest category in which God revealed his plan to save in Christ (Heb. 7:20-22).⁵⁶

After bemoaning the fact that the doctrine of the covenant “has become locked away in the forgotten basements of many a church and ministry and consequently makes no impact on the thinking of many Christians,” Gordon J. Keddie asks, “is covenant theology merely tangential to the substance of the Christian faith? Or is it really important, with vital application to our lives as Christians in the modern world?” His unequivocal answer is:

God’s covenants are in fact foundational in the Bible’s own system of teaching and practice. This being so, it follows that not only should covenant theology be preached and taught, it ought to be something Christians are excited about! God is a *covenant* God and deals with us all the time in a *covenantal* manner. His covenants reveal His redemptive purposes as they unfold from the Creation in the beginning to the Consummation at the end of the age. Here we have the very core of our relationship to the Lord. Here we have the basis, pattern and motivational power for our daily and lifelong obedience to Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the Covenant. This is the fixed point from which our personal world must move. Here we have the perspective from which to work out our salvation as the people of God, to His glory and our joy.⁵⁷

Herman Hoeksema and Covenant Theology

In line with Reformed orthodoxy, Herman Hoeksema considered the doctrine of the covenant to be the overarching doctrine of Holy Scripture, as well as the great

⁵⁶ Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God's Covenants* (Birmingham: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2011), 1.

⁵⁷ Gordon J. Keddie, *Christ's Covenant and Your Life* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2011), 9-10.

organizing principle of Reformed dogmatics.⁵⁸ Early in his ministry, he gave expression to this viewpoint. Writing for his rubric, “Our Doctrine,” in the November 21, 1918 issue of the *Banner*, Hoeksema wrote:

Of all the different elements of our doctrine that of the doctrine of the covenants is perhaps most important, and at the same time most of all peculiarly Reformed, more so even than the doctrine of predestination and all it implies.⁵⁹

In his book devoted to a treatment of the doctrine of the covenant, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, Hoeksema wrote “that the covenant idea is very really one of the most important doctrines in the confession of the Reformed churches, and rightly so. This doctrine is really more characteristically Reformed than the doctrine of election.”⁶⁰ *Believers and Their Seed* first appeared as a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* in 1927, very soon after Hoeksema and others had founded the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

⁵⁸ For biographical information on Herman Hoeksema, see the full-length biography by Gertrude Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken: A Biography of Herman Hoeksema* (1969; repr. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1974). Confer also Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: The History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992); Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000); Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997); David J. Engelsma, “I Remember Herman Hoeksema: Personal Remembrances of a Great Man,” a twelve-part series of articles in *Beacon Lights*, October 2008 (vol. 67, no. 9) through December 2009 (vol. 68, no. 11).

⁵⁹ Herman Hoeksema, “Mankind’s Relation to the Fallen King,” *Banner* 53 (November 21, 1918):844. For almost four years, from 1918 to 1922, Hoeksema wrote a weekly column under the rubric “Our Doctrine” in the *Banner*. He began by treating at length the subject of the kingdom of God, which he treats from the perspective of and in terms of the covenant of God. Again and again, he brings up the subject of the covenant, which indicates how central the doctrine of the covenant was in his own thinking already at this early stage of his theological development. Hoeksema began to write the articles in this series when he was pastor of his first charge, Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church, in Holland, Michigan. The remainder were written after he became pastor at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, a pastorate he took up in 1920. For a complete “Bibliography of Works by Herman Hoeksema,” see *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 515-20.

⁶⁰ Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, trans. Homer C. Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 3. The chapters in this book first appeared as a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* in 1927, written in the Dutch language under the title *De Geloovigen en Hun Zaad*. Later these articles were twice published in brochure form in the Dutch language.

In 1945, Hoeksema presented a paper entitled “The Idea of The Covenant” at a conference between representatives of the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Churches in the United States (RCUS, also known as the German Reformed churches). He began the paper by stating:

Since the time of the Reformation, the doctrine of the covenant has occupied an important place in Reformed theology, and a dominating position in the life of the Reformed churches. It is a peculiarly Reformed heritage, even more so than the doctrine of sovereign predestination, for while the latter truth is held by other than Reformed churches, the truth of the covenant was developed exclusively by them.⁶¹

In a sermon based on Lord’s Day 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism, in conjunction with Psalm 25:14, “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant,”⁶² which Hoeksema preached on Sunday morning, March 12, 1950, he told his congregation:

The idea of the covenant...and the subject of the covenant is of prime importance, especially to the Reformed churches. It is undoubtedly more peculiarly Reformed than any other part, any one tenet of the Reformed doctrine. It is even more peculiarly Reformed than the doctrine of predestination...the truth of the covenant is distinctively Reformed.⁶³

In his exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, expositions that arose out of his sermons preached in the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Hoeksema reiterated what he had earlier said regarding the covenant as occupying the “dominating position in the life of the Reformed churches,” adding that “[t]he covenant idea occupies

⁶¹ Herman Hoeksema, “The Idea of the Covenant,” (1). This paper was later published in two parts in the July 1, 1946 and August 1, 1946 issues of the *Standard Bearer*.

⁶² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the 1611 Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible.

⁶³ Sermon transcribed by Mr. Jacob Kuiper.

an essential place in any Reformed system of dogma. Reformed theology is federal theology.”⁶⁴

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Hoeksema borrows—very likely knowingly—the language of the eminent Dutch Herman Bavinck when he says that the covenant is “the very essence of religion,” and that “[t]he covenant is not an incidental relation, but belongs to the very essence” of the Christian religion.⁶⁵ At the end of the chapter on “The Covenant,” Hoeksema concludes by underscoring, once again, the central place that the doctrine of the covenant occupies in Reformed thought.

This, then, is the conclusion of the matter concerning God’s covenant: God wants to reveal his own glorious covenant life unto us; as the triune God he ordains his Son to be Christ and Lord, the firstborn of every creature, the first begotten of the dead, the glorified one, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead; unto this end he ordains the church and gives her unto Christ, and he elects by name all those who in the church will have a place forever, in order that the one fullness (τλήρωμα) of Christ may scintillate in a thousandfold variation in the church to the praise of his glory. Around that Christ and his church and that purpose of the revelation of the glory of God’s covenant life, all things in time and in everlasting eternity concentrate. The end of it all is that we fall down in adoration before that glorious sovereign [covenant] God....⁶⁶

John Calvin, to whom can be traced the rudiments of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant, saw the central importance of the covenant in salvation. In his commentary on Psalm 67:2, “That *thy way* [emphasis mine, RLC] may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations,” he says:

By the *way of God* is meant his covenant, which is the source or spring of salvation, and by which he discovered himself in the

⁶⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, reprinted 1971), 2:506.

⁶⁵ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, second edition (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:454.

⁶⁶ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:479-80.

character of a Father to his ancient people, and afterwards more clearly under the Gospel, when the Spirit of adoption was shed abroad in greater abundance.⁶⁷

In commenting on Isaiah 59:12 and the prophet's reference to the promises of God's covenant, Calvin says that God's promises "may be regarded as the stones of the building, while the foundation of it is the covenant, which upholds the whole mass."⁶⁸

Hoeksema, Bavinck, and others before them, depended on the work done by the Reformers in so many areas. What was true generally was also true specifically of the doctrine of the covenant. The Reformers laid the foundation of the biblical truth concerning the covenant, especially in their controversy with the Anabaptists, and those that followed have built upon that foundation.

The Covenant as Grounded in the Divine Being

Fundamental to Herman Hoeksema's covenant theology was his grounding of the covenant of God with man in God's covenant life within Himself as the triune God. The covenant of grace in time reaches back into eternity for its source. That source is not, first of all, God's decree, but it is God's very being.⁶⁹ The triune life of God is both the basis and the pattern for God's covenantal relationship with man. The intra-trinitarian covenant is the foundation for the covenant of grace.

In the January 1, 1920 issue of the *Banner*, in an article entitled "The New King and His Kingdom," Hoeksema wrote that the relationship between the persons in the holy Trinity must "be designated as a covenant-relationship."

⁶⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 3:3.

⁶⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 4:270.

⁶⁹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:454.

...we call the relation between the three Persons of the divine Trinity a covenant-relationship. It is a relationship of Friends that dwell together in most intimate communion, of friends that have no secrets from one another, of friends that enjoy one another's most intimate confidence to perfection...it can readily be seen that the general relationship between these divine Three must be such a covenant-relation.⁷⁰

Hoeksema goes on to insist on the importance of this understanding of the basis for the covenant of grace.

The truth [of the Trinity] is of most profound significance. Especially for a correct understanding of the covenant-relation between God and man, it is extremely significant that this deepest and at the same time most beautiful of all truths is clearly understood. God is a covenant God. That does not mean that He became a covenant God after He had created man, for God became nothing that He had not eternally been. Or rather, God only IS.... And, therefore, it is not thus, that God became a covenant God after man was created, for He was a covenant God and lived within Himself a covenant life in infinite perfection and harmony. Neither is it thus that the real covenant relation exists between God and man and that the term "covenant" can be applied only in a figurative sense to God Triune. For rather the reverse is true. The most perfect, the most absolutely real covenant relation exists between Father, Son and Holy Ghost in unity of Being. And the covenant of God with us, possible subjectively because man was created in the image of God, is only a creaturely reflection of that eternal covenant relation between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.⁷¹

In a radio message delivered on November 9, 1941, entitled "God is the Living God," Hoeksema told his listeners "that God is triune means that God is a covenant God. He lives a covenant life."⁷² In that same message, he went on to say:

God, then, is a covenant God, and the divine life is a life of perfect fellowship and friendship. The three persons of the holy Trinity completely enter into one another's lives. Their fellowship is perfect. The Father knows and loves the Son in the Spirit; the Son

⁷⁰ Herman Hoeksema, "The New King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 55 (January 1, 1920):6.

⁷¹ Hoeksema, "The New King and His Kingdom," 6.

⁷² Herman Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2006), 51.

knows and loves the Father in the Spirit; the Spirit knows and loves the Father through the Son in himself.... The divine life is a life of eternal and infinitely perfect fellowship in the inaccessible light. The living God is a covenant God!⁷³

In a radio message delivered not long thereafter, on January 18, 1942, under the theme “Man, the Friend-Servant of God,” Hoeksema told those who were listening to the

Protestant Reformed Hour:

The highest distinction for man, and his greatest possible blessedness, is implied in the covenant relation of friendship with God, for this bond of friendship and fellowship is a reflection of God’s own life. God is a covenant God and lives a covenant life of friendship with himself, for he is the Triune God, one in being but three in persons.⁷⁴

In *Triple Knowledge*, Hoeksema’s exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, Hoeksema also emphasized the truth that God is a covenant God in himself and that his covenant with man depends on and is a reflection of God’s covenant life within his own being.

[T]he relationship of the three persons of the Holy Trinity to one another is such that He is the living God, and that He lives the life of infinitely perfect friendship: He is the covenant God in Himself, and His own covenant life of friendship is the infinite archetype and basis of our covenant relation to, and covenant fellowship with Him.⁷⁵

And again:

The deepest ground of this covenant relationship between God and man is the triune God Himself, of Whose triune life it is at the same time the highest revelation. For God is in Himself, apart from any relation to the creature, a covenant God. For He is one in Being, yet three in Persons.⁷⁶

Thus, “it is the eternal purpose of the triune God to reveal His own covenant life to the

⁷³ Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 51.

⁷⁴ Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 90.

⁷⁵ Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 1:365.

⁷⁶ Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 2:519.

highest possible degree and on the highest possible plane by establishing the covenant relation of friendship between Himself and His people.”⁷⁷

In his messages on the radio, in his preaching to his congregation, in his instruction in the seminary classroom, as well as in his many writings, Hoeksema consistently pointed to the triune life of God as both backdrop for and basis of the covenant of grace. “The living God is the covenant God! That is the great significance of the truth that God is triune, and that these three distinct persons are the one, only true and eternal God!”⁷⁸ In his definitive work on the covenant of grace, *Believers and Their Seed*, when it comes to “The Meaning of the Covenant,” this is once again Hoeksema’s starting point in developing the truth of the covenant of grace.

First of all, then, we would proceed from the idea that God is a covenant God. He is that in Himself, even apart from any relation to His creature. From eternity to eternity the infinite God lives a divinely perfect covenant life in Himself. This follows from God’s triune subsistence.⁷⁹

It is herein that the essence of the covenant is to be found. That life of God is a covenant life, a life of the most intimate communion of love and friendship, resting in the unity of God’s Being and living through the personal distinction. The Lord God is a covenant God.⁸⁰

Because God is a covenant God within Himself, He is also and can be also a covenant God outside of Himself. What God is *ad extra* depends on and has its prototype in what God is *ad intra*. God can be a covenant God in relationship to men because He is, first of all and essentially, a covenant God in His own being.

⁷⁷ Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 1:521.

⁷⁸ Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 1:366.

⁷⁹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 59.

⁸⁰ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 61. In addition, confer “The Idea of the Covenant,” *Standard Bearer*, 22:439-443; 462-466; *The Unbreakable Bond of Marriage*, 7; *The Triple Knowledge*, 1:115, 365; 2:519; *Sin and Grace*, 167; *God’s Tabernacle with Men*, 3, 11, 12.

This had been Herman Bavinck's position, a position with which Herman Hoeksema was thoroughly familiar and with which he was in full agreement. Bavinck taught that we can know who and what God is "only when we know and confess Him as the Triune God of the Covenant, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁸¹ Scripture reveals "the relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom... among the three persons" in whom "[t]he greatest freedom and the most perfect agreement coincide." "The covenant of grace revealed in time does not hang in the air, but rests on an eternal, unchanging foundation. It is firmly grounded in the counsel and covenant of the Triune God...."⁸² The fact that God relates covenantally to humankind is due to the fact that as the triune God, God is a covenant God within himself.

God of Friendship

Because he viewed God's trinitarian life as the basis for the covenant of grace, Hoeksema also taught that the covenant of grace is essentially a bond of love and friendship. It is a bond of love and friendship that expresses itself in fellowship, or communion between those who are bound in love and who are intimate friends.⁸³ The life of the three persons within the Trinity is the perfect love-life, a life of perfect

⁸¹ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), 143.

⁸² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:214-15.

⁸³ Our concern in this thesis is with Herman Hoeksema's view of the covenant of grace. But it should be noted that it was out of his conviction that the covenant life of God within Himself is a life of friendship and perfect fellowship that Hoeksema rejected the traditional view of the *pactum salutis*, the intra-trinitarian covenant. The traditional view is that the *pactum salutis* is a pact or agreement between the First and Second Persons respecting the redemption of the elect. On other grounds, but also on the ground that this view does violence to God's covenant life as a life of love and friendship, Hoeksema rejected the traditional view that reduced the intra-trinitarian covenant to a bargain, a cold business transaction hammered out between partners, binding each other with mutual stipulations, responsibilities, and penalties. Instead, he developed the view that the *pactum salutis* is the eternal decree of the covenant, the eternal decree of the triune God to establish the covenant of grace with the elect in Jesus Christ, the Head and Mediator of the covenant. Confer Hoeksema's extended discussion of the *pactum salutis* in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, volume 2, pp. 401-453.

friendship and fellowship—three distinct persons communing together in love. Friendship demands plurality of persons. One cannot be friend to oneself, but must be friend in relationship to others. So it is in God. Friendship is grounded in love. There are different kinds of friends and different levels of friendship. Friendship can be more or less intimate. But true friendship always arises out of the love that one has for one's friend. So it is in God. And friends delight in one another's presence and in communion with each other. Friendship comes to expression in communion. Friends speak; friends converse; friends commune together. So it is also in God. God is the God of perfect friendship. God of friendship within himself, he is also the God of friendship in relationship to his people in the covenant of grace.

Embracing what was already Augustine's insight, John Calvin spoke of the covenant of grace as a relationship of friendship.⁸⁴ Commenting on Psalm 102:12, which is translated in his English commentary as, "And thou, O Jehovah! shalt dwell for ever; and the memorial of thee from generation to generation," Calvin says:

What advantage would we derive from this eternity and immutability of God's being, unless we had in our hearts the knowledge of him, which, produced by his gracious covenant, begets in us the confidence arising from a mutual relationship between him and us? The meaning then is... as God continues unchangeably the same—'without variableness or shadow of turning'—nothing can hinder him from aiding us; and this he will do, because we have his word, by which he has laid himself under obligation to us, and because he has deposited with us his own memorial, which contains in it a sacred and indissoluble bond of fellowship.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Augustine spoke of the relationship between God and his people in the covenant of grace as friendship and fellowship arising out of love, for example in *The City of God*, 10.32, and *On the Holy Trinity*, 6.5.7.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Commentary Psalms*, 4:109.

In his comments on Isaiah 41:8, “But thou, Israel, *art* my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend,” Calvin asks the rhetorical question,

[How] highly should we esteem it, when God accounts us as his servants and members of his family? But, not satisfied with that, he bestows on him even a higher honour, and adorns him with the name of “friend.” What is here said about Abraham relates to all believers; and Christ declared more plainly, “Now I call you not servants, but ye are my friends....”⁸⁶

Before Hoeksema, the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck spoke of the “essence” of the covenant as

nothing less than fellowship with God, the most deep, inward, and tender fellowship that can be imagined and understood second only to the fellowship between the three persons of the Godhead and the fellowship between the two natures of Christ. That is what Scripture expresses in its beautiful doctrine of the covenant. For the covenant refers to that act of God whereby God places man as His image in relationship to Himself and causes him to dwell continually in His fellowship. That fellowship is more intimate and tender than the fellowship between husband and wife, between the vine and its branches, between a foundation and its superstructure. Scripture can hardly find words or metaphors sufficiently powerful and clear to make us understand something of that fellowship.⁸⁷

Hoeksema never tired of describing the nature of the covenant of grace as friendship. Already in a January 1, 1920 article in the *Banner*, Hoeksema took exception to Dr. Abraham Kuyper because he “constantly defines the covenant as...an agreement between two parties...whenever he defines the covenant-relation he presents it as an agreement, a contract...” To Hoeksema the language of “agreement” and “contract” is unbecoming as a description of the relationship between God and his people in the covenant. It is unbecoming inasmuch as “the covenant relation is one of friendship. God is the friend of man and the latter friend of God.” And a bit later he writes: “Once more,

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Commentary Isaiah*, 3:255-6.

⁸⁷ Bavinck, *Saved by Grace*, 25.

then, positively expressed, the covenant is that relation of friendship between God and man that is a creaturely reflection of the divine relation of friendship between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity itself.” He then adds immediately by way of explanation: “By friendship we understand such a relation of mutual affection, intimate communion, free and open intercourse, confidence and harmony as exists between persons of greatest equality and mutual correspondence.”⁸⁸ Later, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Hoeksema reiterated his objection to the presentation of the covenant as a pact, agreement, or bargain: “[T]he idea of a covenant is not [to be] understood as being a contract or an agreement, but is [to be] conceived as being a living, spontaneous relation and communion of friendship that is given with the very nature and relation of God and man in the covenant.”⁸⁹

In another *Banner* article, in the March 3, 1921 issue, under the title, “Abraham, the Friend of God,” Hoeksema once again defended his view that the fundamental nature of the covenant of grace is friendship. In the article he developed extensively the idea of friendship, answering the question, “What are the main elements of friendship?” After a protracted discussion of what he identified as the three main elements of friendship, he presented the following concluding summary.

Hence, three elements are presented by Scripture as implied in this idea of friendship.

In the first place, there is the strong affection, the mutual love, the longing for each other, the yearning for each other’s presence.

In the second place, there is the idea of familiar intercourse, the living together on the same plane, the confiding to each other of plans and secrets, the counseling together.

In the third place, there is the idea of taking each other’s side, of defending each other’s cause, of being each other’s party over against enemies. Abraham was the friend of God. God was his

⁸⁸ Hoeksema, “The New King and His Kingdom,” 6-7.

⁸⁹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:453.

friend. He was God's friend. He was the beloved of God and God was loved by him.⁹⁰

Writing on the Old Testament tabernacle and temple, Hoeksema identified the significance of these Old Testament places of worship as types of God's covenantal dealings with his people.

The general significance of the tabernacle or temple is quite plain. It was a picture of God exercising covenant communion with His people. In the sanctuary He dwelled with His people under one roof. He lived with them in the same dwelling as a friend with his friends. As such the sanctuary was a symbol of the intimate relationship and intercourse of the covenant God with His covenant people.⁹¹

In a subsequent article, Hoeksema called attention to the basis for God's friendship with those who by nature are guilty sinners.

If the sanctuary of the old dispensation as it stood in Jerusalem was a perpetual gospel, a silent witness of God's covenant with His people Israel, no less was there a gospel message in Israel's sacrifices under the law. In general they carried the testimony that atonement is through blood and the covenant communion with God is possible only on the basis of righteousness and, therefore, by atonement for sin.⁹²

On the same theme of the Old Testament sanctuary, in a book of Lenten messages, Hoeksema wrote concerning the temple that "[t]he whole was, therefore, a beautiful picture of the idea of God's covenant: God dwelling with His people in intimate fellowship of friendship under the same roof, in the same house."⁹³ At the same time the veil that separated the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place

was also the real symbol of the imperfection of the old covenant. For it plainly testified that the way into the inner sanctuary was not

⁹⁰ Herman Hoeksema, "Abraham, the Friend of God," *Banner* 56 (March 3, 1921): 134.

⁹¹ Herman Hoeksema, "The Earthly Sanctuary," *Banner* 57 (January 19, 1922): 37.

⁹² Herman Hoeksema, "Blood in the Sanctuary," *Banner* 57 (February 2, 1922): 70.

⁹³ Herman Hoeksema, *The Amazing Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943), 74.

yet open. The temple was a promise of better things to come, when we might enter with boldness into God's fellowship through the blood of Jesus.⁹⁴

Hoeksema was fond of quoting the description of the perfection of the covenant of grace in Revelation 21:3: "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, 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." The glory of the new heavens and new earth is described as God's tabernacling with men. "In the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth, in which the tabernacle of God shall be with men forever (Rev. 21:3) in heavenly beauty and glory, the covenant of God's friendship shall be perfected, God's house shall be finished, and his kingdom shall be established."⁹⁵

That the covenant between God and man is a covenant of friendship was also Hoeksema's teaching in his book devoted to a development of the doctrine of the covenant of grace, *Believers and their Seed: Children in the Covenant*. In the book Hoeksema insists that "the covenant is God's, and He bestows upon His friends all that is necessary for the life and the battle of the covenant.... [T]he essence of the covenant is to be sought in this living relation of friendship whereby God the Lord is the sovereign friend of His people, and they are the Lord's friend-servants, partaking of His fellowship...."⁹⁶ Over against the conditional covenant conception, which Hoeksema considers to be a "mechanical conception of God's covenant," he "propose[s] that the covenant consists essentially in a relation of friendship...."⁹⁷ Hoeksema concludes his chapter entitled "The Historical Realization of the Covenant," by affirming that the

⁹⁴ Hoeksema, *Amazing Cross*, 75.

⁹⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:523.

⁹⁶ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 65.

⁹⁷ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 75.

essence of the covenant of grace is God's friendship with those with whom he establishes the covenant.

So God's covenant is now the life of friendship of God in Christ. In that covenant there are no offers and no conditions. The covenant is solely God's. He establishes His covenant. He chooses and saves. He ingrafts us into Christ, and He sanctifies. He makes us friends of God for His name's sake in the midst of the world.⁹⁸

That friendship and fellowship are the essence of the covenant was also Hoeksema's teaching in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. Having affirmed that the life of the divine Trinity is a life of the most intimate communion of friendship, Hoeksema proceeds to make application to the covenant of grace: "...if the life of the covenant in God is such a life of most perfect friendship, of the most intimate communion, of the deepest knowledge and most affectionate love—then it follows that the idea of the covenant cannot be found in an agreement or pact." Within God himself the covenant is a bond of perfect friendship and fellowship.

If this is so in God himself, it must also be applicable to the covenant idea as a relation between God and man. Because all things are only out of God, through him, and unto him, also the covenant relation can never be anything else than an ectypical reflection of the covenant life in God himself. If the essence of the covenant in God is the communion of friendship, this must also be the essence of the covenant between God and man.⁹⁹

At this point in *Reformed Dogmatics*, Hoeksema offers his definition of the covenant of grace, a definition fundamental to which is the idea of friendship and fellowship:

The covenant is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship, in which God reflects his own covenant life in his relation to his creature, gives to that creature life, and causes him

⁹⁸ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 83.

⁹⁹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:458-9.

to taste and acknowledge the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all good.¹⁰⁰

Biblical Words for “Covenant” and Word Roots

In connection with his definition of the covenant of grace, Hoeksema calls attention to the biblical words for covenant, the Hebrew word בְּרִית, and the Greek word διαθήκη.¹⁰¹ However, disappointingly, he is of the opinion that the words for “covenant” are of little help in determining the meaning of “covenant.” I say disappointingly because a study of בְּרִית does lend support to Hoeksema’s contention that the covenant relationship is essentially a bond of love and friendship, as well as his contention that the covenant is sovereignly and unilaterally established by God, and thus not a pact or agreement mutually entered into—an important aspect of Hoeksema’s covenant theology to which we will have opportunity to return in a later chapter.

It is true, of course, that it is possible to give too much weight to etymology when analyzing the meaning of a word. The meaning of a word is not primarily determined by its etymology, but rather by its use in the immediate context in which it appears, as James Barr and others have demonstrated.¹⁰² Edmond Jacob reminds us of this as well.

Although he believes that the evidence favors the position that derives בְּרִית from בָּרָה, “to eat,” he adds that “in any case the term became separated from this root at an early

¹⁰⁰ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:459.

¹⁰¹ Early on Reformed theologians called attention to the meaning of the biblical terms for covenant, *berith* and *diatheke*, rather than primarily the Latin, *foedus*. Cocceius is an example of this approach. In his *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei*, published in 1648, he begins by consideration of the meaning of the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew terms for covenant, taking the position that not the Latin mainly, but the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words is of importance. Cocceius’ approach reflects the Reformed conviction of the sole authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*), as well as the necessity of doing exegesis from the original languages. In addition, his approach is indicative of the Reformed view of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.

¹⁰² James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 103ff. Confer also D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 27ff.

date, which proves once again that Old Testament concepts must be studied more in the light of their internal evolution than their etymology.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the original meaning of a word does often shed light on its usage, as well as indicate nuances of meaning. That is the case with the biblical words for covenant.

There are three possibilities that are favored as explanations for the root of בְּרִיתָהּ. The first is that this noun has no attested root. A second view is that the root is the III-He verb בָּרַךְ, which means “to eat, to eat bread, to break bread, to participate in a festive meal.” This was often done by those who entered into covenants, as an indication of the peace and goodwill established between them by the covenant. As an expression of their friendship they sat down together and broke bread. An example in Scripture of such a celebratory meal after the confirmation of a covenant is found in Genesis 26:28-33. After Isaac and Abimelech had concluded their covenant, we read that Isaac “made them a feast, and they did eat and drink” (Genesis 26:30). In Genesis 31 we read of the covenant established between Laban and Jacob, which included the erection of a pillar that would be a permanent testimonial to their covenant. Again, after the confirmation of this covenant, we read: “Then Jacob offered sacrifice upon the mount, and called his brethren to eat bread: and they did eat bread, and tarried all night in the mount” (Genesis 31:54). Over time the common meal that concluded the making of a covenant became the root from which was taken the designation for the covenant itself. Gottfried Quell supports this option. In connection with his treatment of the origin of διαθήκη in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, he treats the etymology of its Old Testament counterpart, בְּרִיתָהּ. He writes: “If we presuppose the identity of this בְּרִיתָהּ with the בְּרָהּ in

¹⁰³ Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, tr. Arthur W. Heathcote and Philip J. Allcock (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), 210.

בְּרִיתָהּ, it is worth considering the solution...that בְּרִיתָהּ is the meal or act of eating and בְּרִיתָהּ the food or material of eating.”¹⁰⁴ Dr. William Gesenius is of the opinion that this original meaning “deserves attention, viz. that בְּרִיתָהּ is strictly nothing more than *an eating together, banquet*, from בְּרִיתָהּ...since among Orientals, *to eat together* is almost the same as to make a covenant of friendship. The Hebrews too were accustomed to eat together when entering into a covenant....”¹⁰⁵

Third, as regards the etymology of בְּרִיתָהּ, there are those scholars who contend that בְּרִיתָהּ is derived from a Semitic root, which means “to clasp, to fetter,” and therefore indicates a “bond.” *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (BDB) favors this derivation, indicating that בְּרִיתָהּ is derived from a root, בָּרַח, which means “to bind, to fetter.” Those who support this origin emphasize that בְּרִיתָהּ refers to a binding *relationship*, a relationship in which they are bound to each other who have entered into this relationship. In addition, this relationship into which they enter is a relationship of friendship. M. Weinfeld writes in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* that בְּרִיתָהּ appears to come from a root that means “clasp,” or “fetter,” and has reference to a “bond.” He compares the meaning of בְּרִיתָהּ to the word “bond” in the expression “bond of faith.” He goes so far as to say: “The original meaning of the Heb. *berith*...is not ‘agreement or settlement between two parties,’ as is commonly argued.”¹⁰⁶ In support of his position that בְּרִיתָהּ refers to a relationship of friendship, Weinfeld points to the fact

¹⁰⁴ Gottfried Quell, “δισθηκη,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vol., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964-1976), 2:107.

¹⁰⁵ William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Samuel P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 141.

¹⁰⁶ M. Weinfeld, “בְּרִיתָהּ,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vol., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974-2006), 2:255.

that “covenantal relations were expressed by terms like ‘grace,’ ‘brotherhood,’ ‘peace,’ ‘love,’ ‘friendship,’ etc.” And he concludes that בְּרִית expresses “friendship and benevolence” and that it is “the aspect of friendship” that is especially expressed by the synonyms of בְּרִית.¹⁰⁷

In his article on διαθήκη in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gottfried Quell comments at length on the Old Testament equivalent, בְּרִית. He contends that the “use of διαθήκη” has “the intention to mediate the sense and usage of בְּרִית.”¹⁰⁸ He argues that the root of בְּרִית is Accadian and that its root has the sense of “to bind,” “binding,” or “bond.”¹⁰⁹ This bond, he goes on to say, is in the “form of a fellowship between God and man or man and God.”¹¹⁰ It is worth pointing out that the word “bond” is part of both the German and the Dutch words for covenant: “bund,” is the German, and “verbond,” the Dutch.

R. B. Kuiper offers the following comments with respect to the possible origin of the Hebrew word for covenant:

The derivation of the Hebrew word employed in the Old Testament to designate the covenant of grace is uncertain. Perhaps it was derived from a root meaning *to bind*. That God should willingly be bound to man is indeed condescension. It is also possible that the word under consideration was derived from a root meaning *to cut*. In making a covenant it was customary in the Orient to cut certain animals in two and to place the pieces at a short distance over against each other. Then the parties to the covenant would walk between the pieces, signifying that, if they broke the covenant, they would be willing to be cut in pieces as these animals had been. When God established His covenant with Abraham, He actually condescended to do that very thing. At God’s command Abraham arranged the pieces of various animals, and, when the sun had set, “behold, a smoking furnace and a

¹⁰⁷ Weinfeld, *TDOT*, 257.

¹⁰⁸ Quell, *TDNT*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Quell, *TDNT*, 108.

¹¹⁰ Quell, *TDNT*, 109.

burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham” (Genesis 15:8-18). That, too, was extreme condescension. Again, it has been suggested by some scholars that the Hebrew word for covenant may mean *eating together*. When making a covenant, Orientals would often banquet with each other. Whether or not that is the meaning of the word, as a matter of fact the Lord condescended to visit Abraham in his tent and to eat the fare served by His friend (Genesis 18:1-8).¹¹¹

The Greek word διαθήκη is the New Testament word for “covenant.” It is derived from the Greek verb διατίθημι. It is found only in the middle and means “to appoint,” or “to determine.” It occurs in Luke 22:29, “And I appoint (διατίθεμαι) unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me (διέθετό μοι).” The verb is used frequently in the New Testament with διαθήκη as its object, as for example in Acts 3:25, as well as Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16. In these passages the meaning is to appoint or to establish a covenant. Thus, according to Quell, the Greek term for covenant does not refer to a mutual agreement entered into by two consenting parties. Rather, it describes a one-sided disposition, an appointing by God. In making the covenant, two parties do not come together in order to form an alliance. But God acts sovereignly and unilaterally to establish the covenant with man. The covenant thus established by God is a bond of love, and arising out of that love, it is a relationship of friendship and fellowship.

R. B. Kuiper takes fundamentally the same position as Quell. Reflecting on the Greek word for covenant, he says:

The sovereign character of the divine friendship comes to forceful expression in the word employed in the Greek New Testament to designate the covenant of grace. It is not the word which is commonly used for a covenant or agreement made by men with equal rights. On the contrary, it specifically denotes a disposition made by one person in behalf of another. In some contexts it is properly translated *testament*. As one in his last will

¹¹¹ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 333.

of his own free choice bequeaths his possessions to another, so God in the covenant of grace sovereignly bestows His friendship upon the elect.¹¹²

The Superiority of the Divine Covenant of Grace

Beyond the issue of etymology, there are different understandings of covenant that relate to different contexts in which they are established and different kinds of covenants, most notably the difference between human and divine covenants. It is true that on a purely human level, the Bible speaks of covenants among men containing stipulations mutually agreed upon and jointly entered into.¹¹³ This is the nature of covenants between those who are peers and mere men. An example would be Judas Iscariot who “covenanted with them [the leaders of the Jews] for thirty pieces of silver” (Matthew 26:15). Clearly, the stipulations of this covenant were mutually agreed upon. The conditions under which the Jewish leaders insisted that Judas not deliver Jesus into their hands: not on the feast day and not publicly. And they agreed upon the price: thirty pieces of silver. Also in the Old Testament there are numerous examples of such human covenants. In Genesis 21 we read of Abraham and Abimelech that “both of them made a

¹¹² Kuiper, *Glorious Body*, 332.

¹¹³ Even in the case of human covenants recorded in Scripture, John Murray insists that “when all the instances of merely human covenants are examined, it would definitely appear that the notion of sworn fidelity is thrust into prominence in these covenants rather than that of mutual contract. It is not the contractual terms that are in prominence so much as the solemn engagement of one person to another. To such an extent is this the case that stipulated terms of agreement need not be present at all. It is the giving of oneself over in the commitment of truth that is emphasized and the specified conditions as those upon which the engagement or commitment is contingent are not mentioned. It is the promise of unreserved fidelity, of whole-souled commitment that appears to constitute the essence of the covenant. There is promise, there may be the sealing of that promise by oath, and there is the bond resultant upon these elements. It is a bonded relationship of unreserved fidelity, of whole-souled commitment that appears to constitute the essence of the covenant. There is promise, there may be the sealing of that promise by oath, and there is the bond resultant upon these elements. It is a bonded relationship of unreserved commitment in respect of the particular thing involved or the relationship constituted. This is well illustrated by what David says to Jonathan: ‘thou hast brought thy servant into a covenant of the Lord with thee’ (I Sa. XX.8). David accords to Jonathan’s commitment the bonded character of divine sanction and regards it as sealed by divine oath.” *The Covenant of Grace* (London: The Tyndale Press, repr. 1977), 10.

covenant (vs. 27; and also vs. 32). Genesis 31:44 records the covenant made between Jacob and Laban. Joshua 9 records the “league” (covenant) that Joshua and the elders of Israel made with the inhabitants of Gibeon. Judges 2:2 contains the Lord’s warning to Israel that they not make any “league” (covenant) with the inhabitants of Canaan, which warning Israel did not obey. When threatened by his army, the men of Jabesh-Gilead sought to make a covenant with Nahash the Ammonite, I Samuel 11:1-3. According to I Samuel 18:3, “Then Jonathan and David made a covenant....” David also made a league (covenant) with Abner, according to II Samuel 3:12-21. King Ahab of Israel and Ben-Hadad, king of Syria made a covenant between them, I Kings 20:31-34 reports. And there are many other examples in Scripture of human covenants mutually entered into and with stipulations mutually agreed upon.

While human covenants may be leagues, pacts, treaties, bargains, or agreements, the nature of God’s covenant with His people is different, fundamentally different. The outstanding reason is that it most emphatically is not a covenant made between equals. Rather, it is a covenant between the sovereign God of heaven and earth and man the creature. Not only is man a mere creature, but he is besides a *sinful* creature. He is by nature dead and lost, incapable and unworthy of standing in a covenant relation with God. He cannot and he does not deserve to stand in a relation of love and friendship with the great God of heaven and earth. Says Hoeksema:

God is GOD. He is the infinite, the eternal, the self-existent, the perfectly self-sufficient One. He is the Lord, the sovereign Creator, of Whom, and through Whom, and unto Whom are all things. There is none beside Him. And man is a mere creature, that owes his whole existence, all that he is and has, his entire being, with body and soul, with mind and will and strength, with all his powers and talents and possessions, in every relationship and every moment of his life, to his Lord and Creator. God is

always the overflowing Fount of all good, and man is always the dependent and needy creature, who must drink from that Fountain. God is the self-sufficient I AM, man is constantly and completely dependent on Him. How, then, shall that creature assume the position of a [contracting] party in relation to his God? What obligation could he possibly assume beside that which is already incumbent upon him, without any special agreement: that he shall love the Lord his God with all his strength? Can the fulfillment of this solemn obligation ever become a condition for higher favors and richer blessings? Man can bring nothing to God, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; His are all the gold and silver, and the cattle on a thousand hills. He can do nothing for God, Who is absolutely self-sufficient. All the good that man has is a gift of grace, of free and sovereign favor from his God. Even the privilege that he may love and serve his Creator is a gift of divine goodness, for which he owes Him thanks. How then can the relation between this absolutely sovereign Lord and this wholly dependent creature ever be or become a pact or agreement with mutual conditions and stipulations? How could man ever merit eternal life, or, in fact, merit anything with God, by fulfilling certain conditions. Do I make a pact with the worm that crawls at my feet? Or can a man that owes me a thousand dollars make a claim to new favors by paying his debt? How, then, can the speck of dust that is man ever assume the position of a party in relation to God, and merit special favors and blessings by paying to God what he already owes Him? The relation between God and man can never really be that of an agreement between contracting parties, with mutual stipulations, conditions, and promises?¹¹⁴

In the nature of the case, therefore, in the view of Hoeksema, the covenant of grace as a bond of love and friendship cannot be a pact or agreement. And in the nature of the case, the establishment of the covenant is an act of infinite condescension on God's part.

Hoeksema would concur with R. B. Kuiper's remarks:

How the Creator can regard mere creatures as His friends defies human understanding. How the holy God can bestow His friendship on sinful men is utterly incomprehensible. Suffice it to say that here we witness a supreme manifestation of divine condescension. And the intimacy of that friendship renders the divine condescension all the more marvelous.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *The Covenant: God's Tabernacle with Men* (Grand Rapids: Sunday School of the First Protestant Reformed Church, reprinted 1981), 3-4.

¹¹⁵ Kuiper, *Glorious Body*, 332-3.

As regards the superiority of the covenant of grace in relation to all merely human covenants, John Murray is in agreement with Hoeksema.

It must be said, first of all, that, even should it be true that in these [human] covenants the idea of mutual compact is central, it does not follow that the idea of compact is central in or essential to the covenant relation which God constitutes with man. We have to recognize a parity existing between men which cannot obtain in the relation between God and man.... Hence we might find that mutual compact is of the essence of covenant when a merely human relationship is in view and that such an idea would be entirely out of place when a divine-human relationship is contemplated.¹¹⁶

Rather than to rely on the derivation and basic meaning of either בְּרִית or διαθήκη, Hoeksema is of the opinion that “it is better to note those Scripture passages that speak of the relation between God and his covenant people.” When we follow this approach,

there can be no doubt that the emphasis is not on the idea of an agreement or a pact, but rather upon a living relation of friendship between God and those whom he has chosen in Jesus Christ their Lord. In that relation he lives, as it were, on equal footing with his people, reveals himself to them, causes them to know him, opens his heart for them, speaks with them face-to-face, as a friend to his friends, imparts his secrets to them, lives under one roof with them, eats and drinks with them, and walks with them.

The relation is such that God receives them into his own family and that, according to the measure of the creature, they enter into the life of friendship of the triune God and in that relation enjoy the highest possible bliss. God always remains God and Lord, and man remains creature and servant. The distance between the creator and the creature, between God and man, is not removed. Nevertheless, as the Lord God in the covenant, he is the sovereign friend of his people, who blesses them in his favor, blesses those who bless them, curses those who curse them, makes his people heirs of all things, puts them over the works of his hands, and causes them to enter into his rest and to enjoy the pleasures there are at his right hand. He who as servant enters into God’s covenant is nevertheless friend of God, obedient friend, who has the law of God in his heart and delights to do his will, to sing his

¹¹⁶ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (1954; reprint, London: The Tyndale Press, 1977), 9.

praises, to consecrate himself with body and soul and all things to the living God, and to rule only in his name over all the works of his hands.¹¹⁷

The covenant relation is explicitly described in terms of friendship in Scripture. Of both Enoch (Genesis 5:22) and Noah (Genesis 6:9), we read that they “walked with God.” This walking with God was no mystical experience, but friendship, the friendship of God’s covenant. Enoch and Noah were God’s friends, and as God’s friends, knew him, loved him, delighted in him, served him, and confessed him in a world that hated him and rejected him, in a world of men who lived, not as God’s covenant friends, but as his enemies.¹¹⁸ Similarly, Abraham is called the “friend of God”: II Chronicles 20:6, 7; Isaiah 41:8; and James 2:23. To Abraham the Lord revealed the secrets of his heart (Genesis 18:17-19). And that is what God does with all his covenant friends, according to Psalm 25:14: “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant.” The Hebrew word translated “secret” is a noun, סֵדֶר, which is derived from a root that refers to “a pillow, a cushion, a couch,” and has in view intimate conversation, the conversation between close friends who share the same pillow or cushion, or who lie down together on the same couch.

In the covenant, God reveals Himself as the friend of His people, the everlastingly faithful covenant friend. But at the same time, he reveals himself as a *sovereign* friend. That God sovereignly and unilaterally establishes the covenant is made plain by what follows upon the account of God’s establishment of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. It belonged to the establishment of covenants between men in Bible times that before confirming their covenant by eating together a festive meal, they walked

¹¹⁷ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:462-3.

¹¹⁸ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:462.

together between the divided parts of the animals, a portion of which they would eat at the covenant meal and a portion they would sacrifice to God. Edmond Jacob refers to this practice and its significance:

One of the most ancient rites, and one which lasted a long time, was for the participants to pass between the two halves of one or of several beasts that were killed, a gesture by which the participants undertook to suffer the lot of the victims in the event of their transgressing the claims of the covenant. . . . It is to this practice that we can trace the origin of the expression *karat berit*, to cut a covenant, the term *berit* denoting the result of the action, the cutting being in this case only the means of attaining an agreement.¹¹⁹

In Jeremiah 34:18, 19 the Lord rebukes those who “have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof, the princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf.”

In Genesis 15 God passed between the divided parts of the animals *alone*, when it became dark—a “horror of great darkness”—as a smoking furnace and a burning lamp, while Abraham was in a deep sleep. Abraham clearly was altogether passive in the establishment and maintenance of the covenant. That Abraham was passive in the establishment and maintenance of the covenant did not mean that Abraham had no calling to carry out. On the contrary, he did; he divided up the animals and placed the animal parts over against each other. And “when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away” (Genesis 15:11). Although Abraham has a calling in the covenant, that does not take away from the fact that the covenant is established and maintained by God alone, altogether apart from any contribution by the members of the

¹¹⁹ Jacob, *Theology*, 210.

covenant. All that they do is the fruit of the establishment of the covenant with them, and arises out of God's covenantal grace at work in them. Concerning God's covenant with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 15, Keil and Delitzsch write:

The covenant which Jehovah made with Abram was not intended to give force to a mere agreement respecting mutual rights and obligations,—a thing which could have been accomplished by an external sacrificial transaction, and by God passing through the divided animals in an assumed human form,—but it was designed to establish the purely spiritual relation of a living fellowship between God and Abram....¹²⁰

Additional grammatical considerations underscore the truth that the covenant of grace is unilaterally and unconditionally established. There are three main Hebrew verbs that take בְּרִית as their object. First, there is קָרַח, which means literally “to cut.” Undoubtedly this refers to the cutting and offering up of sacrifices confirming the covenant that was established. It may also have at first been used proleptically of the Old Testament rite of circumcision. The second verb used with בְּרִית is קָוַם. This verb has the meaning of “arise, stand, stand fast, establish, confirm.” And the third verb that takes בְּרִית as its direct object is שָׁבַע, which means “to swear, to adjure, to bind by an oath.”

Whenever these verbs occur in reference to God's establishment of his covenant with his covenant people, invariably the subject of the verb is first person singular, “I”. When these same verbs are used in reference to covenants established between men, the subject is plural. In Genesis 27 we read, for example, of the covenant established by Abraham and Abimelech. In this case the verbs are plural. In verse 27 we read, “and both of them made a covenant.” And again in verse 31, “Wherefore he called that place

¹²⁰ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 1:210.

Beersheba; because there *they* swore *both of them*.” Later Abimelech establishes a covenant with Abraham’s son Isaac. And once again the verb is plural. Genesis 26:28, “And they said, We saw certainly that the Lord was with thee: and we said, Let there be now an oath betwixt us, even betwixt us and thee, and let us make a covenant with thee.” And to cite only one more example, the covenant between Laban and Jacob, in Genesis 31:44, “Now therefore come thou, let make a covenant, I and thou; and let it be for a witness between me and thee.”

When Scripture records covenants that are established between men, between those who are equals, what are sometimes called parity covenants, the verbs are invariably plural. The fact that the verbs used to relate God’s establishment of his covenant with his covenant friends are not plural but singular, testifies to the truth that God alone establishes the covenant. The covenant is unilateral. God does what man cannot and will never do. He sovereignly establishes his covenant.

Besides the fact that the verbs describing God’s establishment of his covenant with men are singular in number, indicating that God alone establishes, maintains, and perfects his covenant of grace, there is also the fact that God’s covenant promises are invariably expressed in the Hiphil verbal pattern, rather than in the simple Qal. The Hiphil is the causative Hebrew stem. Verbs in the Hiphil verbal pattern invariably imply an element of causation. In Genesis 17:2 we read, “And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.” God makes his covenant with Abraham. The promise that he adds to the covenant (the covenant promise) is, “I will multiply thee exceedingly.” The verb is in the Hiphil. The translation properly is, “I will cause thee to multiply exceedingly.” God causes the covenant promise to be

realized. He is the cause of its fulfillment entirely, not partly the cause of its fulfillment along with Abraham with whom he establishes his covenant. He *alone* will cause Abraham to multiply exceedingly.

This same point is established by what we read in Genesis 17:6 and 7. Verse 6 reads: “And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.” The beginning of the verse, “And I will make thee exceeding fruitful,” is the verb **פָּרַדְתִּי**, which is in the Hiphil. The idea is once again causative: “I will cause thee to multiply exceedingly.” Verse 7 begins: “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” Once again the verb with which the text begins is in the Hiphil verbal pattern: **וַיִּקְמַדְתִּי**.

Literally, verse 7 begins, “And I will cause to stand my covenant.” God and God alone causes his covenant to stand. Clearly the covenant is unilateral and unconditional.

And when the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise is recounted in the Old Testament, the fulfillment is once again often indicated by verbs that are in the Hiphil verbal pattern, with God or Jehovah (occasionally Jehovah God) as their subject. This is the case in Deuteronomy 1:10, “The Lord your God hath multiplied you, and behold, ye are this day as the stars of the heaven for multitude.” The verb **הִרְבִּיךָ** is a Hiphil form, derived from **רָבַח**. “Jehovah your God,” is the subject of the verb. Therefore, literally we read, “Jehovah your God has caused you to become great.” God has caused the covenant promise to be fulfilled typically. The same is true of Psalm 105:23 and 24: “Israel also came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. And he increased his people greatly; and made them stronger than their enemies.” Both verbs in this

marriage by the Roman Catholic Church. Rome denigrated marriage; the Reformers rescued and exalted marriage.

In deriving their teaching concerning marriage, the Reformers unanimously pointed to the first marriage, the marriage at which God himself officiated, the marriage of Adam and Eve in Paradise. The Reformers agreed that all the fundamental truths concerning marriage could be derived from the first marriage, when God brought Eve, whom he had created from Adam's rib, to Adam to be his wife. Their marriage was archetypal. The Reformers also agreed that Christian marriage models the relationship between Christ and his church. This was the unique contribution to the development of doctrine of marriage that the Protestant Reformers made. Among those who viewed marriage as uniquely a picture of the relation between Christ and the church, there were also those who viewed marriage as a covenant and as a picture of God's covenant of grace with his elect people. James Johnson judges that "[t]he covenant model of marriage was a distinctive element in the Protestant recasting of marriage that took place during the sixteenth-century Reformation era."¹²¹

In their view that marriage is a type of God's covenant of grace, the Reformers exalted the purpose of marriage. The purpose of marriage was not simply that it provided a remedy to fornication. The purpose of marriage was not only procreation. The purpose of marriage was not even, first of all, the companionship of husband and wife as they lived in the enjoyment of the covenant of marriage. But the chief purpose of marriage was that it portrayed the glorious reality of the covenant relation between God and his elect people in Christ. James Johnson says that "[w]hat is definitively unique in the

¹²¹ James Turner Johnson, "Marriage as Covenant in Early Protestant Thought: Its Development and Implications," in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 124.

covenant model of marriage is not the purpose of procreation...but the right ordering of the man-woman relationship according to God's redemptive plan. This reconception of the priorities of the ends of marriage became one of the most important long-term influences of the covenant idea of marriage..." as it was developed by the sixteenth-century Reformers.¹²²

Max Stackhouse expresses agreement with this viewpoint and indicates that in his judgment this was especially the contribution of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition following Calvin. Whereas "Martin Luther emphasized the idea that marriage is one of the 'orders of creation'—built into the way God created the world and a practical remedy for the temptations to lustful behaviors for sinful humanity," says Stackhouse,

John Calvin and others in the Reformed tradition, especially Heinrich Bullinger and Martin Bucer, followed Luther at first, but gradually elaborated a theory of overlapping covenants—between God and the persons who formed the couple, between the parents of the marriage partners and the couple, and between the larger society and the particular couple, with God present in all these relationships.¹²³

Michael Lawler goes so far as to say that "it cannot be disputed that Calvin clearly taught that marriage is presented in the Bible as a covenant. He is the first post-biblical Western theologian to do so."¹²⁴

In light of the fact that marriage is an earthly reflection of God's covenant with his people, the Reformers emphasized strongly the indissolubility of the marriage bond. They emphasized that marriage is for life: "for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in

¹²² Johnson, "Marriage as Covenant," 134.

¹²³ Max L. Stackhouse, "Covenantal Marriage: Protestant Views and Contemporary Life," in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 158.

¹²⁴ Michael G. Lawler, "Marriage as Covenant in the Catholic Tradition," in *Covenant Marriage in Comparative Perspective*, ed. John Witte, Jr. and Eliza Ellison (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 80.

sickness and in health, till death do us part.” At the same time, the Reformers made allowance not only for divorce, but even for remarriage after divorce, at least remarriage after divorce on biblical grounds.

Herman Hoeksema took exception to this majority opinion of the Reformers that not only permitted divorce, but took the position that under such circumstances the marriage bond was dissolved so that at the very least the “innocent party” was allowed to remarry. This majority view is incorporated into the Westminster Confession of Faith.

V. Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent part to dissolve that contract. In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce, and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.
VI. Although the corruption of man be such as it apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such wilful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage: wherein a publick and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed, and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.¹²⁵

Hoeksema disagreed with this view of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. He did so because of his conviction that marriage was a picture of God’s covenant of grace with his elect people. In that light, Hoeksema, first of all, asked the question: “What is marriage essentially? Is it a bargain, a contract, an agreement? Or is it a relationship of love and friendship, of the most intimate communion and union, so that two become one?” On the basis of Scripture, Hoeksema taught that marriage is the most intimate union of love between a husband and his wife. “Marriage...is that natural covenant or bond of union that exists between one man and one woman for their entire life, which is a

¹²⁵ *Confession of Faith and the Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland*, Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter XXIV, “Of Marriage and Divorce,” paragraphs V and VI (Edinburgh: General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, 1973), 38.

natural reflection of the covenant of God, of his covenant relation to his people, of the relation between Christ and his church, and that for the purpose of bringing forth the seed of the covenant.”¹²⁶

Because marriage is itself a covenant, as well as a type of the covenant of grace, Hoeksema also contended that marriage is for life. In his view, the bond of marriage is indissoluble. Divorce does not break the marriage bond, not even divorce on the one biblical ground for divorce: fornication. Only death dissolves the marriage bond. The two people who are married remain married as long as both spouses are living. God brings a husband and wife together in marriage, and only God can dissolve the marriage bond. He does this through death; nothing but death dissolves the bond of marriage. Because divorce does not dissolve the marriage bond and because divorced persons remain married in the sight of God, all remarriage of divorced persons is impermissible. “[B]ecause of the fact that God never breaks His covenant, and because of the fact that Christ never divorces his bride—therefore the marriage bond is before God unbreakable forever. You cannot break the marriage bond.”¹²⁷ On the basis of his view of the covenant, Hoeksema insisted on the permanence of the marriage relationship and disapproved even of the remarriage of the “innocent party.”

Hoeksema adopted this position because Scripture clearly teaches that marriage is for life and that only death dissolves the marriage bond, as is the apostle’s plain teaching in Romans 7:1-3 and I Corinthians 7:39, among other passages. But he also came to this position after reflection on the truth of the covenant of grace, of which the marriage of believers is a picture. Since the covenant of grace is everlasting and unbreakable, since it

¹²⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *The Unbreakable Bond of Marriage* (Grand Rapids: Sunday School of the First Protestant Reformed Church, 1957), 6.

¹²⁷ Hoeksema, *Unbreakable Bond*, 11.

is a relationship of enduring love, so is also earthly marriage, which is intended to portray the covenant of grace. The two truths stand or fall together, in Hoeksema's view:

[on] the general ground that marriage is a reflection of the covenant-relation between God and His people and this covenant can never be broken: God never breaks His covenant. The people may violate the covenant, commit spiritual adultery, yet God's covenant stands fast on His part. The marriage-tie between Him and His people is never broken. It is established forever in His eternal counsel of election and sealed in the blood of the cross.... We conclude that, if this is true of the eternal reality of God's marriage-tie with His people, it certainly must be true of the reflection in our earthly marriage[s]: it can be violated, but it can never be broken.¹²⁸

Man Created as God's Covenant Friend

The covenant of grace is essentially a bond of love and friendship. In this respect the post-lapsarian covenant of grace resembles the covenant of God with Adam in Paradise. It belongs to Hoeksema's covenant theology that, in line with the Reformed tradition, he taught that Adam stood in a covenant relationship with God his Creator.

Herman Bavinck articulates the consensus of the Reformed tradition:

Even if the term 'covenant' never occurred in Scripture for the religious relation between Adam and God, not even in Hosea 6:7, still the religious life of man before the fall bears the character of a covenant. Reformed scholars were never so narrow as to insist on the word 'covenant' since the matter itself was certain: one may doubt the word, provided the matter is safe (*de vocabulo dubitetur, re salva*). But hidden behind the opposition to the word was opposition to the matter itself. And this must never be surrendered inasmuch as covenant is the essence of true religion.¹²⁹

Echoing Bavinck, Hoeksema writes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*:

Even though the first three chapters of Genesis do not mention the covenant, there can be no doubt that the relation between God

¹²⁸ Herman Hoeksema, *Unbiblical Divorce and Remarriage* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, [n.d., but likely 1957 or 1958]), 21.

¹²⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:569.

and Adam was a covenant relation. This truth does not have to be based upon a single text, such as Hosea 6:7, although this passage certainly can be quoted with reference to this truth...all of Scripture proceeds from the truth that man always stands in covenant relation to God. All God's dealings with Adam in paradise presuppose this relation: God talked with Adam and revealed himself to him, and Adam knew God in the wind of the day.¹³⁰

Created as he was in the image of God, Adam was created capable of standing in a covenant relationship with God.

For this reason, the reflection of God's trinitarian life of friendship that is found in God's covenant with man was realized when Adam was created in the image of God, that creaturely likeness of God consisting of true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness. From the very first moment of his existence, and by virtue of his being created after the image of God, Adam stood in covenant relation to God and was conscious of the living fellowship and friendship which is essential to that relationship. He knew God, loved him, and was conscious of God's love to him. He enjoyed the favor of God. He received the word of God, walked with God, talked with him, and dwelt in the house of God in paradise the first. And as Adam stood at the pinnacle of all created things on earth, the whole creation through him was comprehended in that covenant relation of fellowship. In Adam's heart the whole creation was united to the heart of God.¹³¹

In the Reformed tradition, the Adamic covenant is described by the term "covenant of works." Early in his ministry, Hoeksema spoke of the covenant of works and expressed agreement with the teaching of the covenant of works. He spoke, for example, of Adam as "the head of all mankind in the covenant of works."¹³² In the end, however, Hoeksema came to reject the traditional covenant of works teaching, as is evident from his treatment of this topic in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.¹³³ He offers five

¹³⁰ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:313. Confer also *Triple Knowledge*, 1:113.

¹³¹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:315.

¹³² Herman Hoeksema, "The King of the Kingdom," *Banner* 53 (October 3, 1918):714.

¹³³ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:308-12. The objections that follow are taken from this section.

objections to the traditional view. First, “this doctrine finds no support in Scripture,” and the Reformed confessions “never speak of a covenant of works; of a so-called covenant of works, these confessional standards certainly know nothing.” He has in mind particularly the idea of God and man cooperating in making an agreement, bargain, or pact, which he also criticizes as being “an altogether mechanical” view of the covenant. Second, “it is impossible that man should merit...with God,” as is the teaching of the traditional covenant of works. The creature can never merit with the Creator. Third, unanswered questions regarding when man would have been glorified and the nature of this glorification are obstacles to accepting the traditional view of the covenant of works. Fourth, “the covenant of works presents the covenant relation as something incidental and additional to man’s life in relation to God. The covenant relation is a means to an end, not an end in itself.” And fifth, the traditional teaching is objectionable from the point of view of the wisdom of God. “If the covenant of works theory were true, then Adam stood in a position in which he could attain to eternal life and glory and merit that same glory and life for all his posterity by obeying God’s command.” Christ must do for some only “through the deep way of suffering, sin, and death” on the cross, what Adam could have done for all men by his obedience in the garden. Hoeksema is of the opinion that this is a blot on the wisdom of God. In the end, what Christ merits for us, Adam himself could never have obtained—had no possibility of obtaining.

Although Hoeksema came to reject the traditional covenant of works teaching, he did insist that God’s relationship to Adam in Paradise was a covenant relationship.¹³⁴

Writing in the November 28, 1918 issue of the *Banner*, he said:

¹³⁴ In his early articles in the *Banner*, Hoeksema spoke of and defended the covenant of works, insisting, for example, “that the Covenant of works is not mere fiction, not the invention of philosophy, but

And then we may first of all observe that our Reformed theologians have justly pointed out, that the doctrine of the Covenant is after all nothing but an explanation of the only possible relation between God and man. It is the *conditio sine qua non*, that is, the prime requisite, the only conceivable basis, the very nature of all religion, conceived of as a communion between the creator and the creature. And for that reason they have even expressed their comparative indifference with regard to the term "Covenant of Works," if only you maintain the essence of the thing. You may discard the term "Covenant of Works," if you please, [but] the idea and the essence of that Covenant cannot be denied. For God is the absolute and infinite Sovereign of heaven and earth, infinite in His perfections, infinitely above all that is called creature. If the creature shall ever be able to stand in a conscious relation to that Highest Majesty, not only in the relation of creature to the Creator, of servant and Lord, but also in the relation of the child to his Father, of friend to his friend, then it is absolutely necessary that this Supreme Lord of heaven and earth stoop down to enter of His own free grace into such relationship with the creature. And after all, you arrive at the conclusion that the Infinite God entered into a covenant with His finite creature.¹³⁵

Also in his book *Believers and Their Seed*, Hoeksema criticizes the traditional covenant of works teaching. Although he is critical of the covenant of works teaching, he is nevertheless insistent that Adam stood related to God covenantally from the very beginning of his creation. "However this may be, Adam stands in God's covenant. He was created as covenant friend-servant, adapted to God and to fellowship with Him. For God created the first man after His image and likeness."¹³⁶ A bit later, he writes:

And not only is he a creature who is *adapted* to God's covenant life and who *can* live that covenant life; but he is also at once placed in that living fellowship of God's covenant. For he is gifted by God with true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness. Adam is not neutral, but he stands with his face toward God and is God's friend. Accordingly, God also speaks with him in Paradise and demands of him that he shall consecrate all things to Him.

living and significant Scriptural truth, the conscious acceptance of which is indispensable for a clear understanding of our salvation." (*Banner* 53, December 12, 1918, 898.)

¹³⁵ Herman Hoeksema, "Mankind's Relation to the Fallen King," *Banner* 53 (November 28, 1918): 864.

¹³⁶ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 68.

And as friend-servant of God Adam is also king, and he receives dominion of the beasts of the earth and over the fish of the sea and over all earthly things. God established His covenant with Adam, and in the first Paradise man stands in that covenant of friendship as prophet, priest, and king. God dwells with Adam in Paradise, and in God's fellowship Adam can and may eat of the tree of life in the midst of the garden.¹³⁷

Hoeksema continues by pointing out that already in His covenant with Adam in Paradise, God revealed the *antithetical* character of the covenant. That revelation came to Adam in connection with the two trees in the garden, and the command of God that Adam might not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as well as the intrusion into the garden of God's enemy, the devil, a fallen, wicked angel.¹³⁸ Already in Paradise, "Adam stands before the calling, as the friend of God, to reject all that is not of God, but against God, before the calling to fight against and overcome the Evil One and to maintain himself as friend-servant of the living God."¹³⁹

That Adam was created in covenant with God his Creator implies that Adam's sin was sin against the covenant—sin against the covenant God. His sin was the heinous sin of disdain for God's covenant friendship, a breaking of God's covenant, and transgression of the covenant. Adam was a covenant-breaker. "He broke the covenant and became the party of the devil over against his covenant God."¹⁴⁰ Hoeksema agrees with those who understand Hosea 6:7 as referring to Adam, rather than to "men" or "mankind" generally. That text should be read: "But all they like Adam have transgressed the covenant."¹⁴¹ Rather than the friendship of God, Adam and Eve chose the friendship of God's enemy, the devil. Rather than to be devoted to God in love, they

¹³⁷ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 69.

¹³⁸ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 69.

¹³⁹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 69.

¹⁴⁰ Herman Hoeksema, "The Fallen King and his Kingdom," *Banner* 54 (February 13, 1919): 5.

¹⁴¹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:313; 1:350.

chose loving devotion to Satan. Rather than to walk and talk with God, Adam and Eve chose communion with the Prince of Darkness.¹⁴²

But God maintains His covenant. In maintaining His covenant, He establishes with fallen man His covenant of grace. This is the proper understanding of the protevangel. Not only is Genesis 3:15 the first announcement of the gospel, but it is at the same time the sovereign establishment by God of the covenant of grace.

The positive meaning of the enmity against Satan, which was announced by God, is the covenant fellowship of the Most High. As the friendship of the world is enmity against God (James 4:4), so also the enmity against the serpent and his seed is friendship of God. The covenant of friendship had been violated by Adam, and an alliance with the devil had been established. But God maintains his covenant and through Christ destroys the alliance with Satan.¹⁴³

Here, too, Hoeksema was echoing Bavinck before him: "Genesis 3:15 already contains the entire covenant in a nutshell and all the benefits of grace. God breaks the covenant made by the first humans with Satan, puts enmity between them, brings the first humans over to his side, and promises them victory over the power of the enemy."¹⁴⁴ And thus from the very dawn of history, God shows himself to be the God of the covenant, the God of friendship.

¹⁴² Johannes Cocceius is an exception within the Reformed orthodox tradition in that he spoke of the "covenant of works" (*foedus operum* or *foedus creationis*) as a "covenant of friendship" (*foedus amicitiae*). Confer Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, ed. Robert J. Bast, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 254-7.

¹⁴³ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:369.

¹⁴⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:321.

Chapter 2

Election Applied to the Covenant

Introduction: Who Belong to God's Covenant?

It is a tragic irony of church history that the doctrine most characteristically Reformed, the doctrine of the covenant, has proven to be one of the most controversial. Among the Reformed there has been disagreement over the nature of the intra-trinitarian covenant, the *pactum salutis*. There has been disagreement over the nature of God's covenant with Adam, the pre-lapsarian covenant, traditionally referred to as the covenant of works. And there has been disagreement over the nature of the covenant of grace, God's covenant with believers and their seed.

One significant area of disagreement, evoking strong sentiments on both sides of the issue, has been the relationship between the covenant of grace and election. There have been Reformed theologians and churches, on the one hand, who insisted that the covenant is broader than election. In their view, all the physical descendants of believing (covenant) parents are included in the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace and eternal election are two altogether distinct realities that must not be confused. The Dutch Reformed (Liberated) theologian J. Kamphuis is representative of this position. He says that

the Covenant is a reality in history which is clearly distinct from God's eternal decree of election: God has established his Covenant *within time* with believers and their children. In the Covenant he does not ask the question whether we belong to the number of the elect, but whether we accept Jesus Christ, *the Mediator of the Covenant*.¹

¹ J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), 22.

The Christian Reformed theologian H. Henry Meeter goes so far as to speak of the doctrine of election and the doctrine of the covenant as “two opposites.” They are ideas “which are logical opposites, that is, ideas which seem to be in direct conflict, paradoxes.” Whereas the doctrine of election “stresses God’s activity,” the covenant of grace “stresses man’s activity.”²

Those who extend the covenant beyond the elect, generally hold that God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 17 must be taken literally, that, therefore, God’s covenant promise with its blessings applies to all the “seed” of Abraham, that is, all his physical descendants. The promise includes all who are born in the covenant line, without any distinction. In the Old Testament the benefits of the covenant extended to all who received the sign and seal of the old covenant, circumcision. Similarly, the benefits of the covenant in the New Testament extend to all who are baptized. By means of the administration of the sacrament, all baptized children are incorporated into the covenant. They all receive the covenant promise. In the language of the Reformed baptismal form, they all have the promise that God the Father establishes with them an eternal covenant of grace. They all have the promise that their sins are washed away in the blood of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. And they all receive the promise of the Holy Spirit, His indwelling and saving operations.³ At the same time, the baptized child’s conscious reception of these covenant blessings and his perseverance in the enjoyment of the salvation of the covenant are dependent on the child. The child must in time fulfill the conditions of the covenant, of which the outstanding conditions are faith and obedience.

² H. Henry Meeter, *The Basic Ideas of Calvinism*, 6th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 40-1.

³ “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 258.

The covenant is established with all who are baptized, but at the same time it is a conditional covenant.

Some Reformed theologians have interpreted the promises referred to in the baptismal form as extending to all the physical children of believers, while at the same time making a distinction between the objective testimony *to* covenant and subjective membership *in* the covenant. For example, William Heyns distinguished between the promise “that we have an eternal covenant of grace with God,” which is “as such not for the elect only but, objectively, for all the baptized children of believers,”⁴ from “the subjective applying unto us of these [covenant] benefits by the Holy Spirit, the ‘applying unto us of that which we have in Christ.’”⁵

Over against the view that the covenant of grace includes all the physical children of believers is the view that the covenant is established by God only with the *elect* children. Those who hold to this view maintain that not all the physical children born to believing parents are included in the covenant of grace, but only those children who have been eternally chosen by God. With appeal to Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:6, they hold that not all who are “of” Israel are truly members of Israel. Not all the children of the flesh, but only the children of the promise are accounted by God as “the seed” of the covenant, Romans 9:8. And although both Jacob and Esau were born to believing parents, and although both were circumcised, elect Jacob alone, in distinction from reprobate Esau, was a member of the covenant in order that in the covenant “the purpose of God according to election might stand,” Romans 9:11. Election determines membership in the covenant. The elect belong to the covenant; whereas the reprobate, by

⁴ William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1926), 142.

⁵ Heyns, *Manual*, 136.

virtue of their reprobation, are excluded by God from the covenant and all the blessings of the covenant. According to this view, God is pleased to gather His elect children *from among* the children of believers. At the same time, this is God's covenant promise. His promise to covenant (believing) parents is that He will save their children. He fulfills that promise by saving the elect among their children.

The latter was the position of Herman Hoeksema and through Hoeksema also came to be the official position of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRCA). Hoeksema was an ardent proponent of the view that election determines membership in the covenant. This, he contended, was not confusion, as some alleged, but consistency. From the beginning of his ministry he maintained that only the elect children of believers are genuine members of God's covenant of grace. He taught that not all who are born in the "sphere" of the covenant actually belong to the covenant. God's sovereign election and reprobation cut right through the generations of believers. In addition, Hoeksema rejected the teaching that faith is a condition unto the covenant, a condition upon which the fulfillment of the covenant promise depends. Rather, faith is the fruit of the covenant, the result of God's work of grace within the members of the covenant, and His gift to them. At the same time faith is the means by which God realizes the covenant promise, and the means by which the members of the covenant consciously appropriate the blessings of the covenant. In this way they manifest themselves as the elect. Hoeksema vehemently opposed the view that membership in the covenant is broader than election. Specifically, he rejected what he termed the "Heynsian" view of the covenant, as well as the view of the covenant advocated by Dr. Klaas Schilder and the Reformed Churches in

the Netherlands (Liberated).⁶ Hoeksema contended that the views of Heyns and Schilder were fundamentally the same. Both views made membership in the covenant wider than election. And both views, in his judgment, resulted in a form of Arminianism injected into the covenant.

Herman Hanko, in his book *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, identifies seven main points that make up Herman Hoeksema's covenant conception. Among these are:

4. Th[e] covenant is established with Christ, as Servant of Jehovah, and with the elect in and through Christ.
5. Historically this covenant is realized in the line of the continued generations of believers. These generations receive the sign of the covenant, circumcision in the old, baptism in the new dispensation, and, in general, are addressed and treated as the real covenant people of God.
6. Yet, God's election and reprobation cut right through these generations, and "God is merciful to whom He will be merciful, and whom He will He hardens."⁷

An examination of Hoeksema's writings makes clear that Hanko's analysis is accurate.

Election and the Covenant: Early Writings

Writing for his rubric "Our Doctrine," in the April 17, 1919 issue of the *Banner*, Hoeksema treated the covenant of God with Noah. From his comments it is plain not only that he viewed the Noahic covenant as a dispensation of the everlasting covenant of grace, but also that he limited membership in the covenant to the elect.

⁶ Churches that are closely related to the Liberated and that share the same basic covenant conception include the American Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches of North America, the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa. Many in the United Reformed Churches, the Christian Reformed Church, the Free Church of Scotland, the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, and other Reformed denominations embrace the Heynsian or the Liberated view of the conditional covenant.

⁷ Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 281-2.

If the covenant revealed immediately after the flood, was a covenant with all men, and if the essential idea of the covenant is that of friendship, the question comes naturally: Can God be the friend of all, can He assume a relation of friendship to the seed of the devil? You say, that this covenant implies only temporal relations and temporal blessings and that there is no eternal salvation involved. Good; but my objection is not removed. The question only assumes a still stronger form: How can God temporarily assume an attitude of friendship with men whom He has destined to condemn eternally?⁸

Three weeks later, Hoeksema continued his discussion of the covenant with Noah and rejected the view that there were two covenants, a covenant of special grace and a covenant of common grace. In that connection, he wrote:

There are not two covenants, one special and one common, one eternal and one temporal, one of grace and one of nature, but there is but one covenant, the covenant of grace of which Christ is the Head and His people are the members.... There is but one covenant, and that covenant is the one established with Christ as the eternal Head of His people.... Again, not as if all the seed of Abraham actually belongs to the covenant, but the children of the promise, the holy seed are in his loins.... In the widest sense this is true of the natural basis of this covenant as revealed to Noah. It touches all men that live in the world. They came in close touch with the blessings of that same covenant. In the most specific sense this applies to what was called Israel and yet was not Israel. They received all the outward blessings of that covenant, lived in the land of the covenant, enjoyed the light of its revelation, participated in the worship of the sanctuary, and yet, essentially they never belonged to the covenant in Christ.⁹

A bit later in the same article he added: "The innermost circle embraces those that are the members of His covenant, the people given to Him from all eternity by the Father, the elect, the seed of the woman."¹⁰

What these quotations demonstrate is that from his first contributions in the *Banner*, Hoeksema applied the truth of election to the doctrine of the covenant. After

⁸ Hoeksema, "The Fallen King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 54 (April 17, 1919): 248.

⁹ Hoeksema, "The Fallen King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 54 (May 8, 1919): 296-7.

¹⁰ Hoeksema, "The Fallen King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 54 (May 8, 1919): 297.

only a few years in the ministry, while still serving in his first charge, Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church, in Holland, Michigan, Hoeksema held to the view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. Throughout his nearly fifty-year-long ministry he would maintain fundamentally the same covenant conception.

As he continued his series in the *Banner* on the historical development of the kingdom of God, time and again Hoeksema reiterated his view that election determines membership in the covenant: "In the covenant of grace the parties are Almighty God and his elect people in Christ."¹¹

In the course of his *Banner* series Hoeksema dealt with the history of God's covenant with Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 17 and 21. In connection with his treatment of this history, he faced the issue

whether all the children of Abraham were as such objects of the [covenant] promise, whether the children of the flesh and the children of the promise were identical... Did the covenant of God with Abraham and his seed signify that **every one** that was circumcised or, still more broadly, that every one that proceedeth from Abraham's loins was saved?¹²

Hoeksema's concern was not only with God's establishment of His covenant with Abraham, but also by extension with believers in the New Testament. With appeal to Romans 9, Hoeksema answered the questions that he posed in the negative:

the apostle starts out from the principle that the word of God itself was limited, that it did not embrace all the children according to the flesh, but the children of the promise. And he maintains that this word, embracing the children of the promise, and following the line of election, was in no respect brought to naught but completely fulfilled. "They are not all Israel that are of Israel, neither because they are Abraham's seed are they all children, but in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, it is not the children of the flesh that are the children of God, but the children of the

¹¹ Hoeksema, "Abraham, the Friend of God," *Banner* 56 (May 5, 1921): 276.

¹² Hoeksema, "The Children of the Promise," *Banner* 56 (September 8, 1921): 550.

promise are reckoned for a seed” (vs.6-8). The word of God has not failed. It is realized completely, if it is only remembered that the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed.¹³

Hoeksema began his treatment of the history of Jacob and Esau in the September 29, 1921 issue of the *Banner*. In the very first article of this series, he drew the conclusion that “it is evident from all history, that even in the sphere of God’s covenant, as it manifests itself in the world, God maintains the freedom of His elective purpose.”¹⁴ In his contribution to the December 1, 1921 issue, Hoeksema finished his treatment of the history of the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau. He ended exactly where he had begun. In the midst of Abraham’s descendants, “God’s mercy according to election remains free. Not all amongst them are children of the promise. Not all are Israel that are called Israel. But those on whom Jehovah will have mercy and have compassion according to His free grace are His people evermore.”¹⁵

In 1923 Herman Hoeksema cooperated with his friend and colleague the Rev. Henry Danhof in writing *Van zonde and genade*, which has been translated and published under the title *Sin and Grace*. The year of publication is significant. It was one year before the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), meeting in Kalamazoo, Michigan, adopted the “three points of common grace.” At this time Hoeksema and Danhof were ministers in good standing in the CRC. Their book contains an extensive refutation of the views of Dr. Abraham Kuyper on common grace, as well as a positive exposition of their own position. It was not only particular grace that they defended, but particular grace *in the covenant*. They wrote:

¹³ Hoeksema, “The Children of the Promise,” *Banner* 56 (September 8, 1921): 550.

¹⁴ Hoeksema, “The Children of the Promise,” *Banner* 56 (September 29, 1921): 600.

¹⁵ Hoeksema, “The Children of the Promise,” *Banner* 56 (December 1, 1921): 742.

God's friendship is a specific aspect of God's favor toward His people. By the wonder of God's grace, the enmity of sin between God and His chosen people in Christ is abolished, the relationship of friendship is restored, and henceforth God and His people, in fellowship together, go up in battle against sin, Satan, and the whole realm of darkness.¹⁶

Speaking of the believer's subjective assurance of election, they said:

If we have learned from experience to taste that eternal election is meant for us, that we are God's children, and that God wills to be our Friend; if we have learned that the bonds of God's covenantal mercy have drawn us out of the estrangement and bondage of sin and out of all the power of the enemy; then we have discovered indeed that the mystery of election is great.¹⁷

Election and the Covenant: From the Beginning of the PRCA

In his definitive work on the covenant of grace, *Believers and Their Seed*,

Hoeksema continued to maintain the view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect.¹⁸ God "establishes His covenant with creatures whom He in His sovereign grace has chosen" so that "the Lord realizes this covenant along the antithetical line of election and reprobation...."¹⁹ "We believe that essentially the covenant of grace pertains to the elect alone...." and "[t]he Lord God Himself, through His Word and Spirit, and in His own time, makes all His elect people partakers of the benefits of His

¹⁶ Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, trans. Cornelius Hanko, ed. and intro. Herman Hanko (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 174.

¹⁷ Danhof and Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, 171.

¹⁸ These articles were originally written in Dutch under the title "De Geloovigen en Hun Zaad." Soon after they appeared in the *Standard Bearer*, they were collected and published in a book with the same title. The book was reprinted in 1946, in part because of the issues troubling the GKN. In the foreword Hoeksema reminds his readers that these were the very issues concerning the covenant that he had treated when the book was first published nearly twenty years before. In 1971 the Reformed Free Publishing Association published Homer C. Hoeksema's translation of his father's Dutch work under the title *Believers and Their Seed*. In 1997 the RFPA released a revised edition, which included a biographical sketch of the author and a subtitle: "Children in the Covenant." This is the edition from which my quotations will be taken.

¹⁹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 62-3.

covenant and forms His people in order that they should show forth His praise.”²⁰ Thus, “[s]trictly speaking...no one can maintain that anyone who has been reprobated by God can really belong to the covenant of grace. God’s covenant is the living and eternal relation of friendship between Him and His elect people in Christ Jesus.”²¹ The covenant is a covenant of grace, and grace is not common, but particular—for the elect alone.

Now, it is our conviction that we cannot arrive at a correct view of the seed of the covenant as long as we hesitate to accept the clear teaching of the Word of God that it is not all Israel that is called Israel, that not all the children born in the historical manifestation of God’s covenant on earth are also actually children of the promise, but that the line of election and reprobation also cuts right through the visible manifestation of the covenant and makes separation, always and again separating between Israel according to the promise.²²

Of special significance with regard to *Believers and Their Seed* is the second chapter of the book, which is entitled “Arminianism Injected into the Covenant.” In this chapter Hoeksema sets forth and analyzes the covenant conception of Prof. William Heyns.²³ Heyns had been one of Hoeksema’s instructors at Calvin Theological Seminary. Hoeksema later indicated that already when he graduated from Calvin Seminary in 1915, he did not agree with the doctrine of the covenant that he had been taught by Prof. Heyns.²⁴ Heyns taught that God’s covenant promise is a promise that

²⁰ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 136-7.

²¹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 137.

²² Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 51.

²³ No full-length biography of William Heyns has been written. For biographical information on Heyns, see “William Heyns as Covenant Theologian,” by Jelle Faber, in *Calvin’s Books: Festschrift for Peter De Klerk*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser, Herman J. Selderhuis, and Willem van’t Spijker (Heerenveen: J. J. Groen, 1997), 301-314; “The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant,” by Anthony A. Hoekema, in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*, ed. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 185-201; and *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*, by Jelle Faber (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996), 15-54.

²⁴ David Engelsma, footnote to his translation of “The Idea of the Covenant of Grace,” by Rev. Henry Danhof, *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 31 (November 1997): 17, footnote 7. See also

God makes to all baptized children. He taught that accompanying the promise is a grace of God, a “subjective covenant grace,” which enables every baptized child to choose for or against the promise. And he taught that the benefits of the covenant are fully enjoyed only by those who fulfill the “conditions of the covenant,” which conditions are faith and obedience.²⁵

Hoeksema rejected Heyns’ covenant conception.²⁶ He did not want “to injure or offend [his] ex-professor,” but he was convinced that his view “is thoroughly Arminian” and that he has directed the thinking of the churches “in Arminian channels.” His teaching of a universal promise to all the baptized children introduced “a *Christos pro omnibus*,” which is Arminian theology applied to the covenant.²⁷ On the basis of the particularism of the Reformed faith, the “Reformed line of thought,” not all the children of the flesh, but only the true, spiritual children, that is, the elect, receive the covenant promise. For “distinction [must be] made between seed and seed, and the essence of the covenant does not after all concern all the children who are born in the sphere of the covenant.”²⁸

Of special significance is the fact that Hoeksema’s series of articles, which were later translated and published as *Believers and Their Seed*, first appeared on the pages of

Gertrude Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), 58.

²⁵ William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1926), 136f. Cf. also William Heyns, *Verhandelingen over het Genade-verbond* (Grand Rapids: n.p., 1914), 11-12, 70-75. This is a mimeographed booklet of essays that originally appeared in *De Gereformeerde Amerikaan*.

²⁶ Hoeksema begins this chapter with a paragraph in which he expresses the judgment that it was “because Prof. Heyns’s presentation has for years been imbibed by many who now serve as ministers in the Christian Reformed denomination...it is no longer surprising that the doctrine of a general offer of grace on God’s part in the preaching of the gospel to all who hear that gospel not only could find a reception but also could be so readily officially adopted by the Synod of 1924 as the only pure Reformed presentation” (p. 20).

²⁷ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 27 and 33.

²⁸ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 22.

the *Standard Bearer* in 1927, only a few years after the establishment of the Protestant Reformed Churches as a separate denomination. The significance of this must not be overlooked. While the denomination was still in its infancy, Hoeksema was articulating his distinctive covenant conception. His colleague in the seminary, George Ophoff, shared his views.²⁹ All the pastors whom they trained and who served in the Protestant Reformed Churches for nearly the first twenty-five years of her existence, shared his views. Among the membership in the churches, it was the accepted view. It was the view, as Hoeksema, Ophoff, and others insisted upon, that followed necessarily from the PRCA rejection of common grace, especially the common grace of the well-meant offer of the gospel. If God's grace is limited to the elect, only the elect can be included in God's covenant of grace. This was rightly considered to be the Protestant Reformed view, the view according to the Preamble of the Declaration of Principles that has "always been maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches."³⁰

²⁹ Interestingly, George Ophoff's maternal grandfather was Prof. G. K. Hemkes, the second professor appointed to Calvin Seminary. In fact, when Ophoff entered Calvin Seminary in 1918, at twenty-seven years of age, he was living with his grandfather. He had moved in to assist in the care of his aging grandfather after he had fallen and broken his hip. When he married in August 1920, he and his new bride moved in with Prof. Hemkes. Shortly thereafter, in December of 1920, Hemkes died. It was while he was in seminary that Ophoff was assigned a paper on "common grace." He had great difficulty with the paper because he struggled to harmonize common grace with the doctrines of sovereign, particular grace. Common grace seemed to him to conflict with the Reformed faith. It may very well have been the case that he sought the advice of his grandfather in writing the paper. In the end, this was the position that he took in his paper. What the reaction of his professor was, we do not know. All this is related by Herman Hanko in "George Martin Ophoff: Humble Servant of the Truth," *Portraits of Faithful Saints* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1999), 406-20.

³⁰ "Declaration of Principles," *Confessions and Church Order*, 412. In a protest to the 1949 Synod of the PRC regarding missionary labors among the Dutch immigrants to Canada from the Liberated churches in the Netherlands, Rev. G. M. Ophoff, close friend of Herman Hoeksema and fellow professor in the PRC Seminary, made this same argument. In warning about the dangers of working among the Liberated, Ophoff more than once reminded the synod that repudiation of the doctrine of common grace, especially its application to the well-meant gospel offer, by the PRC in 1924 was in principle the rejection "of the heretical line of thought," that the "reprobated [are] in the covenant as well as the elect," that they "possess Christ and all things with Him. They, too, have the legal right to this spiritual good. This right is given them of God in the promise and sealed unto them, the reprobated, by baptism." He later added: "The deep, underlying reason of the leaders of the secession [as for example, Dr. Klaas Schilder, Dr. S. Greijdanus, and Dr. Benne Holwerda] allowing themselves to be deposed was their unwillingness to

What this means is that it was not true, as the advocates of a conditional covenant within the PRCA later argued, that the churches had no *official* position on the doctrine of the covenant. They argued further that because the churches had no official position, they were permitted to hold, defend, and propagate their conditional covenant view in the churches. And, in addition, they contended that there was room in the PRCA for those who embraced the conditional covenant view advocated by Dr. Klaas Schilder and the Liberated in the Netherlands. This was simply not true. The PRCA rejection of common grace and the well-meant offer of the gospel in 1924, as well as the consensus of agreement with what Hoeksema taught concerning the covenant in *Believers and Their Seed* in 1927 was in principle the rejection of the theology of the conditional covenant. The rejection of the Heynsian view of the covenant implied the rejection of the Liberated view of the covenant, indeed *demanding* it, since the views were fundamentally the same. What had been implicit from her earliest days, would eventually become explicit with the adoption of the Declaration of Principles by the 1951 Synod of the PRCA.

The Schilder Factor

In 1939 Dr. Klaas Schilder, the Dutch Reformed theologian who would play a prominent role in the covenant controversy in the PRCA, made the first of his two trips to

subscribe to our doctrine to the effect that the promise of the gospel is only unto the elect. And their followers broke off their ecclesiastical relation with the Synodicals [GKN] for the same reason." Ophoff concluded his protest with these words: "The liberated clergy in the Netherlands, including Dr. Schilder, are Heynsians through and through. There may be, and undoubtedly are, exceptions among them. But these exceptions are few. Yet, Dr. Schilder, it seems, favors our becoming sister churches. But he is not going to succeed in winning over his colleagues for that idea, except by camouflaging the doctrinal difference between us. And the same holds true for us. Hence, our becoming sister churches would for us be a tragedy." *PRCA Acts of Synod, 1949*, 48-54. In the same year, writing in the *Standard Bearer*, Ophoff expressed the same conviction: "Twenty-six years ago now [referring to 1924, the year of the beginning of the PRC] our people as headed by their consistories voluntarily, by their own free choice, and certainly by the unction of the Spirit, we believe, officially rejected the Henysian view of the covenant and thereby of necessity adopted the logical contrary to that view—the view held, proclaimed, and taught by Rev. Hoeksema." George Ophoff, "Reply to Prof. K. Schilder," *Standard Bearer* 26 (November 1, 1949): 62.

the United States.³¹ By this time Schilder and Hoeksema had become rather well acquainted with each other, through their writings in *De Reformatie* and the *Standard Bearer* respectively, as well as their personal correspondence. They found themselves to be kindred spirits. As it turned out, both Hoeksema and Schilder rejected the teaching of common grace, particularly Kuypertian common grace. Although Schilder's trip to the United States had been arranged by a group of laymen in the CRC, by the time Schilder arrived in the States, he was largely boycotted by the CRC. Rev. H. J. Kuiper, at the time editor of the *Banner*, had called for this boycott. He considered Schilder to be a controversial figure and a threat to the CRC's sister-church relationship with the GKN in the Netherlands, largely because of Schilder's rejection of common grace.³²

³¹ For the historical details of Schilder's trip, I am dependent especially on Gertrude Hoeksema's biography of Herman Hoeksema entitled *Therefore Have I Spoken*, and Herman Hanko's *For Thy Truth's Sake*. For biographical information on Schilder, see Jelle Faber, "Klaas Schilder's Life and Work," in *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder*, ed. Jacob Geertsema (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 1-17; Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church. Volume 6: The Modern Age* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 856-863; Rudolf Van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990); Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 17-18, 265-296; Theodore Plantinga, "Commemorating Schilder: Have We Learned Anything Yet?" in *Myodicy* 4 (June 1997); Rudolf Van Reest, "Klaas Schilder (1890-1952)" retrieved April 12, 2013 at: www.spindleworks.com/library/schilder/schilderbio.html; Geoff Thomas, "Learning From the Life of Dr. Klaas Schilder," in *Banner of Truth*, 2 parts, retrieved April 12, 2013 at www.banneroftruth.org/pages/article_detail.php?614 and 615; Richard J. Mouw, "Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian," *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 281-98.

³² James A. DeJong, *Henry J. Kuiper: Shaping the Christian Reformed Church, 1907-1962* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 226. One high- or low-light, depending on one's perspective, was the all-day conference that Schilder arranged between leaders of the CRC and the PRC in order to discuss the possibility of reunion. The conference was held at the Pantlind Hotel in Grand Rapids on March 29, 1939. At the conference Hoeksema presented a paper that was later published as "The Reunion of the Christian Reformed and Protestant Reformed Churches: Is it Demanded, Possible, Desirable?" In the paper Hoeksema presented an analysis of the Three Points of Common Grace adopted by the CRC Synod of 1924. The conference was a failure. No one from the CRC side had prepared a written document for discussion, nor were they prepared to respond to Hoeksema's paper. Several prominent leaders of the CRC did not attend. To the ministers from the PRCA, and to Schilder, it appeared that the representatives from the CRC were not genuinely interested in resolution of the doctrinal differences that divided the CRC and the PRC. This was the last time that there was an attempt to discuss healing the breach between the two denominations.

Shunned by the CRC, Schilder was warmly received by the PRCA. He lectured and preached throughout the denomination. He participated in conferences in the east and west. He stayed in the homes of and visited with many PRCA ministers. And he gained a large following among members of the PRCA. It became increasingly apparent, however, that although there were areas of agreement, there were also questions that Schilder left unanswered—important questions. In addition, Schilder indicated that he held to a promise of God in baptism that was general, for all who were baptized, and not for the elect alone. After some months Schilder returned to the Netherlands just as World War II was about to break out. Schilder was gone, but certainly not forgotten.

In the years following Dr. Schilder's first visit, Hoeksema continued to write and teach on the doctrine of the covenant. In a monograph entitled "The Covenant Concept," written in 1943, at a time when the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) were debating the doctrine of the covenant, Hoeksema carefully laid out what he considered to be his and his denomination's doctrine of the covenant. In less than a decade the PRCA herself would be engulfed in controversy over the doctrine of the covenant. Although this document appears to have been circulated at the time among Protestant Reformed clergy and interested members, it was not until 2003 that it came to light again and was published in the *Standard Bearer*. Once again, Hoeksema made plain that it was his view that election determines membership in the covenant.

As to the *realization* of this covenant, we can speak of its *objective* and *subjective* realization. To the objective realization belongs:

1. The eternal ordination of Christ as the Head of the covenant (*institutio mediatoris*) and the election of His people in Him, so that they are one body with Him legally and organically in their election.³³

³³ Hoeksema, "The Covenant Concept (1)," *Standard Bearer* 80 (December 1, 2003): 107.

A bit later in the same document, Hoeksema discussed “the close relation of the doctrine of the *covenant and election*, and the question as to *who are in the covenant*.” He began this section by establishing the relationship between the decree of the covenant and the decree of election. He argued “that the decree of the covenant is first, and that the decree of election is subservient to the decree of the counsel of peace. God first decrees in the counsel of peace to reveal the glory of His own covenant life in a covenant established with the creature, and then He ordains and chooses the elect in Christ for the realization of that covenant.”³⁴ He continued:

This also answers, in part at least, the questions: *with whom* is the covenant established? Or, who are in the covenant of God? Also in regard to this question there is much confusion among Reformed theologians. Some simply answer that the covenant is established with the elect, others prefer to say that the elect sinner in Christ is in the covenant, while still others look at the historical realization of the covenant in the world and then insist that believers and their seed are those with whom God establishes His covenant, and by the “seed of believers” they then mean all that are born of believing parents. It should be clear, however, that if the covenant is established in and with Christ, those that are in the covenant of God according to God’s elective decree are none other than the elect. In God’s counsel, the covenant is strictly limited to those who are chosen in Christ (Eph. 1:4), so that in actual fact the covenant people are those who receive the gifts of grace according to election, such as regeneration, being grafted into Christ by faith, and receiving all the benefits of grace and salvation in Christ so that they may live the life of God’s eternal friendship even in this world.³⁵

Hoeksema concluded:

However, it is quite certain:

1. That the stream of God’s election follows the riverbed of continued generations, and that in such a way that the riverbed is dug out for the stream. The organic development of the

³⁴ Hoeksema, “The Covenant Concept (2),” *Standard Bearer* 80 (December 15, 2003): 131.

³⁵ Hoeksema, “The Covenant Concept (2),” *Standard Bearer* 80 (December 15, 2003): 131.

generations is adapted to the realization of the seed of the covenant....

4. That nevertheless only the “children of the promise” are counted for the true seed of the covenant (cf. Rom. 9:6-9), so that with them and only them, even in the line of the generations of believers, God established His covenant. They alone believe the promises of God and walk in a “new and holy life,” as of the party of the living Jehovah.³⁶

Election and the Covenant: In the Heat of Controversy

As the controversy over the covenant was beginning to heat up in the PRCA, the recognized leader of the churches was stricken. Hoeksema was on a vacation at the time in the western part of the United States, headed for California. On June 17, 1947, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Hoeksema suffered a severe stroke. The stroke affected his motor skills and took away his speech. Temporarily he was unable to carry on with his preaching, writing, and teaching in the seminary. Replacements were found while he worked through the agonizing process of regaining what he could of that which he had lost. As a testament to his indomitable spirit and determination, Hoeksema was able by the fall of 1948 to resume his work in the seminary. Before this time already he had regained his speech and taken up his pen once again. In this first year of work since his stroke, he was aided by his son Homer C. Hoeksema, who was doing post-graduate work in the seminary.

During the summer of 1947, Dr. Klaas Schilder made a second trip to the United States. Just before his devastating stroke, in the May 1, 1947 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, Hoeksema had extended a hearty welcome to Dr. Schilder. World War II had taken place between Schilder’s first and second visits to the United States. During the

³⁶ Hoeksema, “The Covenant Concept (2),” *Standard Bearer* 80 (December 15, 2003): 132.

war, after a brief imprisonment because of his public opposition to Hitler, Schilder had gone into hiding. For the duration of the war he was not heard from by anyone in the States, though attempts were made to locate him with the assistance of the State Department. It was only after the war was over, that he was again heard from. When Schilder's plans for a return visit were made public, Hoeksema assured Schilder in the pages of the *Standard Bearer* that "we still love him, and that we will give him a warm reception." This assurance was given despite the fact that "[h]e knows that we do not agree with their [that is, the Liberated] covenant conception." Hoeksema went on to assure his old friend that "in spite of our differences our churches will give him a hearing."³⁷

Because he was recovering from his stroke, Hoeksema was unable to play a significant role in the conferences that took place with Dr. Schilder. He did, however, participate to a limited extent in the two conferences that were held in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At the first conference, held on October 16, 1947, Hoeksema presented a list of seven propositions on the covenant that served as the basis for discussion. This list of propositions he later published in the *Standard Bearer* as part of an article entitled "Our Conference with Dr. Schilder." In his list of propositions, Hoeksema emphasized that God establishes the covenant only with the elect: "The promise of the covenant is fulfilled in the elect alone, even as it concerns them alone. Romans 9:6-8, 15; Hebr. 6:16-18."³⁸ In addition, Hoeksema insisted that the covenant is unconditional and that God alone establishes and maintains His covenant. He rejected the view that man is a party with God in the covenant. Instead, he taught that, as a fruit of God's establishment

³⁷ Hoeksema, "The Coming of Dr. Schilder," *Standard Bearer* 23 (May 1, 1947): 343.

³⁸ Hoeksema, "Our Conference with Schilder," *Standard Bearer* 24 (December 1, 1947): 102. Hoeksema's propositions are in Dutch. The translation is mine.

of the covenant and by the power of grace, redeemed man stands in the world as the party of the living God.

A second conference with Schilder was held from November 4 through 6, 1947. At this conference Hoeksema presented six additional propositions on the covenant, propositions that concerned the understanding of key expressions in the Baptism Form. He maintained that the work of salvation as it is described in the first part of the Form “is applicable only to the elect.”³⁹

When they were published in the *Standard Bearer*, Hoeksema’s initial set of propositions on the covenant were the first words from Hoeksema to appear on the pages of the magazine in several months. Gradually, as his strength returned, Hoeksema resumed the active editorship of the *Standard Bearer*. He did so in the middle of the storm of controversy that by this time was raging within the PRCA. He made clear that he was determined, by the grace of God, to preserve in the PRCA the teaching concerning the covenant that he was convinced was both biblical and confessional—the teaching for which he had stood from the beginning of the denomination’s history.

In 1949 Hoeksema wrote another series of editorials on the covenant in the *Standard Bearer*. The general title of this series was “Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace.” In this series of editorials Hoeksema once again insisted that election determines membership in the covenant: “...the covenant includes strictly speaking only the elect.”⁴⁰ He presented the following syllogism as biblically and confessionally correct:

- a. God’s promise is for the elect only.

³⁹ Hoeksema, “Our Conference with Schilder,” *Standard Bearer* 24 (December 1, 1947):103.

⁴⁰ Hoeksema, “Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace,” *Standard Bearer* 25 (February 15, 1949): 221.

- b. God surely fulfills His promise through the operation of the Holy Spirit.
- c. Only the elect receive the promise and are saved.⁴¹

At the beginning of the series Hoeksema expressed disagreement both with the Liberated churches and their conditional covenant view, as well as with the followers of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, who taught presumptive regeneration. Additionally, he made clear that his disagreement with both views arose out of his conviction that the covenant includes only the elect.

Nor can we agree with the liberated. Just as it is the attempt of the synodicals to assert something about all the children of the covenant, head for head, even though it is only in presumption, so the liberated assert of all the children born in the church in the line of the covenant and of believing parents that they all have the promise of God. Also this is plainly contrary to the Word of God, which emphasizes that the promise of God is only for the elect, Rom. 9:8: "That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" ...it is very evident that the promise is not for all, but for the heirs of the promise, for the elect, whom God in His eternal counsel has chosen unto eternal life.... Therefore, if the promise depends on God alone, and God certainly fulfills His promise, it must be very evident that the promise is for the elect only.⁴²

In the course of his series Hoeksema responded to a certain Rev. Meima, who had publicly criticized Hoeksema's view that the covenant is with the elect alone.

The Rev. Meima complains that I approach the truth of the covenant very strongly from the direction of election. But I ask: what is wrong with this approach for people who believe in the Reformed truth? Is not election the very heart of the Church? And should not that heart beat in every doctrine which the church teaches? Can the approach to any doctrine ignore the doctrine of predestination? I deny this. And especially do I deny that the

⁴¹ Hoeksema, "Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace," *Standard Bearer* 25 (March 15, 1949): 269.

⁴² Hoeksema, "Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace," *Standard Bearer* 25 (March 1, 1949): 246.

doctrine of the covenant can be approached properly, except on the basis of election and reprobation.⁴³

The Declaration of Principles

The Synod of 1951 is remembered by members of the Protestant Reformed Churches for especially one decision. That decision was the final adoption of the document known as the “Declaration of Principles.” The Declaration had been adopted provisionally by the Synod of 1950, which met in Hull, Iowa. The Mission Committee of the PRCA had requested of Synod 1950 a document that made clear to groups desiring to be organized as Protestant Reformed congregations, what distinctive teachings would be binding on them. Most of the work of the Mission Committee and the denominational missionaries was concentrated at that time with Dutch immigrants living in Canada, particularly Dutch immigrants from the Liberated Churches. These immigrants had pressed the Mission Committee for a document that spelled out requirements for organization, in particular, what view of the covenant they would be required to affirm. This is what prompted the request of the Mission Committee.

The Declaration was formulated and presented to the Synod of 1950 by a committee of pre-advice, into whose hands had been placed the request of the Mission Committee. Herman Hoeksema was appointed by the synod to serve as an advisor to this committee, along with his colleague in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Prof. G. M. Ophoff.⁴⁴ Although it was presented to the synod as the work of the committee, as indeed it was, Hoeksema later acknowledged that he was the primary author of the

⁴³ Hoeksema, “Extinguished Root and Branch,” *Standard Bearer* 25 (March 1, 1949): 245.

⁴⁴ *Acts of Synod, 1950*, 54.

Declaration. The other members of the committee had asked him “to draw up the first draft of this Declaration of Principles.”⁴⁵

Prior to the meeting of the Synod of 1951, Hoeksema explained, defended, and promoted the Declaration of Principles through a series of editorials in the *Standard Bearer*. In the April 15, 1951 issue he concluded his series with these words:

If our next synod should dare to reject it, I see no longer any hope for the future of our Protestant Reformed Churches as remaining distinctively Reformed. Hence, “with malice toward none,” I shall fight for it.⁴⁶

By the narrowest of margins the PRCA Synod of 1951 adopted the Declaration of Principles. The whole issue in the debate over the covenant came down to one question really: “Is the doctrine of a unilateral, unconditional covenant sovereignly established by God with the elect alone confessional? Is it demanded by the Three Forms of Unity?” The Declaration of Principles answered that question in the affirmative. It set forth the Protestant Reformed Churches’ convictions regarding what the Three Forms of Unity teach about the covenant, while at the same time identifying certain teachings that are not consistent with Scripture or the creeds. Although the confessions do not contain a complete statement of the Bible’s teaching on the subject of the covenant, what the confessions do teach has important implications for the doctrine of the covenant. The Declaration made plain what is implicit in the creeds, what therefore can be deduced “by good and necessary consequence.” It applied the teaching of the confessions to the doctrine of the covenant. In content the Declaration is by-and-large made up of quotations from the confessions. The Declaration demonstrates that the Reformed confessions teach that the members of the covenant are the elect alone; that the elect

⁴⁵ Hoeksema, “Reply to Rev. Blankespoor,” *Standard Bearer* 27 (October 1, 1950):4.

⁴⁶ Hoeksema, “The Declaration of Principles,” *Standard Bearer* 27 (April 15, 1951): 318.

alone enjoy the blessings of the covenant; and that the promise of the covenant is not a conditional promise for all the children of believers, that is, for all who are baptized.

The Declaration concludes with a brief summary of the teachings that on the basis on Scripture and the Reformed confessions the Protestant Reformed Churches repudiate and maintain.

- III. Seeing then that this is the clear teaching of our confession,
 - A. We repudiate:
 1. The teaching:
 - a. That the promise of the covenant is conditional and for all that are baptized.
 - b. That we may presuppose that all the children that are baptized are regenerated, for we know on the basis of Scripture, as well as in the light of all history and experience, that the contrary is true.
 2. The teaching that the promise of the covenant is an objective bequest on the part of God giving to every baptized child the right to Christ and all the blessings of salvation.
 - B. And we maintain:
 1. That God surely and infallibly fulfills His promise to the elect.
 2. The sure promise of God which He realizes in us as rational and moral creatures not only makes it impossible that we should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness but also confronts us with the obligation to love, to walk in a new and holy life, and constantly to watch unto prayer. All those who are not thus disposed, who do not repent but walk in sin, are the objects of His just wrath and excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven.
 3. That the ground of infant baptism is the command of God and the fact that according to Scripture He establishes His covenant in the line of continued generations.⁴⁷

The main charge of the opponents of the Declaration of Principles was that it was extra-confessional. It was alleged that by adopting the Declaration an extra-confessional viewpoint, namely that the covenant was unconditional and with the elect alone, was imposed upon the members of the PRCA. At the same time this extra-confessional

⁴⁷ *Acts of Synod, 1951, 207-8.*

viewpoint was elevated to such a status that no one could affiliate with the PRCA who did not subscribe to it. This was the charge made by the Rev. Bernard Kok, in a contribution to the January 1, 1951 issue of the *Standard Bearer* entitled “The Declaration, A Mistake.” In the article Kok alleged that permanent adoption of the Declaration “will be the cause of dissention and schism in our Churches” and that “the questions involved are extra-confessional and hence may not determine membership or non-membership in the Church of Christ.”⁴⁸ In the same issue of the *Standard Bearer*, Hoeksema wrote a lengthy rejoinder to Kok entitled “The Declaration Not A Mistake.” Among other things Hoeksema wrote:

One thing, however, I deny. And that is the statement of the Rev. Kok that the Declaration is extra-confessional, that is, that it is outside of the Confessions.

I claim not only that the matters touched upon in the Declaration of Principles are entirely within the Confessions, but also that the Declaration itself is confessional and entirely based on the Three Forms of Unity.

It is purely Protestant Reformed.⁴⁹

Despite the charge of the proponents of a conditional covenant, the Declaration of Principles is not extra-confessional binding, but rather strictly confessional binding. That is what it was designed to be, and that is in fact what it is. With the adoption of the Declaration of Principles, the Protestant Reformed Churches freely bound themselves by and to the Reformed confessions with regard to the all-important doctrine of the covenant of grace. And any truly Reformed—confessionally Reformed—church would not have it any other way.

In his editorial in the *Standard Bearer* immediately following the meeting of synod and the final adoption of the Declaration in June of 1951, Hoeksema expressed his

⁴⁸ Bernard Kok, “The Declaration, A Mistake,” *Standard Bearer* 27 (January 1, 1951): 153.

⁴⁹ Hoeksema, “The Declaration Not A Mistake,” *Standard Bearer* 27 (January 1, 1951): 153.

judgment that, as far as the PRCA are concerned, the Synod of 1951 “will undoubtedly go down in history as one of the most important synods—if not the most important—that to date was ever held.”⁵⁰ And further, “what we always maintained we now declared officially in the Declaration of Principles, which is not a fourth form, but is simply the expression of the Confessions and may be tested by the Confessions at any time.”⁵¹

It belongs to the Declaration’s teaching that the covenant of grace is sovereignly established by God with the elect alone. After quoting Canons of Dort, II, 8, the conclusion is drawn: “This article very clearly teaches...that all the covenant blessings are for the elect alone.”⁵² And this same article, the Declaration goes on to state, teaches “[t]hat the promise of God bestows the objective right of salvation not upon all the children that are born under the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, not upon all that are baptized, but only upon the spiritual seed.”⁵³ In explanation of the statement in Canons of Dort, II, 8 that “Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of the faithful than for the adult persons,” the Declaration states that “also here the reference is only to the elect children.”⁵⁴ On the basis of the Belgic Confession of Faith, Article 35, which concerns the Lord’s Supper, specifically the part of the article that denies that all who partake receive that which is signified by the sacrament, “as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament, but not Christ who was

⁵⁰ Hoeksema, “Our Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28 (November 1, 1951): 52.

⁵¹ Hoeksema, “Our Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28 (November 1, 1951): 54. By insisting that the Declaration is not a fourth form, Hoeksema was rejecting the charge of some in the PRC and of Dr. Klaas Schilder. Schilder expressed this judgment of the Declaration in *Bovenschriftuurlijke Binding—een Nieuw Gevaar*, which has been translated into English as *Extra-Scriptural Binding: A New Danger*, and included with *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*, by Jelle Faber (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996).

⁵² *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 418.

⁵³ *Confessions and Church Order*, 418.

⁵⁴ *Confessions and Church Order*, 421.

signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers,” the Declaration averred that “the promise of God, preached in the gospel, signified and sealed in both the sacraments, is not for all but for the elect only.”⁵⁵ And finally, the Declaration quoted from the Baptism Form: “And although our young children do not understand these things, we may not therefore exclude them from baptism, for as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ....” Who are the children to whom the Form refers? The answer is: “none other than the elect children of the Covenant are meant....”⁵⁶ The Declaration cited the concluding prayer in the Baptism Form: “Almighty God and merciful Father, we thank and praise Thee that Thou hast forgiven us and our children all our sins through the blood of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ....” To whom does this prayer refer? Does it refer to all the children of believers, head for head? No, “[t]he prayer refers only to the elect; we cannot presuppose that it is for all.”⁵⁷

Dr. Schilder responded to the adoption of the Declaration of Principles with sharp criticism. He voiced his criticism in *De Reformatie*, the magazine of which he was the editor, in a series of editorials under the main title “*Bovenschriftuurlijke Binding—Een Nieuw Gevaar*.” These articles were later translated and published as *Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger*.⁵⁸ As might be expected, Hoeksema responded to these articles and defended the Declaration. He rejected Schilder’s charge that by adopting the Declaration the PRCA were adopting a fourth confession. He rejected the charge from a

⁵⁵ *Confessions and Church Order*, 421.

⁵⁶ *Confessions and Church Order*, 422.

⁵⁷ *Confessions and Church Order*, 426.

⁵⁸ Klaas Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger*, trans. T. van Laar (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996). The Dutch title was: *Bovenschriftuurlijke binding—een nieuw Gevaar*. The chapters in this book were slightly revised articles that had appeared in *De Reformatie*, of which Schilder was the editor.

formal point of view, since the Declaration was not approved by the Synod of 1951 as an additional confession, which would have meant that rather than Three Forms of Unity in the PRCA there were now Four Forms of Unity. Although not adopted as a fourth confession, the adoption of the Declaration was nevertheless a settled and binding decision in the PRCA, Hoeksema maintained. Hoeksema defended the Declaration, however, chiefly from a material point of view. He defended the Declaration as a biblically and confessionally sound exposition of the truth concerning the unconditional covenant of grace. Time and again he pointed out that the Declaration's contents consisted mainly of statements taken directly out of the Three Forms of Unity. He also challenged Dr. Schilder, or any other of the theologians of the Liberated, to point out the erroneous interpretation of Scripture or the confessions in the Declaration, rather than only to object to the legality involved in its adoption. To date, no Liberated theologian has taken up this challenge.

In the course of his defense of the Declaration, Hoeksema wrote several articles under the title "The Promise According to the Confessions." Throughout this series, which ran from the end of 1952 through the middle of 1953, Hoeksema sought to demonstrate that the confessions teach a promise of God that is unconditional and for the elect alone. "Just as in the preaching of the gospel the ungodly may hear with the natural, external ear the promise of God, but receives it to his condemnation," so also in the sacraments he "certainly does not receive the promise of the Holy Ghost. Nor is that promise of the Holy Ghost meant for him. The promise is meant by God only for the elect."⁵⁹ Commenting on Canons of Dort I, 7 he stated: "For even [the] infralapsarian

⁵⁹ Hoeksema, "The Promise According to the Confessions," *Standard Bearer* 28 (September 1, 1952): 485.

language expresses very plainly that the promise is an oath of God for the elect only, and that it is unconditional.”⁶⁰

Hoeksema appealed not only to the major confessions, the Three Forms of Unity, but also to the minor confessions, the Reformed liturgical forms. He offered an extended explanation of the Baptism Form, taking special care to explain certain disputed sections. One of the disputed sections is at the end of the second of the “principal parts of the doctrine of holy baptism,” the section that concerns the Holy Spirit:

In like manner, when we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this holy sacrament, that he will dwell in us and sanctify us to be members of Christ, applying unto us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot or wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.⁶¹

Both Heyns and Schilder interpreted the language of this part of the Form in terms of a conditional covenant made with all the baptized children. Hoeksema rejected this interpretation as unreformed.

There is and can be only one Reformed position and only one Reformed interpretation of this part of the Baptism Form. And that is that the promise of the Holy Spirit is not for all, but for the elect seed only, and is absolutely unconditional. He promises, and He realizes the promise of the Holy Ghost, not to and in all the children that are born under the historical dispensation of the covenant, but to and in all the elect seed only.⁶²

In a later article in the same series, Hoeksema wrote that “the promise in baptism was not for all the children, head for head, but only for the elect, even though all the children

⁶⁰ Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 28 (September 1, 1952): 486. It should be noted that Hoeksema makes a point of emphasizing that even though its language is infralapsarian, the Canons make clear that the promise of God is for the elect alone. He does this because a number of proponents of the conditional covenant view charged that Hoeksema’s unconditional covenant, which included only the elect, was the necessary corollary of his supralapsarianism.

⁶¹ “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” *Confessions and Church Order*, 258.

⁶² Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29 (October 15, 1952): 29.

must receive the sign and seal of baptism according to the rule that God establishes His covenant in the line of continued generations.”⁶³ And he concluded his consideration of the expression “sanctified in Christ” in the Form with these words:

[T]he entire Baptism Form, in its doctrine, in its confession, in its prayer, and in its thanksgiving, views the church organically as the elect saints in Christ Jesus. The church confesses, prays, and gives thanks for the believers and their spiritual seed. And of course, this implies that the promise is not for all, head for head and soul for soul, but only for the elect, for the believers, for them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus.⁶⁴

Clearly, it was Hoeksema’s view that the confessions do not leave room for the conditional covenant conception. It was his conviction that the confessions supported only one view of membership in the covenant of grace and that is the view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. This was the view articulated in the Declaration of Principles that was adopted by the PRCA Synod of 1951 and of which Hoeksema was an ardent supporter. And this was the view that Hoeksema championed. He was determined that no other view would be accepted in the PRCA. In his judgment, at stake was not simply the unity and existence of the denomination; but at stake more importantly was faithfulness to the Reformed confessions.

In an article in the January 15, 1951 issue of the *Standard Bearer* entitled “The Proposed Declaration,” Hoeksema gave six reasons “why the Declaration that was proposed by our last Synod to the churches should be adopted at our next Synod.”⁶⁵ His first reason was that “it is often necessary that within the Confessions the Churches clearly express what according to their conviction is the plain teaching of those

⁶³ Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29 (February 15, 1954): 221.

⁶⁴ Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29 (February 15, 1953): 222.

⁶⁵ Hoeksema, “The Proposed Declaration,” *Standard Bearer* 27 (January 15, 1951):172.

Confessions.” This becomes necessary when “persons within the churches claim to stand on the basis of the confessions but nevertheless deviate from them.” Hoeksema cited three examples from the history of the Christian Reformed Church—history in which he was directly involved—in order to demonstrate the validity of this point. The first example is that of Rev. H. Bultema, who attempted to promote premillennial and dispensational teachings in the CRC, whose views were condemned by the Synod of 1918. The second example was that of Dr. Ralph Janssen who taught higher critical views of Scripture in the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Churches (now Calvin Theological Seminary), whose views were condemned by the CRC Synod of 1922. In both instances Reformed synods appealed to, interpreted, and applied the Reformed confessions. The third example from history that he cited concerned the history of the origin of the PRCA, when “it became necessary for those who loved the Reformed faith in 1924 to express their conviction as to what is the plain teaching of the Three Forms of Unity over against the error of the Three Points adopted by the Synod of Kalamazoo, 1924.”⁶⁶

Hoeksema’s second reason for the adoption of the Declaration amounted to his defense of the Declaration against the charge of its opponents that it had not originated in the proper church orderly way of consistory, classis, and synod. The charge was a veiled charge of hierarchy—imposition of the Declaration by the synod upon the churches. In the end, this was a poorly camouflaged procedural objection to the Declaration by those whose real objection was to the content of the Declaration. Hoeksema’s defense of the procedure by which the Declaration came into existence was twofold. First, he pointed out that synod has the perfect right to respond to a request of one of its own standing

⁶⁶ Hoeksema, “The Proposed Declaration,” 172-3.

committees—in this case the synodical Mission Committee. Second, he deflected the charge of hierarchy by pointing out that rather than to adopt the Declaration at the synod responsible for its creation, the Declaration was committed to the churches for a year of study and response before its final adoption (or defeat) by the following synod. “How anyone can contend on good grounds that the Synod violated any rule of the Church Order is certainly a mystery to me.”⁶⁷

Hoeksema’s third reason for the adoption of the Declaration was that it “will certainly serve as a sound and clear basis for the organization of prospective Protestant Reformed Churches,” the Declaration providing a very clear statement of what the PRCA maintain with respect to the doctrine of the covenant. Fourth, Hoeksema advocated adoption of the Declaration on the ground that it “will serve as a clear proclamation to all that are without of the faithful adherence of the Protestant Reformed Churches to the Reformed faith as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity, over against all that deviate from these Confessions.” All will know where the PRCA stand on the fundamental doctrine of the covenant. Fifth, adoption of the Declaration “will safeguard our Protestant Reformed Churches by the grace of God against the influence of those who claim that they adhere to the Reformed Confessions, but who nevertheless deviate from them.” And sixth, “the Declaration of Principles will serve as a sound and safe basis and starting-point for correspondence with other Reformed Churches.” “These are some of the reasons why, in my opinion,” Hoeksema concluded his article, “the Synod of 1951 should adopt the Declaration of Principles.”⁶⁸ As compelling as Hoeksema’s reasons were, the adoption of the Declaration by the Synod of 1951, was no easy matter.

⁶⁷ Hoeksema, “The Proposed Declaration,” 173.

⁶⁸ Hoeksema, “The Proposed Declaration,” 173-4.

Reaction and Analysis of Others

From the time that it was first drawn up until the present, those within and outside of the PRCA have reacted to and analyzed the Declaration of Principles. Dr. J. Van Genderen, long-time professor at the *Theologische Universiteit* of the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (CGKN) in Apeldoorn, gives an analysis of the Declaration of Principles in his book *Election and Covenant*. He writes:

With an appeal to the Reformed Confessions this ecclesiastical document rejects the teaching that the promises of the covenant are addressed to all baptized children.... One of the most important theses is that the promise of God which is proclaimed by the gospel and signified and sealed by both sacraments is not meant for all, but only for the elect. Behind this *Declaration of Principles* stands the theology of H. Hoeksema.... The covenant, for Hoeksema, is not an agreement, but a living relationship of friendship between God and those whom He has chosen in Jesus Christ our Lord. The children of the congregation must receive baptism as a sign of the covenant, but the covenant promises are only meant for the elect, for they are the children of the promise. Whereas the sign and seal of the covenant is a savour of life unto life for the children of the promise, it is at the same time a savour of death unto death for the reprobate who tread upon the covenant of Jehovah.⁶⁹

Van Genderen's judgment of Hoeksema's teaching concerning the relationship between election and covenant is that "theology here is so dominated by the idea of election that we have to speak of an election-system whereby the doctrine of the covenant is seriously deformed."⁷⁰ Whether or not one agrees with Van Genderen's opinion that Hoeksema's covenant theology, and by implication the covenant theology defended by the Declaration of Principles, is "seriously deformed," Van Genderen is certainly correct in his understanding of Hoeksema's covenant theology. It is a covenant theology that is

⁶⁹ J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995), 24.

⁷⁰ Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election*, 24.

“dominated by the idea of election.” There can be no doubt about the truth of that observation.

An interested observer of the covenant controversy that was taking place in the PRCA in the late 1940s and early 1950s was Dr. James Daane, at the time Professor of Ministry and Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and a founding editor of the *Reformed Journal*. Daane himself rejected Herman Hoeksema’s view of the covenant of grace, the view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. He was convinced, however, that doctrinal consistency on the part of the PRCA demanded rejection of the teaching of the conditional covenant. Specifically he was convinced that the PRCA rejection of the theology of common grace required necessarily rejection also of the conditional covenant. From the point of view of doctrinal consistency, the PRCA repudiation of common grace demanded also the adoption of the covenant conception contained in the Declaration of Principles. Daane informed the readers of the *Reformed Journal* that

[t]he *Declaration* defines the Protestant Reformed view of the Covenant, in contrast to Schilder’s view—and ours [the CRC]. It is the denial of common grace as applied to the Covenant. For the year now running, it has been placed before their churches for consideration. At their Synod this summer, it is to be adopted (or rejected) as the official Protestant Reformed doctrine of the Covenant. God never meets man on a conditional basis....⁷¹

He went on to indicate that

[a] number of Protestant Reformed ministers are not in favor of the *Declaration*. Some object for formal reasons. Others openly contend for conditions within the Covenant. They maintain that such a view of the Covenant does not do violence to Protestant Reformed theology. In this, I believe, these protesting Protestant

⁷¹ James Daane, “Timeless Logic?” *Reformed Journal* 1 (April, 1951): 10.

Reformed ministers are plainly wrong, and Hoeksema, on his basis, is entirely correct.⁷²

Daane's judgment was that "if their churches subscribe to the position that God operates with conditions, and takes them seriously, their churches have lost their reason for separate existence."⁷³ In this assessment, Daane and Hoeksema were in complete agreement.

A more recent assessment of Hoeksema's view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, as well as the judgment that this view was a necessary implication of Hoeksema's rejection of common grace, is that of the Rev. R. Eikelboom. In an article that appeared in the April 14, 2012 issue of *Una Sancta*, the magazine of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, Eikelboom commends Dr. Klaas Schilder for not taking his denial of common grace to its logical conclusion. While noting that Schilder and Hoeksema agreed in rejecting common grace, he faults Hoeksema for taking his rejection of common grace to its logical conclusion in also rejecting the teaching of a conditional covenant. In spite of the fact that he grants that this is indeed the *logical* conclusion of the rejection of common grace, this is not in his view the *biblical* conclusion. Eikelboom contends that although both denied common grace,

in a debate with Prof. Herman Hoeksema of the Protestant Reformed Churches of North America, Schilder modified his position. The Protestant Reformed Churches *totally denied the doctrine of common grace*, even to the point where they said: grace is only for the elect; and therefore God only makes a covenant of grace with the elect as well. Schilder understood that this was a logical consequence of saying 'no' to common grace, but Schilder did not want to go there. So—on the point of common grace—Schilder had the courage to acknowledge that his 'system' was not

⁷² Daane, "Timeless Logic?" *Reformed Journal* 1 (April, 1951): 10.

⁷³ Daane, "Timeless Logic?" *Reformed Journal* 1 (April, 1951): 10.

perfect: in relation to the covenant he did believe in an element of common grace.⁷⁴

With the adoption of the Declaration of Principles by the PRCA Synod of 1951, Dr. Schilder viewed further contact with the PRCA pointless. In an editorial in the November 17, 1951 issue of *De Reformatie* entitled “*De Kous Is Af*” (“The Stocking Is Finished”), Schilder informed his readers of the adoption of the Declaration of Principles and reiterated his charge against the Declaration that it was extra-scriptural and extra-confessional binding.⁷⁵ Hoeksema responded with his own “The Stocking is Finished,” in the January 1, 1952 issue of the *Standard Bearer*. He defended the necessity of the Declaration and expressed his conviction that “I do not regard the Liberated conception of the covenant Reformed.” He further judged that the Liberated view of the covenant was in principle the Heynsian view of the covenant, which long ago the PRCA had rejected. And he concluded that “the differences in regard to the doctrine of the covenant and of the promise were too great and too fundamental to permit members from the Liberated Churches into our [PRCA] communion.” Clearly, in Hoeksema’s view, the teaching of Scripture and the Reformed confession is that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. Only the elect are and may be considered to be members of the covenant. Hoeksema ended by expressing his disappointment in Schilder, closing with the salutation: “Vale, Amice Schilder.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ R. Eikelboom, “What is Reformed? Comments on some ‘unreformed’ Statements Made by KS,” *Una Sancta* 59 (April 14, 2012): 275.

⁷⁵ The translation of this article by Theodore Plantinga can be found as Appendix II, Rudolf Van Reest, *Schilder’s Struggle for the Unity of the Church* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1990), 433ff.

⁷⁶ Hoeksema, “The Stocking Is Finished,” *Standard Bearer* 28 (January 1, 1952): 148ff.

In the Seminary Classroom

Hoeksema's view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect was the view that he taught over the years in his Dogmatics classes in the Protestant Reformed Seminary. The lectures that he gave to his seminary students were the basis for his *Reformed Dogmatics*, published posthumously. The *Reformed Dogmatics* is designed to be a textbook in systematic theology at the seminary level. Like a good number of Reformed theologians of the past, including the Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, for whom he had the highest regard, Hoeksema treats the doctrine of the covenant at the beginning of Christology. He ends Chapter 19, an eighty-page chapter on "The Covenant," with a section devoted to "The Covenant and Predestination." Just prior to his treatment of the relationship between the covenant and predestination, Hoeksema comments on the relationship between the counsel of peace (the *pactum salutis*) and the decree of predestination, indicating that in his judgment "the counsel of predestination follows logically upon the counsel of peace or the counsel of the covenant. The counsel of predestination serves the counsel of the covenant even as the counsel of providence serves the counsel of predestination."⁷⁷ The decree of predestination is related to the decree of the covenant in the same way as the decree of providence is related to the decree of predestination. Just as the decree of providence serves God's execution of the decree of predestination, so the decree of predestination stands in the service of the decree of the covenant. In other words, the realization of the covenant is the goal that the decree of predestination has in view.

⁷⁷ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:472.

Hoeksema begins “The Covenant and Predestination” by relating reprobation to election, in connection with which he sets forth his view that the realization of the covenant is the higher purpose of predestination.

Reprobation is immediately connected with election but cannot be placed on a par with election. Reprobation follows election, and reprobation serves election. Reprobation has its motive in the divine will to realize the covenant in the antithetical way of sin and grace.⁷⁸

Hoeksema goes on to distinguish between man’s choosing and God’s sovereign election. Man can only choose that which already exists, whereas God’s election is causal and brings into existence that which he chooses: “In other words, the election of God is first of all foreordained unto salvation and to the glory of the covenant life in Christ.”⁷⁹ Once again, election finds its fulfillment in the “glory of the covenant.” Hoeksema brings the section and the entire chapter on the covenant to a close with these words:

This, then, is the conclusion of the matter concerning God’s covenant: God wants to reveal his own glorious covenant life unto us; as the triune God he ordains his Son to be Christ and Lord, the firstborn of every creature, the first begotten of the dead, the glorified one, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead; unto this end he ordains the church and gives her unto Christ, and he elects by name all those who in the church will have a place forever, in order that the one fullness (πλήρωμα) of Christ may scintillate in a thousandfold variation in the church and that purpose of the revelation of the glory of God’s covenant life, all things in time and in everlasting eternity concentrate. The end of it all is that we fall down in adoration before that glorious sovereign God and exclaim, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord! or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:477.

⁷⁹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:478.

⁸⁰ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:479-80.

With Appeal to Romans 9-11

Early on Hoeksema found support for his covenant conception, particularly his insistence that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, in the teaching of the apostle Paul in Romans 9-11. Standing on the shoulders of many who preceded him, including Calvin who wrote that the apostle's teaching in Romans 9-11 demonstrates that "the truth of the covenant remained firm,"⁸¹ Hoeksema often pointed out that the main subject of Romans 9-11 is not predestination, but specifically predestination *in the covenant*.⁸²

Hoeksema consistently appealed to Romans 9-11 in defense of his position that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. This was true already of his articles in the *Banner* in the 1920s. With regard to a proper understanding of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:21 that "[i]n Isaac shall thy seed be called," he says: "In Rom. 9 the apostle Paul discusses the very same question. . . he refers particularly to the promise of God's covenant delivered to Abraham with respect to his seed. . . ." And he goes on to say that the apostle "maintains that this word, embracing the children of the promise, and following the line of election, was in no respect brought to naught but completely fulfilled. . . . The word of God has not failed. It is realized completely, if it is only remembered that the children of the promise are reckoned for [the] seed."⁸³ Hoeksema continued his exposition of the history of Abraham and his seed as recorded in Genesis in light of Romans 9-11 in the next several issues of the *Banner*. In the September 29, 1921

⁸¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 343.

⁸² Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 105.

⁸³ Hoeksema, "The Children of the Promise," *Banner* 56 (September 8, 1921): 550-1.

issue he expounded Romans 9:13, “As it is written, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” Not only does this history make plain God’s elective purposes in the covenant, but “it is evident from all history, that even in the sphere of God’s covenant, as it manifests itself in the world, God maintains the freedom of His elective purpose. Not all the children of the flesh were also children of the promise.”⁸⁴

In his book *Believers and Their Seed*, Hoeksema again based his teaching on Romans 9-11. In God’s covenant as it manifests itself on earth, “All who are of Israel are not Israel. And not the children of the flesh, but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. For the line of election and reprobation cuts directly through the generations of the covenant.”⁸⁵ In connection with the apostle’s teaching in Romans 9, Hoeksema says that God’s revelation to Rebekah concerning the twins in her womb, Jacob and Esau, was that “not all the children of the flesh are also children of the promise, but that the Lord God executes His sovereign good pleasure also within the sphere of the historical manifestation of His covenant in the world.”⁸⁶ In Romans 9:15 the apostle Paul appeals to God’s word in the Old Testament to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” Here, too, Scripture teaches that “God’s sovereign good pleasure makes separation also in the historical people of God’s covenant in the world; and among them also He executes the counsel of His election and reprobation.”⁸⁷

In all his debate with Dr. Klaas Schilder and his rejection of the conditional covenant theology of the Liberated churches, Hoeksema repeatedly went back to Romans

⁸⁴ Hoeksema, “The Children of the Promise,” *Banner* 56 (September 29, 1921): 600.

⁸⁵ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 55.

⁸⁶ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 109.

⁸⁷ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 112.

9-11. He was convinced that the apostle's teaching in these chapters made clear that the conditional covenant view, which included the teaching that God's covenant was established with all the baptized children of believers, was in error.

We [intend] to prove that the general position of the Liberated Churches, viz., that all the children of believers are really in the covenant in virtue of the promise, i.e., that the promise is for them all, is contrary to the plain teaching of the Bible on this point. It is exactly this teaching that is denied in Rom. 9:6-8. The ninth chapter of the epistle to the Romans teaches plainly that God's sovereign predestination cuts right through the historical line of the covenant, and, in the generations of believers, makes separation between children of the promise and children of the flesh.⁸⁸

He goes on to deny the contention of the leaders of the Liberated that in Romans 9 the antithesis is between faith and unbelief, rather than election and reprobation, or that Romans 9 concerns national election and rejection, rather than personal election and reprobation.⁸⁹ In the March 1, 1946 issue of the *Standard Bearer* he continues to insist

⁸⁸ Hoeksema, "The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands," *Standard Bearer* 22 (February 1, 1946): 198.

⁸⁹ That this was the Liberated interpretation of Romans 9-11 was made plain in an article written by Erik de Boer entitled "Huiswerk van Holwerda. Zijn invloed inzake de verkiezingsleer in kaart gebracht," in *Holwerda herdacht. Bijdragen over leven en werk van Benne Holwerda (1909-1952)*, ed. George Harinck, AD Charta-reeks, vol. 10 (Barneveld, the Netherlands: Uitgeverij De Vuurbaak, 2005), 227-263. This article was translated, with an introduction added by Nelson D. Kloosterman, and entitled "Unfinished Homework: Charting the Influence of B. Holwerda with respect to the Doctrine of Election," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 107-136. The work is a doctrinal-historical study that narrates the discussion and developments within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s especially, involving the relationship between election and the covenant. The Liberated rejected the pronouncements made in 1942 by the Synod of the GKN meeting in Utrecht concerning election and the covenant of grace. In 1942, Holwerda wrote a series of articles in the *Amersfoortsch Kerkblad*, which deal with election in Scripture. In regard to Romans 9, de Boer demonstrates that Holwerda taught that "Election is historical. Just like the covenant is historical...so that all the emphasis would come to rest upon God who chooses his people within real time by calling his people unto salvation." (p. 113). His conclusion was that "God's choosing referred to an act of God within time by virtue of the gracious working proceeding from Christ" (p. 121). Holwerda denied that election as taught in Romans 9 was eternal, that it concerned definite individuals, and that faith was the fruit of rather than the condition unto election. In agreement with the position of his older brother, Douwe Holwerda already in 1949 suggested that Romans 9:13, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated," should be translated, "upon Jacob I let my choice fall, Esau I passed by," and wrote that in this verse "the question of Jacob and Esau is not about personal election from eternity, but about the election of a people at a particular historical moment for a special role in salvation history." The article indicates that Prof. B. Holwerda found personal election unto salvation in eternity nowhere in Scripture, with the possible

that “[t]he view, therefore, of the leaders of the Liberated Churches, as if God, by promise, bequeaths the blessings of salvation upon all the children of believers, is plainly contradicted in Rom. 9:6.”⁹⁰ And he concludes the article by saying that “[n]o true exegesis of Romans 9:10-13 can yield that result [that is, the Liberated view]. Jacob alone was the child of the promise, and that, too, by God’s sovereign election. And when not Esau, but Jacob receives the promise, the word of God is not become of none effect. The promise of God is for the elect only.”⁹¹

A few years later, when the controversy over the covenant was at its height in the PRCA, Hoeksema penned a series of editorials under the title “The Promise according to the Confessions.” In the January 1, 1953 issue of the *Standard Bearer* he wrote:

The question is whether this promise is for all the children that are born from Abraham, head for head and soul for soul, as the Liberated have it, and therefore also for all the seed of believers in the new dispensation; or whether this promise is particular and is meant only for the spiritual seed, and therefore only for the elect. In the light of Romans 9 there can be but one answer to this question. And that is: the promise of Abraham was meant only for the elect, and not for all the carnal seed of Abraham.⁹²

And a bit later he added that “it is evident from this passage [Romans 9:8] that the promise to Abraham and the promise of the covenant to believers does not include all their seed, but only the seed according to election.”⁹³

exception of Eph. 1:4, which passage did not necessarily require that it be interpreted in his view as referring to personal election.

⁹⁰ Hoeksema, “The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands,” *Standard Bearer* 22 (March 1, 1946): 245.

⁹¹ Hoeksema, “The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands,” *Standard Bearer* 22 (March 1, 1946): 246.

⁹² Hoeksema, “The Promise according to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29 (January 1, 1953): 148.

⁹³ Hoeksema, “The Promise according to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29 (January 1, 1953): 150.

Christ the Head of the Covenant

In line with his teaching that God establishes his covenant only with the elect and not all the physical children of believers, Hoeksema taught that Christ is the Head of the covenant. Christ is not only the Mediator of the covenant and Surety of the covenant, but he is also the Head of the covenant. Significantly, Hoeksema begins his treatment of the doctrine of the covenant, and at the same time the whole of Christology, with these words: “The third locus [of Reformed dogmatics] treats the person and work of Christ, the mediator of God and man and *the head of the covenant*.”⁹⁴ He follows up his introduction to Christology by saying:

The Lord God maintains and establishes his covenant not only by visiting the transgressor with his wrath by bringing upon him death and the curse, and by manifesting in that way that only in the communion of God’s friendship there is life and joy, but also by revealing that covenant of his friendship in Christ Jesus our Lord. God always executes his counsel, even through the means of Satan and sin, and in the way of sin causes the people of his covenant to attain to greater glory and to become manifestations of the glory of his grace.⁹⁵

Hoeksema was in full agreement with the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q.A. 31, “Q. 31. *With whom was the covenant of grace made?* A. The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.”⁹⁶

The Liberated theologians repudiated the contention that Christ is the Head of the Covenant. Rejecting the position of C. Steenblok and G. H. Kersten, as well as Herman Hoeksema, Liberated theologian Dr. J. Van Genderen exclaims, “It is incomprehensible how one can teach on the authority of the Confessions that Christ is the Head of the

⁹⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:401. Emphasis is mine.

⁹⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:401.

⁹⁶ *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons Ltd., 1973), 57.

Covenant.”⁹⁷ J. Kamphuis expresses the judgment that although designating Christ the Head of the Covenant may appear to be giving him the honor that he deserves, “we should make no mistake. We would cross a barrier and arrive in a completely different world. While it seems as if in the terms used Christ is given much honour, in reality He, together with all His benefits, is pushed away from the attention of faith.”⁹⁸ Addressing Article 25 of the Belgic Confession of Faith, Kamphuis quotes Schilder as follows:

Here the question comes to the fore: Is Christ the Head or the Mediator of the Covenant? Those who identified the Covenant with the Counsel of Peace, and in addition those who say that the Covenant is established with the elect came to the conclusion that Christ is the Head of the Covenant. They put it this way that in eternity God, over the heads of men, made a pactum with Christ as the Head of the elect whereby He would pay their debts—a unilateral treaty between the Father and the Son (and the Holy Spirit). However, this is a wrong view. The fact is that Jesus Christ is the Mediator of the Covenant.⁹⁹

There is no dispute here over the fact that the designation “Head of the covenant” does not occur in Holy Scripture. Hoeksema, of course, recognized this. Nevertheless, he maintained that the truth that Christ is the Head of the covenant was clearly implied in Scripture. For all practical purposes Scripture does teach that Christ is the Head of the covenant. He insisted that the truth that Christ is both the Mediator and Surety of the covenant, as well as the truth that the church is elect *in Christ*, demand that Christ also be the Head of the covenant.

The Liberated denied in Hoeksema’s day and deny today that Christ is the Head of the covenant in the interests of their denial that God establishes the covenant only with

⁹⁷ Van Genderen, *Election and Covenant*, 21. Confer Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, and Steenblok, *Rondom Verbond, Roeping en Doop*, and “De Leer van Dr. C. Steenblok,” L.M. P. Scholten, in *Leven en Leer van Dr. C. Steenblok*, 73, 87ff.

⁹⁸ J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), 73.

⁹⁹ Quoted in J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, 72.

the elect. To grant that the covenant is established with all those, and only those, of whom Christ is the Head, is to concede that the covenant is established only with the elect. And that the Liberated will not do.

Already in his early years as an editor of the *Banner*, Hoeksema referred often to Christ as King of God's kingdom and Head of the covenant. He wrote in the April 17, 1919 issue:

There are not two covenants...but there is one covenant, the covenant of grace of which Christ is the Head and His people are the members.... There is but one covenant, and that covenant is the one established with Christ as the eternal Head of His people.¹⁰⁰

Almost a year later, in the April 1, 1920 issue, he repeated his conviction concerning Christ's headship. With reference to the consummation of all things he wrote that "[t]he end of all things, therefore, will be that this Christ will appear as the Head of the creation, as the Head of the eternal covenant of grace and as the glorious King of His kingdom."¹⁰¹

A bit later in the same article he expressed his view that God had eternally appointed Christ as the Head of the covenant: "And, therefore, according to that same eternal purpose it is God's everlasting will that Jesus Christ, that Son come in the flesh shall be the eternal King of the kingdom of which we are now speaking; that He should be the eternal Head of that covenant according to which God is the friend of man and dwells with him."¹⁰²

In later years, as opposition mounted against Hoeksema's covenant conception, he continued steadfastly to teach that Christ is the Head of the covenant. In his position paper "The Covenant Concept," written in 1943, when considering the objective

¹⁰⁰ Hoeksema, "The Fallen King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 54 (April 17, 1919): 248.

¹⁰¹ Hoeksema, "The New King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 55 (April 1, 1920): 240.

¹⁰² Hoeksema, "The New King and His Kingdom," *Banner* 55 (April 1, 1920): 241.

realization of the covenant, the first thing mentioned by Hoeksema was: “1. The eternal ordination of Christ as the Head of the covenant (*institutio mediatoris*) and the election of His people in Him, so that they are one body with Him legally and organically in their election.”¹⁰³ And later, he again referred to Christ as the Head of the covenant:

It stands to reason therefore that this chief covenant friend of God [Christ] in relation to His people is their Surety; that the basis of righteousness shall be established and that they shall be justified and glorified through Him; that He is the Mediator in their behalf, through whom God establishes the covenant relation; and that in the covenant relation He stands as their Head representing them.¹⁰⁴

At the heart of Herman Hoeksema’s covenant conception was his conviction that God establishes His covenant with the elect and with the elect alone. God’s covenant of grace is not wider than election, because it is indeed a covenant of *grace*, and grace is always particular, for the elect alone. Not all the children of believers, therefore, but only the elect among their children, are included in the covenant. And not all baptized children, but only the elect among those who are baptized, are members of God’s covenant. As God Himself has declared, “They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” (Romans 9:8).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Hoeksema, “The Covenant Concept (1),” *Standard Bearer* 80 (December 1, 2003): 107.

¹⁰⁴ Hoeksema, “The Covenant Concept (2),” *Standard Bearer* 80 (December 15, 2003): 130.

¹⁰⁵ The implications of Schilder’s covenant doctrine are being worked out today by the Rev. Norman Shepherd and his supporters, as well as by the leading proponents of the movement known as the Federal (Covenant) Vision. The men of the Federal Vision, among whom are Steve Wilkins, John Barach, Douglas Wilson, Steve M. Schlissel, Peter J. Leithart, Rick Lusk, P. Andrew Sandlin, Tom Trouwborst, are teaching a universal, conditional, and breakable covenant. They are openly denying all of the doctrines of grace, in particular justification by faith alone. These men openly claim to be working out the implications of Klaas Schilder’s conditional covenant conception. See Norman Shepherd’s book *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000); P. Andrew Sandlin and John Barach, editors, *Obedient Faith: A Festschrift for Norman Shepherd* (Mount Hermon: Kerygma Press, 2012); Steve Wilkins, *The Federal Vision* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2004); P. Andrew Sandlin, ed., *A Faith that is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California* (La Grange: Kerygma Press, 2007); Ralph F. Boersema, *Not of Works: Norman Shepherd and His Critics* (Minneapolis: NextStep Resources, 2012). For works contra Federal Vision see David J. Engelsma,

Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2012); David J. Engelsma, *The Unconditional Covenant in Contemporary Debate* (Hudsonville: Trinity Protestant Reformed Evangelism Committee, 2004); John M. Otis, *An Analysis and Refutation of the Heresies of the Federal Vision* (Corpus Christi: Triumphant Publications, 2005); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).

Chapter 3

Within the Tradition

Introduction: Placed Outside the Tradition

Herman Hoeksema insisted that God establishes the covenant of grace unilaterally and with the elect alone. He taught that “[t]his covenant is established with Christ, as the Servant of Jehovah *par excellence*, and with the elect in and through Him.”¹ Only the elect enjoy the benefits of the covenant, of which the outstanding benefit is the everlasting friendship and favor of God. Only the elect enjoy the fruits of the propitiatory work of the Mediator and Head of the covenant, Jesus Christ: “For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” (Romans 11:27). Only the elect are drawn by the Spirit of Christ into the covenant community, which is the church and body of Christ: “As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the Lord; my Spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed’s seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and forever” (Isaiah 59:21). Only the elect enjoy the assurance of the covenant, the Spirit himself bearing witness with their spirit that they are “the children of God” (Romans 8:16). And only the elect have the promise that they will one day enjoy the perfection of the covenant in the new heavens and new earth, in which “the tabernacle of God [will be] 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” (Revelation 21:3).

¹ Hoeksema, “The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands,” *Standard Bearer* 22 (March 15, 1946): 269.

Hoeksema was recognized as a proponent of the view that the covenant of grace was established unilaterally and only with the elect.

As is well known, certain Reformed theologians have insisted that, strictly speaking, membership in the covenant of grace is identical with membership in the circle of the particular elect—in other words, that only the elect in this particular sense are members of the covenant of grace. This position was held, among others, by Abraham Kuyper in the Netherlands and, more recently, by Herman Hoeksema in this country.²

Because he taught that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, Hoeksema's covenant theology was opposed, both in his lifetime and thereafter. This was the main bone of contention between Hoeksema and his contemporary Dr. Klaas Schilder. Herman Hanko observes:

The whole idea of the relation between election and the covenant was a major point of conflict between Schilder and Hoeksema, between the Liberated and the PRC, in the controversies of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The LC [Liberated Churches] did not want to connect election with the covenant in any sense of the word, for these churches could never maintain a general promise to all the children baptized if the membership in the covenant was determined by election and reprobation. One of the chief reasons for the final breach between Schilder and Hoeksema was Hoeksema's insistence on the doctrine of predestination and its application to the doctrine of the covenant.³

Not only has Hoeksema's teaching on the covenant been opposed, but frequently his opponents have maligned his teaching with the accusation that it represents a departure from the historic Reformed line, the consensus opinion regarding membership in the covenant of grace. Curt Daniel accuses those who teach, as Hoeksema did, that "salvation through the Covenant of Grace comes unconditionally, unilaterally and

² Anthony Hoekema, "The Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching," *An Elaboration of the Theology of Calvin*, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: A Fourteen-Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles 8, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 60.

³ Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association), 349.

therefore without offers to man” of being hyper-Calvinists and calls their view “Hyper-Calvinist Federalism.”⁴ After calling attention to Hoeksema’s statement that “the idea of the covenant is not that of an agreement, pact or alliance: it is a bond of friendship and living fellowship,”⁵ Daniel asks, “Does Hoeksema’s definition differ substantially from that of other Hyper-Calvinists?” His answer: “We do not think so.”⁶ And he concludes that Hoeksema “shar[es] the mainstream Hyperist view that the Covenant is unilateral in its relation to men” and that “[i]n that covenant there are no offers and no conditions.”⁷

The late Dr. Roger R. Nicole (1915-2010) was a distinguished professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary and a prolific writer. He also assisted in the translation of the New International Version, was a founding member of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the Evangelical Theological Society, serving for a time as the society’s president. Nicole criticized Herman Hoeksema for teaching that God’s covenant of grace was only with the elect and that the doctrine of definite atonement precluded a universal offer of salvation, teaching instead that Christ and all his saving benefits “can rightly be offered [to none] except to the elect.”⁸ He lumps Hoeksema with hyper-Calvinists of the likes of Joseph Hussey (1660-1726), John Gill (1697-1771), and John Brine (1703-1765).⁹ “Definite atonement and a universal well-meant offer of the gospel are incompatible; one will have to choose one or the other. Arminians, Amyraldians and others choose a universal call, while J. Brine, J. Hussey, K.

⁴ Curt D. Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism and John Gill,” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1983), 226-7.

⁵ Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 1:366.

⁶ Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism,” 230.

⁷ Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism,” 239.

⁸ Roger R. Nicole, “Covenant, Universal Call and Definite Atonement,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38, no. 3 (September 1995), 407.

⁹ Nicole, “Covenant, Universal Call and Definite Atonement,” 407.

Schilder and H. Hoeksema choose definite atonement and reject the propriety of a universal invitation.”¹⁰

The American Presbyterian theologian and philosopher William Young goes so far as to create a pejorative term to describe Hoeksema’s position. He accuses Hoeksema of “Hyper-Covenantism,” obviously a subcategory of “Hyper-Calvinism.” Hoeksema is guilty of “Hyper-Covenantism” because of his teaching that God’s covenant is established unilaterally and is restricted to the elect. Hoeksema’s teaching, in Young’s view, introduces a kind of “presumptive election” into the covenant, the practical consequences of which are “most deadening” and result in “the actual decay of experimental religion.” Most significantly, Young judges Hoeksema’s covenant doctrine to be a departure from historic Calvinism. Hoeksema does not stand within the parameters of the Calvinistic (Reformed) tradition.¹¹

Similar is the assessment of Sherman Isbell in his contribution to a volume introducing the theology of the eminent Scottish divine and commissioner to the Westminster Assembly Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661). Isbell sets forth Rutherford’s covenant theology “by consideration of a contrasting perspective,” the contrasting perspective of twentieth-century Dutch-American pastor and theological professor Herman Hoeksema. In Isbell’s judgment, Hoeksema “put forward a radical reconstruction of covenant theology which is liable to many of the objections which

¹⁰ Nicole, “Covenant, Universal Call and Definite Atonement,” 403.

¹¹ William Young, *Reformed Thought: Selected Writings of William Young* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 51. The title of the chapter in which Young charges Hoeksema with “Hyper-Covenantism” is “Historic Calvinism and Neo-Calvinism.” It should be noted that recently the term “Hyper-Covenantalism” has been applied to the proponents of the view that is known as Federal Vision. Richard Phillips, for example, in his article entitled “Covenant Confusion,” which is posted on the website of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, uses this term to describe the view of the proponents of Federal Vision that all children who are baptized do very really belong to the covenant. In setting forth this teaching the theologians of the Federal Vision have deliberately appealed to Dr. Klaas Schilder, defending their teaching as the necessary (logical) outworking of the covenant doctrine of Schilder.

Rutherford raised [in his own day] against what he termed Antinomianism.”¹² There is a “systemic contrast” between Hoeksema’s and Rutherford’s views of the covenant, and Hoeksema’s view involves a “wide-ranging reconstruction of covenant theology,” including the loss of “the biblical teaching about man’s responsible agency and the means God uses to bring men into communion with himself.”¹³ Clearly, it is Isbell’s position that Hoeksema’s covenant theology lies outside the traditional Reformed teaching concerning the covenant.

Dennis Bratcher makes fundamentally the same assessment of Hoeksema’s covenant theology in relation to mainstream Reformed thought on the doctrine of the covenant. Hoeksema stands apart “because he maintains with absolute tenacity that the [covenant] promises of God are only and always to the elect....”¹⁴ Further, “[o]n Hoeksema’s view it is impossible to affirm the truths contained in the [Reformed] form for baptism....”¹⁵ And he goes so far as to assert concerning Hoeksema that “[h]is concept of the covenant and the promise being given only to the elect prevents him from doing justice to much of Scripture.”¹⁶

Presbyterian theologian Robert S. Rayburn, in his contribution to the book *To You and Your Children*, charges Herman Hoeksema and the PRCA with being hyper-Calvinists for teaching that the covenant of grace is established with the elect alone.¹⁷

¹² Sherman Isbell, “Samuel Rutherford and the Preached Covenant,” *Samuel Rutherford: An Introduction to his Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Reformation Society, 2012), 184.

¹³ Isbell, “Samuel Rutherford and the Preached Covenant,” 189-90.

¹⁴ Dennis A. Bratcher, *The Concepts of Conditionality and Apostasy in Relation to the Covenant* (a thesis submitted to the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology, 1986), 15.

¹⁵ Bratcher, *The Concepts of Conditionality and Apostasy*, 15.

¹⁶ Bratcher, *The Concepts of Conditionality and Apostasy*, 48.

¹⁷ Robert S. Rayburn, “Parental Conditions and the Promise of Grace to the Children of Believers,” *To You and Your Children: Examining the Biblical Doctrine of Covenant Succession*, ed. Benjamin K. Wikner (Moscow: Canon Press, 2005), 17.

That a “real promise” should be made “only to the elect” sets one’s teaching apart from that which is genuinely and historically Calvinistic. No consistent Calvinist could hold to such a teaching, in Rayburn’s judgment. Rather than a covenant promise made only to the elect, the covenant promise is made to all baptized children, but “suspended upon conditions. When the conditions are met the promise is fulfilled, whether we are talking about the nurture of children in a covenant home or an adult responding to the offer of salvation in the gospel.”¹⁸

But is Hoeksema’s position that God’s covenant is only with the elect a position that stands outside genuine Calvinism? Does it represent at best a misunderstanding and misapplication of Calvinism, and at worst a radical distortion of Calvinism’s fundamental principles? Is Hoeksema’s position a consistent application of Calvinism’s main tenets to the doctrine of the covenant, or is it a perversion of those tenets? And can it be demonstrated that Hoeksema’s position has historical precedent? Were there those upon whom he depended, who before him taught that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect alone? Can there be found those who stand in fundamental agreement with him?

In fact, it can be shown that beginning with Calvin himself there have been Reformed theologians who maintained that God’s decree of predestination determines membership in the covenant. Hoeksema’s position is by no means novel. Rather it can be demonstrated that it has a long and honorable pedigree. In taking his position, Hoeksema was standing on the shoulders of those who preceded him and who also applied the doctrine of predestination to the covenant of grace.

¹⁸ Rayburn, “Parental Conditions and the Promise of Grace to the Children of Believers,” 17.

Calvin and the “Substance of the Covenant”

As is generally recognized, John Calvin did not in any of his writings attempt to develop the doctrine of the covenant in a systematic fashion. He did not make covenant an organizing principle of his *Institutes*, nor did he offer a comprehensive treatment of the doctrine in his *magnum opus*. In the *Institutes*, the organizational principle of which is the doctrine of the Trinity, Calvin does not even treat the doctrine of the covenant in a separate chapter and “the word *foedus* [covenant] itself does not occur in any chapter heading...”¹⁹ Calvin scholar Dr. Eugene Osterhaven says that

[covenant] is not a dominant theme in the Reformer’s writings, as are salvation by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of God, the church, the enormity of sin, the reality and power of the Holy Spirit, and Scripture. It is nevertheless an important theme which, one suspects, Calvin had ever in mind so that it is not surprising to come across a reference to the covenant after one has read a long section of a commentary or some sermons in which there is not a single explicit reference to it.²⁰

Calvin’s treatment of the doctrine of the covenant is primarily in connection with his insistence on the unity of the Old and New Testaments, in both of which salvation is of grace and by faith (Book II, Chapters VI-X), and in connection with his polemic against the Anabaptists (Book IV, Chapters XV-XVII).

Somewhat in contrast to the *Institutes* is the far greater number of references to the covenant that are found scattered throughout Calvin’s commentaries and sermons. Especially in his later commentaries and sermons, more frequent mention is made of the

¹⁹ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin’s Old Testament Commentaries* (1986; repr., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 84.

²⁰ M. Eugene Osterhaven, “Calvin on the Covenant,” *An Elaboration of the Theology of Calvin, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism: A Fourteen-Volume Anthology of Scholarly Articles* 8, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 76.

covenant, as for example his unfinished commentary on the prophecy of Ezekiel, unfinished because he died before completing his lectures on the prophecy.²¹

Even though Calvin did not give in any one place anything like a complete statement of the doctrine of the covenant, he did do foundational work with a view to the later development of the doctrine. As Andrew Woolsey puts it:

Was Calvin a ‘covenant theologian’? The answer is both negative and positive. It is negative in the sense that Calvin did not make the covenant the key to his system any more than the doctrines of predestination and law.... On the other hand, the answer is positive in the sense that all the basic *ideas* of what is normally designated ‘covenant theology’ are to be found in his works. It is positive if a covenantal theologian is someone who has built the idea of the covenant into his entire thought in a pervasive manner, so as to include it not only in theological tracts and treatises, but in commentaries and sermons as well. It is also positive if a valid criterion for the label includes having the covenant as an essential and vital part of the theologian’s theological structure.²²

As regards the doctrine of the covenant, Calvin addressed the critical issue of the relationship between election and the covenant. Of course he did. Could we expect otherwise from the theologian who called predestination *cor ecclesia* and gave to predestination such an important place in his theology? To ask the question is to answer it. What we would anticipate to be the affirmative answer to the question is confirmed by an examination of Calvin’s writings. Woolsey is correct in his conclusion in this regard.

Calvin may not have written a specific treatise on the subject or used it as a separate category in his systematic work, but it can be said that the doctrine of the covenant pervades his theology and interacts with other doctrines in an impressive manner. It was not

²¹ Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 66. Whether or not what appears to be Calvin’s more frequent reference to the covenant later in his career indicates his own personal development in understanding the doctrine, I am not prepared to say. Nevertheless, the possibility is intriguing and worth further study.

²² Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 336-7.

simply the case that Calvin ‘found it necessary to speak about the covenant’ because it popped up in biblical references. Calvin saw the covenant as an integral part of God’s dealings with his people and so it became for him a fundamental concept in his overall theological construction.²³

Although Calvin did not provide very much “covenant theology” proper in the *Institutes*, nor give extensive treatment to the issue of the relation between election and the covenant, his opening statement on the subject of predestination is especially noteworthy.

In actual fact, the covenant of life is not preached equally among all men, and among those to whom it is preached, it does not gain the same acceptance either constantly or in equal degree. In this diversity the wonderful depth of God’s judgment is made known. For there is no doubt that this variety also serves the decision of God’s eternal election.... We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God’s free mercy until we come to know his eternal election, which illumines God’s grace by this contrast: that he does not indiscriminately adopt all into the hope of salvation but gives to some what he denies to others.²⁴

With these words Calvin begins his treatment of predestination. It is a significant introduction to the doctrine because, first of all, Calvin relates predestination to the doctrine of the covenant, “the covenant of life.” He mentions both, as it were, in the same breath. Calvin’s introduction to predestination is significant, secondly, because Calvin makes clear that it is his view that membership in the “covenant of life” is controlled by “the decision of God’s eternal election.” The doctrines of covenant and election are not merely related, but they are related in such a way that, in Calvin’s view, the elect and the elect alone are by God’s decision the members of his covenant.

²³ Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity*, 337-8.

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.21.1; 2:920-1.

At the beginning of his treatment of election, Calvin contrasts the elect descendants of Abraham and “many of his descendants [who] were cut off as rotten members.” How is this to be explained? We must explain this, says Calvin, in such a way that

election may be effectual and truly enduring, ascend[ing] to the Head, in whom the Heavenly Father has gathered His elect together, and has joined them to himself in an indissoluble bond. So, indeed, God’s generous favor which he has denied to others, has been displayed in the adoption of the race of Abraham; yet in the members of Christ a far more excellent power of grace appears, for, engrafted to their Head, they are never cut off from salvation. Therefore Paul skillfully argues...that where God has made a covenant of eternal like and calls any people to himself, a special mode of election is employed for a part of them, so that he does not with indiscriminate grace effectually elect all [Rom. 9:13].... Not that it was a vain and unprofitable thing simply to be a child of Abraham; such could not be said without dishonoring the covenant! No, God’s unchangeable plan, by which he predestined for himself those whom he willed, was in face intrinsically effectual unto salvation for these spiritual offspring alone.²⁵

Earlier in the *Institutes*, at the beginning of Book 2, Chapter 10, in which Calvin treats the similarity and unity of the Old and New Testaments, he writes that “all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted [*foederatus*] to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us.”²⁶ To be “adopted by God into the company of his people” is only another way to refer to God’s elect. All the elect, is Calvin’s teaching, and only the elect are “covenanted” to God. T. H. L. Parker judges that it was Calvin’s view that “[t]he covenant...was not made with all the physical descendants of Abraham but, as a Covenant of grace, only with those whom God had eternally chosen.”²⁷

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.7; 2:930-1.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.1; 1:428.

²⁷ Parker, *Calvin’s O.T. Commentaries*, 85.

In taking this position, Calvin was undoubtedly standing on the shoulders of theologians who had preceded him. Just how much Calvin may or may not have been influenced by a man like Johann von Staupitz (1460-1524) is difficult to determine. We do know that he greatly influenced the development of Martin Luther. Besides his views on predestination,

[t]here is ample evidence that Staupitz thinks in terms of a Covenant, but not the *bilateral* Covenant between God and his partners.... For Staupitz it is the *unilateral Covenant* which God has made with his elect, a *Covenant of Grace*, because it provides for the works of justification. Boldly he says that God made Christ a debtor to the elect so that He owes them the gift of His righteousness. Man is not called by God on the condition that he first be penitent or that he first give his best effort, but on grounds of God's unconditional and eternal election.²⁸

At the very least, it is evident that before the Reformation there were those who held that membership in God's covenant is determined by election and that God's covenant is unconditional and unilateral.

That it was Calvin's conviction that election determines membership in the covenant J. Mark Beach demonstrates in his article entitled "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership: Galatians 3:15-22—the Meaning of "'the Seed' is Christ"—and Other Key Texts."²⁹ Beach distinguishes three main positions concerning the scope of covenant membership. First, there are those who "define the parties of the covenant of grace as being God on the one hand and the elect in Christ or Christ and his elect on the other." Beach identifies Herman Hoeksema as a leading representative of this group.³⁰

²⁸ Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents* (1966; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 139.

²⁹ J. Mark Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership: Galatians 3:15-22—the Meaning of "'the Seed' is Christ"—and Other Key Texts," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 20 (2009): 49-73.

³⁰ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 49.

Second, there are “[o]thers, [who] focusing upon the historical manifestation of the covenant, maintain that this covenant is between God and believers and their seed, some also arguing that the question of divine election is not relevant to this issue.” Besides attributing this position to Klaas Schilder, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated), and the Canadian Reformed Churches in North America, Beach also attributes it to CRC minister Lammert J. Hulst and Calvin Theological Seminary professors William Heyns and Foppe Ten Hoor.³¹ A third position, in Beach’s judgment the majority position, is the position of “many Reformed writers [who] define membership in the covenant of grace in a manner that affirms...that in some respects it is proper to define covenant membership as including believers and their seed but in other respects it is correct to define covenant membership as comprising the elect in Christ.”³²

Although he is convinced that Calvin held to the last mentioned position, the dual membership position, Beach defends the proposition that as far as the “substance of the covenant” is concerned, Calvin taught that “the covenant of grace is made with God and the elect in Christ or Christ and his elect.”³³

Beach concentrates first on Calvin’s exegesis of Galatians 3:15-22. In his exegesis, Calvin speaks of “the substance of the covenant” (*substantia foederis*). For Calvin “Christ and all his saving benefits constitute the *substance* of the covenant.”³⁴ Not all the seed participate in the substance of the covenant; there is a spurious covenant seed and there is a genuine covenant seed. The difference between them is not a matter

³¹ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 49.

³² Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 49-50.

³³ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 51.

³⁴ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 54. Beach explains that by “substance” Calvin “refers to the real essence of a thing—that without which a thing could not be what it is and would be something else; i.e., the primary and the most important aspect of a thing or the essential nature of a thing in terms of which a thing is recognized and defined and without which it could not exist as that thing.” (“Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 54, footnote 13.)

of merit, but rather a matter of “the calling of God.” This, Beach points out, citing Calvin’s comments on v. 16, “is the work of divine election and salvation, the work of selection from among the covenanted, and this is God’s prerogative.”³⁵ The difference “is not a matter of good works or of obedience or of covenantal faithfulness or anything else that finds its origin in a human obligation to God or a right response to his law. No, for humans faithfully respond to God only because God first does a gracious work in them. It is a matter of the divine call. Hence, the covenant, in its substance, is made with the elect in the Seed, Christ.”³⁶

Beach concludes his consideration of Calvin’s exegesis of Galatians 3:15-22 with these words:

From our examination of Calvin’s treatment of Gal. 3:15ff., we discover that it is not adequate to define membership in the covenant of grace as pertaining simply or only to believers and their children. While that language is permissible and biblically required, other language is needed next to it in order to follow the shape and texture of the biblical witness. Indeed, Calvin’s exegetical work elicits the following theological observations, which necessitate theological formulation beyond the mere repetition of biblical phrases.³⁷

Among the theological observations and necessary theological formulations that Beach notes is that “God distinguishes between the covenanted by electing some as the seed of the promise.” These two seeds differ “because God makes them to differ—this according to divine election.”³⁸

Besides his exegesis of Galatians 3:15-22, Beach examines Calvin’s exegesis of Romans 9:6ff., exegesis presented in his commentary on Romans published in 1540—his

³⁵ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 55.

³⁶ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 55-6.

³⁷ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 62.

³⁸ Beach, “Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership,” 62-3.

first published commentary. After taking note of the fact that the covenant promise did not belong to every descendant of Abraham without distinction, Beach cites Calvin's statements on verse 7 that the promise "does not belong commonly and equally to all [in the covenant]," and that "the hidden election of God overrules the outward calling [of being in the covenant], and that it is yet by no means inconsistent with it, but, on the contrary, that it tends to its confirmation and completion."³⁹ "This diversity of outcome which manifests itself among the covenanted," says Beach, "is grounded [by Calvin] in God's purpose according to election."⁴⁰ According to Calvin

...the children of the promise are *strictly* those in whom the power and effect of the covenantal promise are found.... [I]n this respect, then, the promise does not belong commonly and equally to the covenanted, for among the covenanted, there are those who are elect (the children of promise) and those who are reprobate (the children of the flesh), according to God's own inscrutable and sovereign selection.⁴¹

Calvin's insistence that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect does not in any way undercut the importance of faith. Not at all.

Calvin will not deny, rather he affirms, a covenantal responsibility along the path of faith. But he will just as strongly affirm, and affirm immediately, that faith is the gift of God and is found only in those in whom God wills, according to his electing grace, to bestow this gift—i.e., it is given only to his elect.⁴²

Further:

While faith is requisite, it must also be bestowed as a gift from God. Part of the blessings of the promise in Christ include that gift. That some covenant members receive this gift according to the promise, while others do not, must be ascribed to the unmerited election of God, for the elect are the children of promise.⁴³

³⁹ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 64.

⁴⁰ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 65.

⁴¹ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 67.

⁴² Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 66.

⁴³ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 68.

The gift of faith, as is the case with all God's gifts within the covenant, is "bestowed according to divine election." It is a mistake "to insist that all in the covenant participate in the promise of the covenant in the same way, for only the elect are the children of promise in the *Seed* and only the elect are moved to faith by God's sovereign working. They are the ones counted as co-heirs with Christ."⁴⁴ Calvin's position is clear: only the elect are included in the covenant. As "co-heirs with Christ" they participate in the benefits of the covenant and enjoy the "substance of the covenant."

Beach draws the following conclusion to his consideration of Calvin's exegesis of Galatians 3:15-22 and Romans 9:6ff.:

As Calvin's exegesis of key texts demonstrates, a whole set of theological motifs, themes, and formulae, alongside a set of distinct and weighty biblical texts, focus membership in the covenant of grace upon Christ, *the Seed*, and in him it is extended to the children of promise, to the effectually called, to the ones whose sins are atoned for, and to the ones who call upon him in faith, i.e., the elect.⁴⁵

Consideration of Calvin's teaching with regard to the covenant of grace is sufficient to indicate the falsity of Perry Miller's contention that the development of covenant theology was an "imposition... upon the system of Calvin" and represented "an altogether different philosophy from any propounded in Geneva."⁴⁶

Other Evidence from Calvin

In addition to his exegesis of Galatians 3:15-22 and Romans 9:6ff., Calvin's comments on other passages of Scripture, as well as his recorded sermons, make clear

⁴⁴ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 70.

⁴⁵ Beach, "Calvin and the Dual Aspect of Covenant Membership," 73.

⁴⁶ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939; repr., Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1982), 367.

that it was his view that membership in the covenant and enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant are limited to the elect. The covenant people of God in both the Old and New Testaments are the elect—the one covenant people. The promise of the covenant is God’s promise to and fulfilled in the elect.

In a sermon on Genesis 17:4-8, Calvin made clear that not all those who are born into the covenant and who receive the sign of the covenant are truly members of the covenant. To the members of his congregation in Geneva he said: “It is true, as we have already said, that all the children of the flesh are not heirs of the promise, for there is God’s unknown election which controls everything.”⁴⁷ Taking Genesis 17:17-22 as his sermon text, Calvin explained the deepest reason on account of which God preferred Isaac to Ishmael and established his covenant with him. He observed that “God discerns between Isaac and Ishmael. He says he will establish his covenant with Isaac, and in that way Ishmael is excluded” in order “to show that he must not glory in his primogeniture.... Isaac comes next, and before he is born, God already establishes him as heir of the heavenly life.” He continued:

If we ask how that happens, we must talk about God’s free election. We will not find in Ishmael the reason he was rejected until he showed himself to be a mocker, as we will later (cf. *Gen. 21:9*), but he had already been rejected. If we ask what Isaac had done by way of merit to explain why God established his covenant with him, we can only answer that it was by God’s pure goodness. For those who claim God foresaw that Ishmael would be perverse and evil only rattle on without any reason or foundation, for it is certain Ishmael and Isaac would have been equal if God had not guided one by the Holy Spirit and abandoned the other. So we must always come back to the point that there was no good in Isaac by which he was to be preferred over Ishmael, but it pleased God that Isaac would be a mirror of his goodness and that in him we might learn to realize that our salvation comes only from God’s

⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 11-20*, tr. Rob Roy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 558.

good pleasure to elect us, not only before we were conceived in our mother's womb, but before the creation of the world. If there is any blessing in that...it is the fruit of God's free election....⁴⁸

In September of 1559, Calvin began preaching through the book of Genesis. Due to public demand, the thirteen sermons that he preached on God's election of Jacob and reprobation of Esau, from Genesis 25:12 through Genesis 27:38, were immediately prepared for publication and printed as a separate volume. After being out of print for over four hundred years, the sermons have been republished. After establishing that God's promise was a "spiritual promise," that "God had chosen the seed of Abraham" that they should be a people "dedicated to my service...to the end that I may gather them to everlasting life," Calvin explains God's discriminating grace in the covenant.

And moreover we are taught a far greater thing: and that is in the first place: that albeit God had established his covenant with Abraham, yet notwithstanding he would declare that this was not all...but that it behooved that he chose according to his liberty, such as he thought good, and that the rest should remain in their cursed state.⁴⁹

Not only did God's sovereign grace distinguish between Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau, but even within the seed of Jacob, God elected some and reprobated others.

Now it is so, that many which descended of Jacob were nevertheless rejected. For he stayeth upon that that is spoken here: to wit, that the stock and offspring of Jacob was chosen and that of Esau rejected: and yet notwithstanding a man may see, that the most part of those that descended of Jacob, were disallowed of God, and that he pronounceth them bastard children, the children of an harlot, and such as were sprung of fornication, and that they belonged nothing at all unto him, and that it was a vain thing for them, to glory or boast of his name.... For God in few words

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis 11-20*, 604-5. It should be noted that there has been disagreement among the Reformed on whether or not Ishmael is to be regarded as reprobate. In fact, there are good grounds for the view that Ishmael was an elect child of God. Whether or not Ishmael was personally elect or reprobate does not, however, essentially affect Calvin's argument at this point that membership in God's covenant is determined by election.

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, trans. John Field (Willow Street: Old Paths Publications, 2001), 27-8.

testifieth unto them, that his church should come of Jacob and not that all they which he should beget concerning the flesh must be of the church.... St. Paul therefore well understood, that they which should be born of Jacob, were not all elected of God: for he sendeth us to the beginning, and saith that the one was separated from the other by the secret counsel of God....⁵⁰

God had established his covenant with Jacob, “yet the stock of Jacob should remain blessed: not altogether without exception, but those whom it should please God to keep to himself, as he had chosen them before the creation of the world.”⁵¹

Commenting on the words of Psalm 74:20, “Have respect unto the covenant,”

Calvin says:

That God may be the more inclined to show mercy, the prophet brings to his remembrance the Divine covenant; even as the refuge of the saints, when they have found themselves involved in extreme dangers, has always been to hope for deliverance, because God had promised, in the covenant which he made with them to be a father to them. From this we learn, that the only firm support on which our prayers can rest is, that God has adopted us to be his people by his free choice.⁵²

Similarly, Calvin interprets and applies God’s word to David in Psalm 89:3, “I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant,” in such a way as to make God’s election the foundation of His covenant: “If, therefore, the cause or origin of this covenant is sought for, we must necessarily fall back upon the Divine election.”⁵³

Calvin interprets Psalm 102 in the context of God’s faithfulness in the covenant. The cry of the psalmist for deliverance is in reality the cry of the covenant people as they languish in the Babylonian captivity. In this circumstance, the “inspired writer, calling to remembrance the promises by which God had declared that he would make the Church

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Sermons of Election and Reprobation*, 32-3.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 37.

⁵² John Calvin, *Commentary of the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (1843-1855; reprint Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: 1963), 3:180.

⁵³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 3:421.

the object of his special care, and particularly that remarkable article of the covenant, 'I will dwell in the midst of you,' (Exod. xxv. 8,) and, trusting to that sacred and indissoluble bond," reminds God's people of the hope that is theirs for deliverance from their enemies.

What advantage would we derive from this eternity and immutability of God's being, unless we had in our hearts the knowledge of him, which, produced by his gracious covenant, begets in us the confidence arising from a mutual relationship between him and us? The meaning then is... since thou, O God! hast made a covenant with us, by which thou hast promised to protect and defend thine own people, and hast brought thyself into a gracious relation to us, giving us the fullest assurance that thou wilt always dwell in the midst of us...nothing can hinder him from aiding us; and this he will do, because we have his word, by which he has laid himself under obligation to us, and because he has deposited with us his own memorial, which contains in it a sacred and indissoluble bond of fellowship.⁵⁴

But to whom does the inspired writer speak these promises of God? Who are the members of the covenant who may have the hope of salvation and deliverance? They are, in the language of the last verse of the psalm, "the children of thy servants." Who are these children? They are those whom "He adopted as his children." "By *the seed and children* of the godly, is to be understood not all their descendants without exception—for many who spring from them according to the flesh become degenerate—but those who do not turn aside from the faith of their parents." Even then, the faith and obedience of the members of the covenant are not the cause of God's covenant faithfulness. Rather, "the salvation of true believers is made steadfast...because of the holy union which exists between them and God," that is, because of election.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:108-9.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:123-4.

In his introductory remarks to his exegesis of Psalm 103, Calvin speaks of “the grace which God has vouchsafed to all his chosen ones in common, by making a covenant of salvation with them...that he might make them partakers of his adoption.”⁵⁶ Clearly God’s “chosen ones” are those with whom He makes “a covenant of salvation.” The number of the elect and the members of the covenant are coextensive.

In Psalm 105 God’s people praise Him for His covenantal dealings throughout history: “Remember his marvelous works that he hath done; his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth; O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen. He is the Lord [Jehovah] our God: his judgments are in all the earth. He hath remembered his covenant forever, the word which he hath commanded to a thousand generations.” Several times throughout the psalm God’s covenant and God’s covenantal dealings with his Old Testament people are connected to election. Says Calvin:

He indeed names in general *his works*, and *his wonders*, but he limits both to that spiritual covenant by which God made choice of a church, that might lead on earth a heavenly life...he celebrates the sovereign grace of God, by which he chose for himself from amongst the lost race of Adam a small portion to whom he might show himself to be a father.⁵⁷

In establishing his “spiritual covenant...God made choice of a church.” In so doing he exhibited “the sovereign grace of God” in choosing a “small portion” of “the lost race of Adam” to whom “he might show himself to be a father”—the language of the covenant relationship. Clearly membership in the covenant is fixed by God’s sovereign election.

Commenting on the phrase in Psalm 132:12, “If thy sons keep my covenant,” Calvin admits that the verse “would seem to suggest that God’s covenant would not be made good, unless men faithfully performed their part, and that thus the effect of the

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:124.

⁵⁷ Calvin, *Psalms*, 4:173.

grace promised was suspended upon obedience.” He begins his explanation of the phrase by calling upon his readers to “remember, in the first place, that the covenant was perfectly gratuitous, so far as [it] related to God’s promise...because this stood connected with the original adoption of those to whom the promise was made, which was itself free.”⁵⁸

Isaiah 41:8 contains the promise of God concerning the salvation of the seed of Abraham, God’s friend in the covenant: “But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.”⁵⁹ “This is added,” Calvin explains, “in order to inform us that election depends on the promise of God; not that the promise goes before the election, which is from eternity, but because the Lord bestowed his kindness from a regard to the promise....” He continues that “if it be reckoned a distinguished favour to be admitted into the family of a king or a prince, how much more highly should we esteem it, when God accounts us as his servants and members of his family? But, not satisfied with that, he bestows on [us] even a higher honour, and adorns [us] with the name of ‘friend.’” And he concludes: “But we ought always to remember that Abraham was God’s friend on no other ground than that of adoption....”⁶⁰

In this same passage, Jacob is referred to as “Jacob whom I have chosen.” Reflecting on this statement, Calvin says that “[t]his is a remarkable commendation of undeserved favour...” in the covenant. It is “as if he had said, ‘You are indeed my servants, not through your own merit, but through my bounty; for by my election I have prepared and formed you to be my peculiar people.’ In short, he reminds them that it was

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Psalms*, 5:154.

⁵⁹ Besides Enoch and Noah, Abraham is called the “friend of God” in Scripture. He is called the friend of God in II Chronicles 20:7 and Isaiah 41:8, as well as James 2:23 in the New Testament.

⁶⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 3:255-6.

not by their own industry that they obtained the honour of being called God's *servants*, and that they did not differ from others so as to excel them in any respect, but that it was because it so pleased God, who has a right to select this or that person according to his pleasure."⁶¹

Calvin's unfinished commentary on the prophecy of Ezekiel contains a number of references to God's covenant. Included in these passages are statements that make plain that Calvin limited the essence or—to use his word—"substance" of the covenant to the elect. They and they alone are to be considered the seed of Abraham with whom God establishes his covenant.

Ezekiel 16:60 and 62 read, "Nevertheless I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth, and I will establish unto thee an everlasting covenant. And I will establish my covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord." The prophet, Calvin says, "now turns himself to the election of grace of which Paul speaks, (Rom. xi. 5;) and for this reason promises them that God would be mindful of his covenant...." But, to whom was this promise spoken? Who were included in the promise? "[T]his promise was not common to all the sons of Abraham who were his offspring according to the flesh, but it was peculiar to the elect alone."⁶²

For this same reason, the wickedness of the majority of the Jews could not "render God's covenant vain...." "[T]he covenant which he had made with Abraham could not be abolished by the perfidy of man." This was so because God's covenant was "specially limited to the elect." "God says, therefore, *that his own covenant should be*

⁶¹ Calvin, *Isaiah*, 3:255.

⁶² Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), 2:172.

firm with the people, not with that people which had been already deserted through its perfidy, but with the true and genuine children of Abraham,” that is, with the elect.⁶³

In Ezekiel 20:34 God promises to gather Israel from the nations into which they have been scattered as a result of the captivity: “And I will bring you out from the people, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with a stretched out arm, and with fury poured out.” He adds in v. 37, “and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant.” By the expression “the bond of the covenant,” the Lord, Calvin says,

means the constancy of his covenant, as far as he is concerned: and the simile is suitable, because God had bound his people to himself, on the condition that they should be always surrounded with these bonds. Hence, when they petulantly wandered like untamed beasts, yet God had hidden bonds of his covenant: that is, he persevered in his own covenant, so that he collected them all again to himself....⁶⁴

For this reason, “that state of the elect people was different, since the end of their covenant was this, that God held them bound to him, even if the whole world should escape from him.”⁶⁵

Not surprisingly, the great champion of predestination applied the doctrine of election to the covenant. Both in his sermons and in his commentaries, Calvin maintained that the “substance of the covenant” was for the elect alone. The benefits of the covenant and the salvation of the covenant are enjoyed exclusively by the elect. Membership in the covenant does not extend to all the physical descendants of believers, but only to their elect children. In agreement with the word of God’s apostle in Romans 9:6, Calvin taught that not the children of the flesh, but the children of the promise are

⁶³ Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 2:178-9.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 2:332.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Ezekiel*, 2:332.

counted for the seed of the covenant. They are the real and spiritual children of Abraham. As Paul teaches in Galatians 3:13, Christ is the Seed of Abraham. To him and to all who are in him, that is the elect, have the promises of the covenant been spoken.

In his very worthwhile book on Calvin's Old Testament commentaries, T. H. L. Parker devotes a section to consideration of Calvin's view on the relationship between election and covenant. Parker insists that Calvin limited membership in the covenant of grace to those whom God had elected. He writes:

The covenant...was not merely an agreement between two parties but was a complete and mutual union; complete in that God entered it with his whole self and for all eternity, and that he demanded [of the elect] that they also should give themselves wholly to him in every generation.... Therefore God's election was like the joining of a mutual bond, so that he did not will to be separate from the people. By entering into such a binding union God in no way surrendered his Lordship. Indeed, the essential significance of the Covenant was that God should be the King ruling over his people and caring for their welfare and that the people should submit themselves to his rule: "*Let there be no strange God in thee*" (Ps. 81.9)⁶⁶

The covenant was a covenant of grace because "[t]he foundation of the Covenant was the love, the grace, the mercy, of God, choosing a people who had nothing to commend them."⁶⁷ And further, "[o]n God's side the Covenant springs from his loving-kindness and mercy: '*God keeps his Covenant and mercy to all that love him*' (Dan. 9.4)."

Scripture here joins God's "covenant" and his "mercy" exactly because

the Covenant of God is gratuitous; or, it flows from the fount of his mercy. What, these, is the Pact or Covenant and the mercy of God? The Covenant which proceeds from God's mercy; that is, the Covenant which is not grounded in the worth (*dignitas*) of men nor

⁶⁶ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries* (1986; repr., Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 181.

⁶⁷ Parker, *Old Testament Commentaries*, 181.

depends on their merits, but which has its cause, its stability, its accomplishment, and its fulfilment in the grace of God alone.⁶⁸

What then, of those passages in which Calvin, in line with Scripture, speaks of the breaking and abolishing of the covenant? Parker explains that

[w]hen Calvin says that the Covenant was abolished (elsewhere, that God abolished the Covenant), this is never intended absolutely. The qualification will always be added that it was, as in the quotation above “as far as they were concerned.” For Calvin follows the distinction made in Gal. 4.22-27 between the children of the flesh and the children of promise; the promise was not given, the Covenant was not made, with the physical descendants of Abraham, but with those of them who could justly also be called his spiritual descendants....

Parker expressly denies that Calvin identifies the natural descendants of Abraham with the members of the covenant. All of the physical descendants of Abraham are not on that account also the members of God’s covenant. This is not the reality and neither is this the nature of God’s covenant promise. For

[t]he existence of the remnant depended, not on their acceptance of the Covenant, but on the Covenant itself. For the Covenant was the declaration of a decision of God to unit himself with this people, this people with himself, in perpetuity.... In regard to the Covenant and the people, God’s faithfulness is maintained in the existence of the faithful remnant, those whom he had chosen.... We therefore know that the promise was not common to all the sons of Abraham, his off-spring according to the flesh, but belonged to the elect alone.⁶⁹

The covenant promise of God did not have for its recipients all the natural children of Abraham. Rather, the recipients of the promise were the elect alone, as the true children of Abraham.

Related to his teaching that membership in the covenant was limited to the elect was Calvin’s view that Christ is the Head of the covenant. Although Calvin did not

⁶⁸ Parker, *Old Testament Commentaries*, 182.

⁶⁹ Parker, *Old Testament Commentaries*, 184-5.

develop this truth to a great extent, it is clear that this, nevertheless, was his view. Calvin argued, for example, in reference to the apostle's instruction in Galatians 3:14 concerning the covenant promise God made to Abraham that "Christ was properly that seed in whom all the nations were to be blessed."⁷⁰ In his sermon on 2 Samuel 7:12-17, the title of which was "Great David's Greater Son," preached on Saturday, July 18, 1562, Calvin said to the members of his congregation in Geneva, "That is why I have said from the beginning that the covenant has been contracted with one who was the unique Son of God, but that it was for the common profit of the whole body...."⁷¹ That Christ is the Head of the Covenant, Calvin makes plain in his comments on Isaiah 55:4, "Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people." Calvin says that "[b]y calling him 'a witness,' he means that the covenant into which he entered shall be ratified and confirmed in Christ." He goes on to explain the implications of the title "witness" that is attributed to Christ: "There is a weighty meaning in the word 'witness;' for he clearly shews that this covenant shall be proved in Christ, by whom the truth of God shall be manifest."⁷²

The last part of Jeremiah 22 records God's judgment against Coniah (also called Jeconiah and Jehoiachin), one of the last kings of Judah. God's judgment is expressed in his word to the prophet, "Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah." Although no son of Jeconiah would sit on the throne of David and rule in Judah, Calvin says that "we must bear in mind that exception, which is expressed

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.2; 1:343.

⁷¹ John Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Samuel, Chapter 1-13*, tr. Douglas Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 347.

⁷² Calvin, *Isaiah*, 4:162.

by another Prophet, 'until he comes whose the crown is' (Ezek. xxi.27)." The crown "was reserved for the head of Christ, though for a long time it had been exposed to dishonour and to the reproaches of all nations." Calvin goes on to remind his readers that it is necessary to be remember that God's promise is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ in order that his people rest in the assurance that his word of promise does not fail. Thus, "we are taught that God is ever so consistent with himself, that his covenant, which he has made with Christ and with all his members, never fails...." "Though it were for a time buried," nevertheless "his covenant was not dead," for "yet God shewed that he was faithful to his promises."⁷³ Calvin is sufficiently clear: God has made his covenant "with Christ and with all his members." Christ is the Head of the covenant.

In line with his view that election determines membership in the covenant, Calvin also taught the unconditionality of the covenant. In an article entitled "Calvin and Federal Theology," the late Dr. Donald J. Bruggink is sharply critical of those who teach the conditional covenant of works and appeal to Calvin for support of this conditional covenant. Neither explicitly nor by implication does Calvin teach such a conditional, pre-fall covenantal arrangement, in Bruggink's view. Such a teaching "stands in flat contradiction to his thought." For such a teaching "involves a covenant of works, in which man *earns* by his works of obedience a confirmed or immutable state of righteousness. If one is to take seriously that this is a real covenant of works, and that man by his works could have earned a confirmation in righteousness, then one stands at

⁷³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. and ed John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 3:127.

odds with Calvin....”⁷⁴ Bruggink criticizes the great Puritan, Richard Baxter, who taught both a conditional covenant of works and a conditional covenant of grace, distinguishing between “legal righteousness,” which was required by the covenant of works, and “evangelical righteousness,” which is man’s fulfilling of the conditions of the covenant of grace. Though Christ performed the “conditions of the Law,” man must perform the “conditions of the Gospel.” Such a conditional covenant conception is completely “out of step with Calvin,” in Bruggink’s judgment. At the same time, such a

construction of the covenant of grace left the door wide open to Arminianism, and through that door, under the leadership of Daniel Williams, marched practically the entire body of English Presbyterians at the close of the seventeenth century. Many of the New England Puritans who pass through this same door concluded their journey in Unitarianism—man having begun by doing a part, ended doing the whole.... Whereas Calvin insisted upon God’s one gracious covenant with man, and understood man, even he existed before the Fall, to be sustained by God’s grace, the federal theologians brought in the concept of attainment by works—albeit works before the Fall. Nevertheless, the seriousness with which these pre-Fall works were proclaimed set the mood for putting works between man and God. The federal constructs which further insisted upon both parties fulfilling certain conditions as prerequisites to a valid covenant constituted a further danger, which, when paired with the triple covenant of works, redemption, and grace demanded works on the part of man to fulfill the conditions of the covenant of grace. Obviously, the federal structure played a culpable part in this theological ascendancy of works.⁷⁵

Introducing conditionality into the covenants “was not a logical development of Calvin’s theology. Rather it was a perversion of great seriousness, for it introduced a covenant of

⁷⁴ Donald J. Bruggink, “Calvin and Federal Theology,” *An Elaboration of the Theology of Calvin*, Articles on Calvin and Calvinism 8, ed. Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1992), 39. Italics is that of the original author.

⁷⁵ Bruggink, “Calvin and Federal Theology,” 41-2.

works as a valid relationship between man and God, and then carried works into the very covenant of grace.⁷⁶

In defense of his doctrine of the covenant, in particular the truth that God's grace in the covenant is not wider than election, Herman Hoeksema appealed to John Calvin. That it was his conviction that he stood in the tradition of Calvin is the thrust of his booklet *Calvin, Berkhof and H. J. Kuiper: A Comparison*. He quotes favorably the statement of Calvin in *Calvin's Calvinism* "that the gift of conversion is not common to all men; because this is that one of the two covenants which God promises that He will not make with any but His own children and His own elect people, concerning whom He has recorded this promise that 'He will write His law in their hearts' (Jer. 31:33)."⁷⁷ And a bit later he writes:

Now, it is plain, that also in this respect they [Berkhof and H. J. Kuiper, but also J. Van Lonkhuyzen and William Heyns, who taught that membership in the covenant is wider than the elect] depart from Calvin. The great Genevan Reformer does not agree with them. And he expresses his disagreement in the strongest terms. He does not hesitate to assert that a man must be utterly beside himself to claim, that God promises these blessings of grace [including the blessings of the covenant] to all men generally and indiscriminately.⁷⁸

It is clear that Hoeksema was convinced that his covenant conception was in agreement with Calvin, whereas that of his opponents contradicted Calvin.

⁷⁶ Bruggink, "Calvin and Federal Theology," 44.

⁷⁷ Herman Hoeksema, *Calvin, Berkhof and H. J. Kuiper: A Comparison* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1930), 36. The quotation from Calvin is taken from *God's Eternal Predestination and Secret Providence*, p. 88-89. in *Calvin's Calvinism* (1856; reprint, Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009). Later in his "Transcript of Address Delivered by Rev. H. Hoeksema to the PRC Synod of 1953 on June 18," Hoeksema lifted several quotations from this booklet in order to demonstrate to the synod that he had not changed his position on the doctrine of the covenant and that his position was in fundamental agreement with Calvin, whereas the teaching of a conditional covenant was in conflict with the teaching of Calvin. This "Address" is included as "Supplement X," p. 264ff., in the *1953 Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America*.

⁷⁸ Hoeksema, *Calvin, Berkhof and H. J. Kuiper*, 39.

In his development of a doctrine of the covenant of grace limited in its membership to the elect, Calvin did not stand apart from his contemporaries, particularly his contemporaries in Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), the latter of whom contributed significantly to the development of the doctrine of the covenant in its early stages. The attempt has been made to demonstrate that Bullinger, in particular, deliberately developed his covenant theology in order to soften the hardline predestinarianism of Calvin. It is alleged that whereas Calvin taught double predestination, Bullinger taught a single predestination in which he downplayed reprobation. Whereas Calvin taught that the “substance of the covenant” was limited to the elect and that the covenant was unilateral, Bullinger taught a bilateral covenant dependent on the fulfillment of covenant conditions by the human participants. The result is that there were two distinct streams of covenant theology flowing out of the Reformation.⁷⁹

Various scholars have demonstrated the fundamental agreement between Calvin and his successors in Geneva, particularly Theodore Beza, on the one hand, and Calvin and the Zurichers, on the other hand. They have shown both the basic agreement of the other reformers with Calvin, and the basic agreement between Calvin and his successors in Geneva on the doctrine of predestination, as well as the application of predestination to

⁷⁹ Representatives of this school of thought would include: Leonard J. Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20 (1951): 37-57; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939); Richard L. Greaves, “John Bunyan and Covenant Thought in the Seventeenth Century,” *Church History* 36 (June 1967): 151-169, and “The Origins and Early Development of English Covenant Thought,” *The Historian* 31 (1968): 21-35; J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980); and David A. Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

the doctrine of the covenant of grace.⁸⁰ With regard specifically to the question of Calvin's teaching in comparison to that of Zwingli, Lyle Bierma writes:

It is true that Zwingli recognizes both a divine and human dimension to the covenant of grace.... But Zwingli never describes the covenant relationship in such a way that God's blessings of salvation *depend* upon human fulfillment of certain conditions. The covenant for Zwingli is not conditional in the sense that "the burden of fulfillment rests upon man." For Zwingli the distribution of divine covenant favor is based solely on God's eternal decision, his free election. His covenant people are those whom he has selected long before they select him. The faith by which they finally do respond is an unearned gift of God bestowed on his elect, and works of obedience are the natural outgrowth of that faith. Thus while Zwingli does teach that God expects obedience as a covenantal response to his grace, there is nothing in his writings to suggest that God's favor is founded upon that response.⁸¹

In his book *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus*, Bierma writes:

It is our judgment, then, that there were no fundamental differences in the conception of the covenant in the major first-generation (Zwingli) and second-generation (Musculus, Bullinger, Calvin) Reformed theologians who dealt with the doctrine. All these figures were contending with a common opponent—the rival covenant theology of the Anabaptists. All discussed the covenant in the same theological contexts—the sacraments and the relationship between the testaments—which intersected in the

⁸⁰ Richard A. Muller has done extensive work demonstrating the fundamental unity of thought between Calvin and his successors, Beza in particular, indicating in what respects the contrary thesis is not a valid evaluation of the development of Reformed doctrine since the time of the Reformation. Confer the following works by Muller in which he defends this reading of the materials of the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras: *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1986); *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 1, Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987); *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics. Volume 2, Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); "The Myth of 'Decretal Theology,'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 159-67; "Calvin and the 'Calvinists': Assessing Continuities and Discontinuities Between the Reformation and Orthodoxy," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 345-75, and 31 (1996): 125-60.

⁸¹ Lyle Dean Bierma, "Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (Fall 1983), 310-11. Another opponent of the "two traditions" view is J. Mark Beach, who devotes considerable space to consideration of this view in his book *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, "2.2 The Diversity of Interpretation on the Rise and Development of Federal Theology," pp. 22ff.

doctrine of infant baptism. All considered the boundaries of the covenant (blessings) to extend to peoples of every nation but no further than the numbers of the elect.⁸²

Andrew Woolsey sees the same unity of thought between Calvin and his followers and Zwingli and Bullinger and their followers. To be sure, Bullinger complained that Calvin's stronger emphasis on reprobation, in his judgment, exposed his colleague in Geneva to the charge of making God the author of sin, but that does not take away from the fact that Bullinger himself taught reprobation. In the *Decades*, Bullinger spoke clearly of predestination both to life and to death.⁸³ The difference between Bullinger and Calvin is not essential, but rather a matter of degree and emphasis. Bullinger, who was the first to produce a theological treatise devoted to the doctrine of the covenant, agreed with Calvin in applying the truth of predestination to membership in the covenant. In his *A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God*, Bullinger addresses the issue of the true seed of Abraham who are included in God's covenant. He says:

Truly this debate about the seed of Abraham has been settled for us by the prophets and the apostles, specifically that not everyone who is born of Abraham is the seed of Abraham, but only he who is a son of the promise, that is, who is faithful, whether Jew or Gentile.⁸⁴

⁸² Lyle Dean Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 61. Confer also Richard A. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation*, 66ff. I reference here my own article entitled "Bullinger's Covenant Conception: Bilateral or Unilateral?" *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 30 (April 1997), 41-63. In the article I demonstrate that Bullinger was in fundamental agreement with Calvin on the doctrine of predestination and that Bullinger did not teach a bilateral conception of the covenant in the sense that the covenant was dependent on the fulfillment of conditions by the humans with whom the covenant was established.

⁸³ Henry Bullinger, Fourth Decade, Fourth Sermon, "That God is the Creator of all Things, and Governeth all Things by His Providence: Where Mention is also Made of the Goodwill of God to Usward and of Predestination," *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, trans. H. I., ed. for The Parker Society by T. Harding (Cambridge: The University Press, 1841-52), 4:185ff.

⁸⁴ Heinrich Bullinger, *A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God* (1534), in *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition*, by Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 106.

Bullinger goes on to identify those children of believing parents who are included in the covenant of grace as those “who belong to God because of the grace and the call of the One who promises.”⁸⁵

Assessing Bullinger’s view, Andrew Woolsey writes:

Bullinger therefore conceived of a general, outward covenantal sphere identified with the Christian community, and within which all participated in the benefits of the external ordinances of the church, but within that was the covenant of grace proper, internally effected in the lives of the elect of God, who ultimately were known to him alone, but whose faith and manner of life were the identifying marks of election.⁸⁶

Cornelis Venema takes note of the relatively small place Bullinger accorded the doctrine of the covenant in the Second Helvetic Confession (1562, revised in 1564), at the same time maintaining that this in no way calls into question the fact that Bullinger steadfastly insisted that membership in the covenant of grace was limited to the elect.

Considering the importance of the doctrine of the covenant in Bullinger’s thought and writings, it is striking that the Second Helvetic Confession only mentions the doctrine explicitly in connection with the subject of infant baptism. Though it is possible to argue that elements of the doctrine of the covenant are implicit throughout the Confession, the absence of any substantial or explicit reference to the doctrine throughout certainly raises questions regarding the thesis that Bullinger systematically organized his thought in terms of this doctrine. The reader is left to surmise, as in the case of Bullinger’s other treatments of

⁸⁵ Bullinger, *One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God*, 107.

⁸⁶ Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity*, 249. In the “Foreword” to Woolsey’s work, Richard Muller reflects on the distinct contribution that Woolsey makes to an analysis of the development of the doctrine of the covenant: “Beyond this, Woolsey’s work came at a time when the mid-twentieth-century analyses of covenant theology as either a positive strand of the Reformed development alternative to the Genevan line or as a problematic deviation from the supposed norm set by Calvin’s *Institutes* seemed to dominate the field. From the perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we can look back at both of these approaches to the history of covenant thought and recognize them as defective—the former having first created and then juxtaposed and compared entire ‘schools’ of thought that never actually existed and the latter having rested its approach to the documents on a highly dogmatized attempt to set Calvin against the ‘Calvinists’ and to claim his thought as a lonely early modern precursor of neo-orthodoxy. Writing in 1988, Woolsey clearly identified the problems in both of these approaches to covenant thought and produced a carefully wrought developmental study that has stood the test of time” (p. vii).

predestination, what is the relation or connection between predestination and covenant. That connection, as we have previously summarized it, is not difficult to discern. Those whom God the Father has elected to save in Christ, whose salvation was the occasion for the predestination of the Son from eternity to be the Savior of the world, are saved through the administration of the covenant of grace of which Christ is the Mediator. The covenant of grace, administered through the preaching of the gospel and the holy sacraments, is the instrument through which God grants faith to the elect and secures their salvation through fellowship with Christ. Though Bullinger does not [always] explicitly or systematically draw these and other lines of connection between the doctrines of predestination and the covenant, they lie close to the surface of his formulations of Christian doctrine and are readily discernible.⁸⁷

Late Sixteenth- through Eighteenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy

Following Calvin there were always those among the Reformed orthodox who taught that membership in the covenant of grace was limited to the elect. It is true that there were differences between these theologians in various aspects of their covenant theology. For example, some taught that the covenant is both conditional and unconditional, that it is established with the elect in one sense and with more than the elect in another sense. Despite these differences, they all taught, in agreement with Calvin, that the “substance of the covenant” was limited to the elect.

I want to place as bookends to consideration of representative theologians from the late sixteenth through the eighteenth century two Reformed confessional statements. The first of these is found in the Hungarian *Confessio Catholica*, published in 1562 (between the Belgic Confession of Faith, 1561, and the Heidelberg Catechism, 1563). This lengthy—nearly two hundred pages—confession was written at the request of the

⁸⁷ Cornelis P. Venema, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 99-100. Later in this same book, Venema rejects the thesis that Bullinger’s teaching of the relation between predestination and covenant represents another Reformed tradition, distinct from the tradition of Calvin, pp. 101ff.

Reformed church of Debrecen by Peter Mélius Juhász (1536-1572), Gregory Szegedi (1511-1569), and György Ceglédi/Czeglédi. For this reason it is also referred to as the *Debrecen Profession of Faith*. In the article that deals with the fall of man into sin, besides treating Adam's fall, the confession also addresses itself to the falls of the elect after regeneration, in connection with a defense of the perseverance of the saints. This confession states:

The elect, however, cannot fall, nor can they commit mortal sin, nor be separated from the eternal covenant; nor can they finally lose the grace and Spirit of God, but the fruits of faith and of the Holy Spirit are only often withheld through the works of the flesh, as with Adam, David, and Peter. Therefore, the elect do not lose the Holy Spirit in their fall, nor do they sin unto death; because they are in covenant with God, the Lord places His hand beneath them and the seed of God is in them.⁸⁸

Clearly this early Hungarian confession limits membership in the covenant of grace to the elect. The elect cannot “be separated from the eternal covenant” and the elect cannot lose the Holy Spirit or commit the sin unto death because “they are in covenant with God.”

Among the Hungarian Reformed it was the accepted view that membership in the covenant was limited to the elect.

The co-authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587) and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583), must be numbered among those who limited membership in the covenant of grace to the elect: “Both Ursinus and Olevianus placed the covenant of grace itself within the framework of a double predestinarian Calvinism, seeing it as a gift

⁸⁸ James T. Dennison, Jr., ed. *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 2, 1552-1566* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 465. The *Confessio Catholica* was translated out of the Hungarian by Bernard S. Adams, with revisions from the Latin text by James T. Dennison, Jr.

of God to the elect and the consequence of unconditional election.”⁸⁹ Concerning the position of Olevianus, Lyle Bierma writes:

If the covenant is founded upon the priestly work of Christ and that work upon His person, the person of Christ as the cornerstone of our salvation is grounded in the deepest level of the foundation, the eternal decree of God. To use another of Olevianus’s metaphors, the covenant of grace “flows out of the fountain” of God’s gracious election in Christ. Or, covenant and election are different “links” in the same “golden chain” of salvation described in Romans 8. At the head of the chain stands God’s decision to save, then his *electio* of a specific portion of the corrupted human race. To this decree of *electio* is joined the effectual *vocatio*, the gift of faith by which the elect are incorporated into Christ. And to faith in turn is linked the double benefit of the covenant, *justificatio* or forgiveness of sins and *glorificatio* or renewal of mind and (ultimately) body. These benefits are secured in history, of course, by the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ on behalf of the elect. But conformity to Christ, through which covenant or reconciliation with God is attained, is grounded ultimately in election *in* Christ, decided by God from all eternity.⁹⁰

Bierma adds that “[i]f we probe behind the decree of election for an even deeper cause of the covenant, says Olevianus, we get no further than the fathomless goodness and grace of God. Those whom God chose to be His covenant partners, He chose out of His boundless love.”⁹¹ A bit later, in his closing remarks to the section dealing with the “Foundation of the Covenant,” Bierma states that

we have found no evidence for the common argument that Olevianus’s covenant of grace serves to temper the doctrine of double predestination. On the contrary, there is at the center of his theology an integral relationship between covenant and predestination, a relationship in which the covenant, by its very definition as reconciliation with God through justification and sanctification, is seen as part of the *unfolding* of God’s decree to elect, to call the elect, to justify the called, and to sanctify the just

⁸⁹ John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 196.

⁹⁰ Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Confessional Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 78-9.

⁹¹ Bierma, *German Calvinism*, 79.

(Rom. 8:29-30). Sometimes, in fact, Olevianus goes so far as to place the covenant of grace within what later Reformed theologians would call a “supralapsarian” predestinarian framework.⁹²

That Olevianus limited membership in the covenant to the elect is indicated by the title that he gave to his work on the covenant of grace, first published in Geneva in 1585. The title is: *De Substantia Foederis Gratuiti inter Deum et Electos*, that is, *The Substance of the Covenant of Grace between God and the Elect*. Relying primarily on evidence from this work, Woolsey says that, for Olevianus,

[t]he covenant rested entirely upon the predestinating purpose and providence of God. Election in Christ was “the fountain of the covenant.” This covenant flowed from the love and grace of a God who was wholly free and supremely good. Grounded in so excellent a love, it was no “meane and common covenant.” The will of this God was for Olevianus the measure of all things.⁹³

Also basing his comments on Olevianus’ major work on the covenant, Sherman Isbell writes that “Olevianus wrote of the covenant being administered outwardly through preaching and the sacraments, with the substance of the covenant being enjoyed only by the elect.”⁹⁴

Olevianus’ covenant views also come out in his exposition of the Apostles’ Creed. Olevianus treats all the main doctrines of the faith as they are confessed in one of the most ancient creeds of the church from a covenantal perspective. Since the Triune God is a covenant God in himself, and since the material of the Apostles’ Creed is divided in a trinitarian fashion, it makes good sense to treat the creed covenantally. At the outset, Olevianus makes clear his view that the covenant is unconditional: “We can see from the following that this covenant between God and us is a gracious one and does

⁹² Bierma, *German Calvinism*, 83.

⁹³ Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity*, 432.

⁹⁴ Isbell, “Samuel Rutherford and the Preached Covenant,” 170.

not rest upon any condition of our worthiness or merit, but exists through faith alone.”⁹⁵

The unconditional covenant is grounded in eternity, in God’s gracious election. The elect and only the elect belong to the covenant. Olevianus writes that “this reconciliation of humanity with God, or rather, this matter of saving the elect by His merit and efficacy, is called a covenant, and is also set before us by God in the form of a covenant, because there is no form or rationale more fitting for making agreement between parties and for establishing faith.”⁹⁶ Saving the elect by Christ’s merit, says Olevianus, “is called a covenant.” Clearly it is Olevianus’s view that the number of the elect is coterminous with the number of persons who are members of the covenant.

Zacharias Ursinus was in complete agreement with his colleague. Although Dr. Fred Klooster does not personally agree with Ursinus’ view, going so far as to say that “we can be grateful that Ursinus’ Large Catechism was replaced by the Heidelberg Catechism” because the view of the covenant in the Large Catechism was “inadequate,” Klooster correctly represents Ursinus’ view: “he limited the covenant to the elect....”⁹⁷ In his Larger Catechism Ursinus gave separate treatment to the doctrine of the covenant in Q.A. 30-37, just prior to the questions and answers that treat the articles of the Apostles’ Creed.⁹⁸ Ursinus introduces the section with Q. 30, “Where then do you receive your hope of eternal life?” The answer is: “From the gracious covenant that God

⁹⁵ Caspar Olevianus, *An Exposition of the Apostles Creed, or the Articles of the Faith, in which the main points of the gracious eternal covenant between God and believers are briefly and clearly treated*, tr. Lyle Bierma, intro. R. Scott Clark (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), 14.

⁹⁶ Olevianus, *Exposition*, 13.

⁹⁷ Fred H. Klooster, *Our Only Comfort: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, published by CRC Publications, 2001), 1:29.

⁹⁸ I am making use of Lyle Bierma’s translation of Ursinus’ Larger Catechism included in Lyle D. Bierma, et. al., *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 163-223. Both the Shorter Catechism and the Larger Catechism were consulted in the production of the Heidelberg Catechism. In fact, although written earlier, the Larger Catechism may justly be regarded as the Heidelberg Catechism rewritten from the viewpoint of the doctrine of the covenant.

established anew with believers in Christ.” In the 31st A., responding to the question

“What is that covenant?” Ursinus defines the covenant in this way:

It is reconciliation with God, obtained by the mediation of Christ, in which God promises believers that because of Christ he will always be a gracious father and give them eternal life, and in which they in turn pledge to accept these benefits in true faith and, as befits grateful and obedient children, to glorify him forever; and both parties publicly confirm this mutual promise with visible signs, which we call sacraments.

It is in the 33rd A., in connection with his explanation of the unity of the Old and New Testaments, in which answer he traces the origin of the covenant promise to the first announcement of the gospel in Paradise, that Ursinus states that this “testament or covenant of God [is] with all the elect.” In the 37th Q. he asks, “Does the gospel teach that God’s covenant of grace extends to all people? A. He certainly calls all to that covenant, but people do not become members of it unless they embrace it and keep it, that is, in true faith receive both the Christ who is offered to them and his benefits.” He then goes on to describe faith as the “assent” and “firm assurance” that is “awakened in the hearts of the elect by the Holy Spirit.” Inasmuch as only believers belong to the covenant, and inasmuch as faith is the Spirit’s work “in the hearts of the elect,” only the elect belong to God’s covenant.

In the year 1568 Prince Frederick III prevailed upon Jerome Zanchius (1516-1590) to teach theology in the University of Heidelberg, joining Zacharias Ursinus. An Italian by birth and one who had studied under the great Italian Reformer, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Zanchius was eventually forced to flee his native land because of persecution. For nine years he taught at the University of Heidelberg, but on the death of Frederick III

he chose to leave the academy and assume a pastoral charge. He accepted the call of the Reformed church in Neustadt an der Haardt and remained there until his death.

Zanchius is probably best known for his book *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*. But Zanchius was also a champion of the unconditional covenant of grace, applying his double predestinarian view to the doctrine of the covenant. John L. Farthing goes so far as to say that the doctrine of the covenant “is conscripted into the service of Zanchi’s exegetical and dogmatic concerns; covenant provides Zanchi a vehicle for articulating his Reformed orthodoxy....”⁹⁹ Zanchius taught that Christ is the Head of the covenant of grace, as well as Head of the elect. He is Head both of the covenant and of the elect because membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. “The covenant and all its benefits are ‘for Christ’s sake’ (*propter Christum*) and ‘through Christ’ (*per Christum*). Christ is the mediator of God’s covenant with the elect; on both sides of the covenant the role of Christ is pivotal.”¹⁰⁰ A bit later Farthing adds: “Zanchi sees Christ and his elect in God’s promises to *Abraham’s seed*: The primary reference of that phrase, he argues, is to Christ himself, and the secondary sense of the phrase embraces all who are joined to Christ by a true and living faith.”¹⁰¹

Having its source in election and its basis in the finished work of Christ, the covenant of grace is unconditional both in its establishment and maintenance.

In fulfilling the terms of the covenant, God himself in Christ takes the initiative, providing to the elect all that is needed for the covenant to remain in effect forever: (a) true knowledge of God, (b) delight in God’s will, (c) firm faith, and (d) real repentance. In

⁹⁹ John L. Farthing, “*Foedus Evangelicum: Jerome Zanchi on the Covenant*,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29, no. 1 (April 1994):151.

¹⁰⁰ Farthing, “Jerome Zanchi,” 152.

¹⁰¹ Farthing, “Jerome Zanchi,” 153.

Christ all these are effected by God, whose promise is unconditional and eternally secure.¹⁰²

The covenant, because it is essentially one covenant, is unconditional in both of its dispensations.

In its substance, even the old covenant is gracious, because it is unconditional. Similarly, the promise by which God establishes the new covenant is evangelical because it is unconditional. There is no *if* attached to the promise; thus the covenant is purely gracious, grounded not at all in human achievement but in God's own mercy and goodness (*ex sua misericordia et bonitate*). The core of the covenant is God's twofold promise: "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33)... Zanchi celebrates the perpetuity of the covenant by emphasizing that God's promise is unconditional and thus utterly gratuitous—and thus incapable of being nullified by human weakness or failure.¹⁰³

As far as the relationship between the covenant, on the one hand and faith, repentance, and good works, on the other hand, Zanchius "sees here an instance of the Reformed dictum that God ordains not only the end (the salvation of the elect) but also the means to that end (faith, hope, love, repentance, the fear of God)...the fulfillment of the terms of the covenant is strictly God's own act."¹⁰⁴

Zanchius also frequently draws on the analogy between marriage and God's gracious covenant with His people in Jesus Christ: *foedus* and *connubium*. "For Zanchi, marriage is the prototype for our understanding of the covenant: In fact, he does not hesitate to use the terms *foedus* and *connubium* interchangeably."¹⁰⁵ Especially in his commentary on the prophecy of Hosea, Zanchius uses marital imagery to describe the covenant relationship between God and His elect people, which is what the prophecy itself does.

¹⁰² Farthing, "Jerome Zanchi," 153.

¹⁰³ Farthing, "Jerome Zanchi," 154.

¹⁰⁴ Farthing, "Jerome Zanchi," 155.

¹⁰⁵ Farthing, "Jerome Zanchi," 159.

For Zanchi the covenant is precisely a spiritual union or marriage between Christ and the elect. Hosea 2:18-20 becomes the *locus classicus* for Zanchi's elaboration of the *foedus-connubium* analogy. In verse 18 God promises a new covenant, which verses 19-20 describe in explicitly nuptial terms. Zanchi reverts to this text again and again in expounding both the perpetuity of the covenant...and its moral content.... The fidelity that lies at the base of the marital relationship is reflected in the language by which the new covenant is described in Hosea 2:20 ("*Et desponsabo te mihi in fide*"). The indissolubility and the mutual moral commitment of marriage reflect the dynamics of the new covenant effected by Christ between himself and the whole body of the elect.¹⁰⁶

Another representative of the view that membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect was the mid-seventeenth century Swiss-Italian Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623-1687). Turretin was a native of Geneva, the grandson of Italian immigrants who had sought refuge in Geneva. After studies abroad, Turretin returned to Geneva, where he was appointed pastor of the Italian congregation in 1648, and professor of theology in the Academy of Geneva in 1653. Turretin was a staunch defender of Reformed orthodoxy as represented in the decisions of the Synod of Dordt, 1618-'19. He is remembered as one of the authors of the *Helvetic Consensus*, which defended double predestination and the verbal inspiration of Scripture down to the pointing of the Hebrew letters. Turretin's *magnum opus* was his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, a three-volume dogmatic work that served as a standard textbook in Reformed seminaries around the world for several generations after it was first published in Geneva, 1679-1685.¹⁰⁷ It was replaced at Princeton Seminary only after Charles Hodge produced his *Systematic Theology* in the late nineteenth century.

¹⁰⁶ Farthing, "Jerome Zanchi," 159.

¹⁰⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vol., trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1992-1996).

In the second volume of his *Institutes*, Turretin treats “The Covenant of Grace and its Twofold Economy in the Old and New Testaments.” After treating such things as the biblical words for covenant, the nature of the covenant, the benefits of the covenant, the duties of man in the covenant, and the unity of the covenant of grace, Turretin treats “The Extent of the Covenant of Grace.” “This question,” he says, “relates to the object of the covenant of grace, agitated with us by the patrons of universal grace.... For in order that they may sustain their thesis concerning the universality of grace, they are bound to maintain the universality of the covenant by which grace is dispensed.”¹⁰⁸ In contrast to the view of the Remonstrants¹⁰⁹ and the supporters of the school of Saumur, Turretin sets forth the view of the Reformed.

But the common and received opinion among the Reformed is different. They hold to a particularity of the covenant (no less than of saving grace) that although what is extended to many may be called general (especially under the New Testament, the distinction of nations being taken away), still it never was universal with each and all, but particular only with the true elect members of Christ.¹¹⁰

Turretin goes on to distinguish between the external dispensation of the covenant and its internal essence. With regard to the internal, saving essence of the covenant of grace, Turretin maintains that “it pertains to none other than the elect, who are really partakers of the covenant according to God’s intention, in whom he fulfills the very conditions of the covenant and to whom he not only offers but actually confers the benefits of the

¹⁰⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:205.

¹⁰⁹ The view of the Remonstrants (Arminians) that the covenant is universal in scope, both as regards the purpose of God and the redemptive work of the Mediator of the covenant, is indicated in the rejection of errors section that is appended to the Second Head of Doctrine of the Canons of Dordt, articles 2, 4, and 5. Confer *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 164-5.

¹¹⁰ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:207.

covenant.”¹¹¹ J. Mark Beach views Turretin’s position as being in line with other federal theologians of the seventeenth century.

As to the internal essence of the covenant—that is, its salvific outcome and communion with God—covenant theologians argued that only persons who are elect enjoy these privileges, for unto them alone is the testamentary character of this covenant applied. These persons are the recipients of the internal call of the gospel by the Spirit’s regenerating and renewing work. They do not receive merely the external blessings and privileges of the covenant, but God works in them the salvific essence of the covenant, such that they receive and accept all its blessings, for they enjoy rebirth and come to faith and repentance; they trust in Christ as their Surety and have the forgiveness of sins; they are united to Christ by faith and meet all the conditions of the covenant because Christ fulfills those conditions in them. The result is that Christ does not merely offer but actually confers the blessings of the covenant upon them. Thus, as to its internal essence, Turretin argues that the evangelical covenant is particular and applies to the elect alone.¹¹²

In support of the position that the covenant of grace is established by God only with the elect, Turretin offers a number of arguments. His first argument is an appeal to the purpose of God in predestination.

The particularity of the covenant of grace appears from various considerations. (1) From its destination, because there was no universal purpose and will in God to pity the whole human race, but a particular will to select and appoint unto salvation a certain number from the common corrupt mass. Therefore, as no such covenant was decided upon in the counsel of God, so neither was it made in time.¹¹³

In addition to his appeal to the eternal decree of God, Turretin also appeals to the covenant promises in order to demonstrate that membership in the covenant is restricted to the elect.

¹¹¹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:207.

¹¹² J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 229.

¹¹³ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:208.

Third, [the particularity of the covenant of grace appears] from the promises of the covenant because to them alone the covenant of grace belongs to whom the promises expressed in it belong. Now they belong not to each and all, but only to the elect and believers, upon whom the blessings comprehended under those promises are conferred. For those promises are absolute, not conditional, springing from the mere grace of God, not depending on any condition in man.¹¹⁴

In no sense can the promise of the covenant be said to be made by God to those whom God has decreed to reprobate.

No one (except absurdly) will say that this [promise of the covenant] can be extended to those whom God hated from eternity and decreed to pass by (by granting them neither his word nor faith, the two means of salvation).¹¹⁵

Commenting on this aspect of Turretin's argument, Beach says:

Because of the testamentary character of the covenant of grace, God fulfills the covenant in those whom he has chosen from eternity to be united to Christ and share in all the benefits of his redemptive program. Federal theologians of the seventeenth century, Turretin included, in adhering to an Augustinian doctrine of predestination, recognize that the guarantee or internal seal promised in the covenant would meet fulfillment only in those whom God had eternally decreed to participate in Christ, for salvation is a divine work from first to last. If God actually promised to the reprobate the internal essence or essential blessing of the covenant—namely peace and communion with God through Christ—then either he would need to fulfill this promise in them, in which case the reprobate are not reprobate (which is an absurdity), or since they are reprobate he would need to deny to them what is promised, in which case God is unfaithful to his own promises or incapable of saving those whom he promises to save (which is also an absurdity, not to mention a blasphemous idea).¹¹⁶

In the end, Turretin's polemic on behalf of the view that election determines membership in the covenant is a polemic on behalf of the gracious character of the covenant, that the covenant is indeed a covenant *of grace*. The covenant is gracious

¹¹⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:208.

¹¹⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:233.

¹¹⁶ Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 233.

inasmuch as God freely determines who will be the members of this covenant. And at the same time, that grace is irresistible grace inasmuch as the promise of the covenant is realized in all to whom it is made.¹¹⁷

Turretin, along with Lucas Gernler, a successor of Oecolampadius in Basel, and John Henry Heidegger, a successor of Zwingli in Zurich, composed the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* (1675), commonly known as the Helvetic Consensus. The Helvetic Consensus was designed to condemn the errors that emanated from the Academy of Saumur, especially the hypothetical universalism of Moïses Amyraut (1596-1664) and the denial of verbal inspiration by the Hebrew scholar Louis Cappel (1585-1658). But along the way, the Helvetic Consensus also affirms that the covenant of grace is established “with only the elect in Christ.”

XXIII. There are two ways in which God, the just Judge, has promised justification: either by one’s own works or deeds in the law; or by the obedience or righteousness of another, even of Christ our Guarantor. [This justification] is imputed by grace to those who believe in the Gospel. The former is the method of justifying man because of perfection; but the latter, of justifying man who is a corrupt sinner. In accordance with these two ways of justification the Scripture establishes these two covenants: the Covenant of Works, entered into with Adam and with each one of his descendants in him, but made void by sin; and the Covenant of Grace, made with only the elect in Christ, the second Adam, eternal. [This covenant] cannot be broken while [the Covenant of Works] can be [and has been] abrogated.¹¹⁸

In the very next article, the Helvetic Consensus affirms this same truth regarding membership in the covenant of grace.

XXIV. But this later Covenant of Grace according to the diversity of times has also different dispensations. For when the Apostle

¹¹⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:175; 2:211; 2:216.

¹¹⁸ *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 4, 1600-1693*, compiled with introductions by James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 528.

speaks of the dispensation of the fullness of times, that is, the administration of the last time (Eph. 1:10), he very clearly indicates that there had been another dispensation and administration until the times which the Father appointed. Yet in the dispensation of the Covenant of Grace the elect have not been saved in any other way than by the Angel of his presence (Isa 63:9), the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8), Christ Jesus, through the knowledge of that just Servant and faith in him and in the Father and his Spirit. For Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).¹¹⁹

Standing in complete agreement with Turretin on the issue of membership in the covenant of grace was his Dutch contemporary Herman Witsius (1636-1708). Witsius is associated with the *Nadere Reformatie*, the Dutch Further or Second Reformation, a pietistic movement in the Dutch Reformed churches dating roughly from the beginning of the seventeenth century through the middle of the eighteenth century. Witsius exercised a great influence in his day, serving successively as professor of theology in the University of Franeker (1675), the University of Utrecht (1680), and the University of Leiden (1698). Witsius' chief work, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, covers the whole of systematic theology from the viewpoint of the covenant. In Book II, Witsius introduces the covenant of grace itself, establishing at the outset that “[t]he covenant of grace is a compact or agreement between God and the elect sinner....”¹²⁰

Witsius reserves treatment of the covenant of grace for the first few chapters of Book III, the book that is devoted to consideration of the *ordo salutis*. Chapter I of Book III is entitled, “*Of the Covenant of God with the Elect.*” Concerning this covenant:

¹¹⁹ *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 4, 1600-1693*, 528.

¹²⁰ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, 2 vol., trans. William Crookshank (1822; reprint, Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1990), 1:165. An added feature of this reprinted edition is the inclusion of a “Publisher’s Introduction” by J. I. Packer entitled “On Covenant Theology.”

The Spirit brings the Elect to Christ, and, in Christ, to the possession of the benefits of the covenant, intimates to their consciences τα ὄσια τῆ Δαυὶδ τα πισα *the holy pledges, the sure mercies of David*, and is the seal and earnest of their complete happiness, I Cor. xii.3, 11, 12. Eph. i.13, 14. Moreover, as we restrict this covenant to the Elect, it is evident we are speaking of the *internal*, mystical, and spiritual *communion* of the covenant. For salvation itself, and everything belonging to it, or inseparably connected with it, are promised in this covenant, all which, none but the Elect can attain to.¹²¹

Abraham Hellenbroek (1658-1731), Dutch Reformed minister at Rotterdam, was a close personal friend of Wilhelmus à Brakel. He too was regarded as a leader of the *Nadere Reformatie*. Alongside a number of very scholarly works, Hellenbroek wrote a catechism for young people preparing to make public confession of faith: *Voorbeeld der goddelijke waarheden. Die zig bereiden tot de belydenisse des geloofs*, which translated is, *A Specimen of Divine Truths for those who are Preparing themselves for the Confession of Faith*. This catechism became extremely popular not only in the Netherlands, but also in the Dutch colonies. Jonathan Gerstner informs his readers that

[i]n the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, it became the only official catechism book from 1806-24, and was used extensively before that time as well.... The work also had great impact on the Dutch Reformed communities of America. An English translation of Hellenbroek was authorized by the Reformed Church in America [RCA] making it one of the few works of the Continuing Reformation to exercise direct influence on Americans of Dutch descent after the language gap.¹²²

The RCA Classis of New Brunswick in 1783 directed the translation and publication of Hellenbroek's catechism, recommending it to the churches for use in catechizing the youth. It was published under the title, *A Specimen of Divine Truths for*

¹²¹ Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1:283.

¹²² Jonathan Neil Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant: Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Group Identity in Colonial South Africa, 1652-1814* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 142n.

the Instruction of Youth. Chapter Ten, which is entitled “Of the Covenant of Grace,” includes the following question and answer:

3. Q. With whom is it [that is, the covenant of grace] made?
A. With Christ, in the name of his elect.¹²³

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Heinrich Heppe quotes from Daniel Wytttenbach (1706-1779), professor of theology at the University of Marburg, in regard to God’s mercy towards lapsed man in establishing with him the covenant of grace. In the quotation, Wytttenbach addresses the relationship of election to the covenant of grace.

Since the covenant of grace is the execution of the testament of grace, and this testament is identical with the decree of election, it is manifest that God’s eternal election is the foundation of the covenant of grace.¹²⁴

Aegidius Francken (1676-1743) was another notable figure in the Dutch *Nadere Reformatie*. Francken was trained in theology at the University of Leiden. His father and two brothers also served as ministers in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. Francken was ordained in 1705 and spent his entire ministry serving only two congregations: Rijsoord (1705-1711) and Maassluis (1711-1743). Francken contributed to a popular genre of Dutch Reformed theological handbooks that were aimed at lay persons. His *Kern der Christelijke Leer* (*Kernal of Christian Doctrine*), a book of some four hundred and fifty pages, in catechetical (question and answer) style, remained in demand for several generations after its first publication in 1713. It not only was very

¹²³ Abraham Hellenbroek, *A Specimen of Divine Truths for the Instruction of Youth* (New York: The Board of Publication and Bible-School Work, 1914), 31. Hellenbroek’s catechism is still used among the Netherlands Reformed Congregations. They have translated and reprinted it numerous times under the title *A Specimen of Divine Truths For Those Who Are Preparing Themselves for the Confession of Faith*. The 1968 reprint, Chapter XI, “Of the Covenant of Grace,” contains the following question and answer: “4. Q. With whom is it [the covenant of grace] established? A. With the elect only.”

¹²⁴ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics, Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson, revised and ed. by Ernst Bizer (1950; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 379. Quotation from Daniel Wytttenbach, *Tentamen Theologiae dogmaticae Methodo scientifica pertractatae*. Tom. I-III (Frankfort-on-Main, 1747-1749).

popular in the Netherlands, but was taken across the Atlantic by Dutch immigrants to America, especially Dutch immigrants from the *Afscheiding* churches. In 1857 the synod of the *Christelijk Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk*, at the urging of men like Simon van Velzen, one of the first *Afscheiding* ministers, and Tamme de Haan, one of the four original faculty members at Kampen, took the decision to elevate Francken's *Kern* to the status of the authorized text for the theology courses in its denominational seminary.¹²⁵

The *Kern* was also the first systematic theology textbook used at Calvin Theological Seminary, being the preferred text of Professor Geert E. Boer, the first and only professor at the seminary of the Christian Reformed Church for the first seven years of its existence, the seminary having been founded in 1876. According to James A. DeJong, "Francken's book served as the basic textbook in theology for aspiring ministers for ten or fifteen years thereafter and as a trusted resource for the next ten or fifteen."¹²⁶ Before its use in the CRC seminary, Francken's text had been used in the parsonages in which aspiring ministers were first trained as, for example, the parsonage of Douwe Vander Werp.

The twenty-first chapter of the *Kern* is entitled "*Van het Verbond der Genade*," that is, "Concerning the Covenant of Grace."¹²⁷ In the ninth and tenth questions and answers, Francken treats the issue of those with whom God establishes the covenant of grace.

9th Q. Can you provide now a description of the covenant of grace?

¹²⁵James A. DeJong, "Sometimes 'buried' treasure' lies in plain view! G. E. Boer's copy of Aegidius Francken," *Origins* 30, no. 2 (2012), 41.

¹²⁶DeJong, "Sometimes 'buried' treasure," 37.

¹²⁷ Aegidius Francken, *Kern der Christelijke Leer, dat is de Waarheden van den Hervormden Godsdienst, eenvoudig voorgesteld, en ter oefening der ware godzaligheid aangedrongen* (Groningen: R. Boerma, 1894), 232ff. This book has not been translated. All translations from this work are mine.

A. The covenant of grace is that gracious negotiation of God with the elect sinner, wherein God on His part, for the sake of the merits of Christ, promises all salvation to him, and the sinner on his part receives and consents to this promise.

10th Q. Does God establish such a covenant with the elect?

A. Yes; for we learn this from Jeremiah 31:31, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord that I will make with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, a new covenant, saith the Lord.” And vs. 33: “But this is the covenant that I will make after those days with the house of Israel, saith the Lord: I will give my law in their inmost part, and will write it in their heart; and I will be unto them for a God, and they shall be unto me for a people.”

Concerning Francken’s covenant doctrine as set forth in his *Kern der Christelijke Leer*,

E. Smilde says that “he stands then also on the viewpoint that the covenant of grace is established *only with the elect*.”¹²⁸ In Francken’s view, only the elect belong to the covenant of grace. Membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. God establishes the covenant with the elect and with the elect alone.

That the covenant is limited to the elect is the clear teaching of the Westminster Larger Catechism (1648), and therefore of the Westminster Assembly. This is the bookend on the far side of our consideration of the late sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century of Reformed orthodoxy. Question and answer 31 of the Larger Catechism expresses the decisive response of the Reformed faith to the question of membership in the covenant of grace.

Q. 31. *With whom was the covenant of grace made?*

A. The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946), 29.

Emphasis is the author’s. This book has not been translated. All translations from this work are mine.

¹²⁹ The Larger Catechism, *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1955), 57.

The covenant of grace has been established with Christ as the Head of the covenant and in Christ with all the elect. This is the confessionally Reformed teaching regarding membership in the covenant of grace. Membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect. They alone belong to the God's covenant.

A Glance at Presbyterians and Puritans

The citation from the Westminster Larger Catechism diverts our attention from the Dutch Reformed tradition. Thus far our focus has been on the Dutch Reformed tradition, since this is the tradition out of which Herman Hoeksema came. It was this tradition that shaped his theological development, particularly his understanding of the doctrine of the covenant. And it was with this tradition that he interacted, both positively and negatively, both by way of agreement and by way of vigorous dissent. He inherited this tradition, enthusiastically embraced it, identified what he considered to be deviations from it, and contributed to its further development.

Apart from consideration of whether and to what extent the Reformed faith as it developed in the British Isles may have influenced Hoeksema, the fact is that in this branch of the Reformation the doctrine of the covenant also came to prominence.¹³⁰ Among the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and the English Puritans there were serious discussions, and sometimes heated debates, over the doctrine of the covenant. In fact some of the same contentious issues divided them as they did the Dutch Reformed. There were disagreements over the nature of the covenant, the number of the covenants,

¹³⁰ Geerhardus Vos says: "It used to be thought rather generally that British theologians had followed the Dutch on this score [the doctrine of the covenant]. Closer research has speedily shown that it is not a matter of imitation but of independent development." In "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 238.

membership in the covenant, the parties in the covenant, the relationship between covenant and predestination, Christ's headship in the covenant, the conditionality of the covenant, and other issues besides.

Without going too far afield, it is worth noticing that also among Presbyterians and Puritans there were those who took the position that membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect, that Christ is the Head of the covenant, and that the covenant of grace is unconditional. Among them were those who openly opposed all broadening of the covenant to include more than the elect, who contended against those who rejected Christ's federal headship, and who repudiated the teaching that the covenant of grace is conditional. Included in their number were not only those who can legitimately be classified as antinomians and hyper-Calvinists, like Tobias Crisp who rejected the conditional covenant as a reducing of the covenant of grace to "a mere bargain and sale,"¹³¹ but also those who are properly regarded as consistently Reformed. These theologians not only affirmed the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, but sought thoroughly to integrate it into their view of the covenant. They rejected the "high contractarian Federal theology exhibited in Rutherford, Dickson, Durham, and *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*" and proposed a biblically consistent alternative.¹³²

The early Puritan leader Ezekiel Culverwell (c.1554-1631) referred to the "condition of faith" upon which the blessings of the covenant of grace were supposedly suspended as "an impossible condition to be performed by ourselves," and that rather faith is "part of the thing promised," for in the covenant of grace God has "freely

¹³¹ John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion 45 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 11.

¹³² M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Handel Press, 1985), 120.

promised, not only life, but to give grace to receive this life.”¹³³ In his work *The Spirit of Prelacie*, published in 1644, Robert Bacon maintained that faith is “infinitely too hard for man,” and that rather than being a condition unto the covenant, “the Covenant is to give us faith to bring us to God.”¹³⁴

William Ames (1576-1633) was born and educated in England. He studied at Christ’s College, Cambridge, where he was especially influenced by William Perkins. While a student at Cambridge, Ames read extensively in both the Latin and English works of the Puritans. Upon graduation he was offered a teaching fellowship at Christ’s College, where he taught for several years. Because of his Puritan convictions, Ames was eventually suspended from his position, after which he sought refuge in the Netherlands. Soon after his arrival in the Netherlands he accepted a position as professor of theology at the University of Franeker in Friesland, where he was installed in May of 1622. He taught at the University for the next twelve years. In 1623 the first Latin edition of his systematic theology appeared with the title *Medulla theologiae (Marrow of Theology)*. Twelve Latin printings followed; the *Medulla* was much in demand not only in England, but also on the Continent and in New England. Three printings of an English translation appeared between 1638 and 1643, and a Dutch translation was published in 1656.

In the introduction to his new English translation, John Dykstra Eusden says:

Ames sees the unconditional covenant of grace as perhaps the single most important biblical teaching. It was the property of both the Old and New Testaments, having its beginning in Genesis 3 with the promise that Christ, or the seed of Eve, would overcome the evils of sin, estrangement from God, and death. This covenant found repeated expression in the lives of Old Testament figures of

¹³³ Quoted in von Rohr, *Covenant of Grace*, 15.

¹³⁴ Quoted in von Rohr, *Covenant of Grace*, 15.

whom Abraham was regarded as chief... The covenant reached its climax...in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹³⁵

The unconditional character of the covenant is seen in the fact, says Ames, that whereas the so-called covenant of works may be viewed as “an agreement of two parties, God and man,” in the covenant of grace “only God covenants. For man being dead in sin has no ability to make a spiritual covenant with God.”¹³⁶ Further whereas

the old [covenant] required perfect obedience of works to be performed by man of his own strength prior to the carrying out of the promise...the present covenant requires no properly called or prior condition, but only a following or intermediate condition (and that to be given as a means to grace), which is the proper nature of faith.¹³⁷

A recent appraisal of Ames’ theology is that of Jan van Vliet, in his book *The Rise of Reformed System: The Intellectual Heritage of William Ames*. Van Vliet judges that “Ames is consistently unambiguous in his contention that the covenant of grace is entirely one-sided.”¹³⁸ He judges Ames to be more emphatic on this point than either Calvin or Perkins before him. He draws attention to Ames’ “preference for ‘testament’ because of its primarily monopoleuric meaning over ‘covenant’ and its dipoleuric connotations. This leads to great stress on the one-sided nature of the covenant of grace.”¹³⁹ At the same time, he commends Ames because he “balanced both the gracious and the demanding character of the covenant of grace. While grace was always prior, obedience was not to be sacrificed on the altar of God’s presumed beneficence. While

¹³⁵ John Dykstra Eusden, “Introduction,” in William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, tr. John D. Eusden (1968; repr., Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 54.

¹³⁶ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (translated from the third Latin edition of 1629 and edited by John D. Eusden; Durham: The Labyrinth Press), 1.24.14; 151.

¹³⁷ Ames, *Marrow*, 1.24.19; 151.

¹³⁸ Jan van Vliet, *The Rise of Reformed System: The Intellectual Heritage of William Ames*, *Studies in Christian History and Thought* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 45.

¹³⁹ Van Vliet, *Rise of Reformed System*, 58.

grace is of utmost importance, obedience is no less so.”¹⁴⁰ Van Vliet also commends Ames for integrating the greater part of the main topics of systematic theology into a covenantal scheme. Ames was, in his view, a covenantal architect. His “construction of this federal covenantal principle around the axis of the *ordo salutis* in his theological predication, is uniquely architectonic.”¹⁴¹

Another leading Puritan and commissioner to the Westminster Assembly was Samuel Bolton (1606-1654). In his well-known work on the freedom of the Christian, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, Bolton applied the distinction between law and gospel to the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.¹⁴² The covenant of works was “a conditional covenant; man had something to do if he expected to receive that which was promised.” However, the fall has changed everything. “[S]uch a [conditional] covenant God could not make with man after man’s fall, for man could not meet the least of its terms or perform the meanest of its conditions.”¹⁴³ Bolton insists on the position that fallen man, as a totally depraved sinner, is unable to fulfill the demands of a conditional covenant. At the same time, the renewed sinner, in whom the Spirit of Christ has worked regeneration and faith, is once again

¹⁴⁰ Van Vliet, *Rise of Reformed System*, 58.

¹⁴¹ Van Vliet, *Rise of Reformed System*, 56.

¹⁴² Bolton was not the first to apply the distinction between the law and the gospel to the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Ursinus had done this in his Larger Catechism. “35 Q. What does the gospel teach? A. What God promises us in his covenant of grace, how we are received into it, and how we know we are in it—that is, how we are delivered from sin and death, and how we are certain of this deliverance. 36 Q. What is the difference between the law and the gospel? A. The law contain the natural covenant, established by God with humanity in creation, that it, it is known by humanity by nature, it requires our perfect obedience to God, and it promises eternal life to those who keep it and threatens eternal punishment to those who do not. The gospel, however, contains the covenant of grace, that is, although it exists, it is not known at all by nature; it shows us the fulfillment in Christ of the righteousness that the law requires and the restoration in us of that righteousness by Christ’s Spirit; and it promises eternal life freely because of Christ to those who believe in him.” Quotation taken from *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, by Lyle D. Bierma, with Charles D. Gunnoe Jr., Karin Y. Maag, and Paul W. Fields (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 168-9.

¹⁴³ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, rev. ed. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 93.

made capable of keeping God's law. The law "remains as a rule of obedience to the people of God, and that to which they are to conform their walk under the Gospel." At the same time, "there was no end or use for which the law was given, but such as was consistent with grace and serviceable to the advancement of the covenant of grace."¹⁴⁴ The covenant of grace is not a covenant of works, which is what it would become if it were a conditional covenant.

William Perkins (1558-1602) was a leader of the Puritan movement and one of its most prolific writers. Perkins was an ardent follower of Calvin and Beza. Perkins was responsible for the publication in English of Beza's *A Brief Declaration of the Table of Predestination*. His defense of double predestination, and especially his supralapsarian viewpoint, made him a bitter foe of Jacob Arminius. One of Perkins' most well-known works is his *A golden chaine, or the description of theologie: containing the order of the causes of salvation and damnation, according to Gods woord*. In Chapter XXXI of *The Golden Chaine*, the title of which is "Of the covenant of grace," Perkins says:

The covenant of grace is that whereby God freely promising Christ and his benefits, exacts again of man that he would by faith receive Christ and repent of his sins.... [I]n this covenant we do not so much offer or promise any great matter to God, as in a manner only receive....¹⁴⁵

Paul Helm analyzes Perkins' conception of the covenant of grace by saying that "had Perkins set out deliberately to choose language specifically to refute the charge that the

¹⁴⁴ Bolton, *True Bounds*. 109.

¹⁴⁵ William Perkins, *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. and intro. Ian Breward, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 3 (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), 213.

covenant of grace had a conditional character he could not have chosen language better than this.”¹⁴⁶ And he concludes:

So the covenant of grace is not a subspecies of covenant defined as a contract between partners with mutual conditions to be fulfilled. There is no conditionality in Perkins’ covenant of grace, as we have seen. Or perhaps we should say, (though he does not put it this way), such conditionality as there is in the covenant of grace is accepted and performed by Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁷

Thomas Watson (c. 1620-1686) is one of the most widely read of the Puritans; many of his works continue to be published today. Especially popular have been his expositions of the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Beatitudes. Along with his expositions of Scripture portions, his *Body of Divinity* also remains a popular resource. In his *Body of Divinity*, Watson gives special treatment to “The Covenant of Grace.” At the very outset of his consideration of the covenant of grace, he makes known his view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect and the elect alone. “Did God leave all mankind to perish in this state of sin and misery? Ans. No. He entered into a covenant of grace to deliver the elect out of that state, and to bring them into a state of grace by a Redeemer.” A bit later he says: “It is a covenant of grace, because it is...all made up of terms of grace; that ‘God will cast our sins behind his back;’ that ‘he will love us freely;’ Hos. xiv. 4; that ‘he will give us a will to accept of the mercy of the covenant, and strength to perform the conditions of the covenant.’ Ezek. xxxvii. 26. All this is pure grace.”¹⁴⁸ And although Watson spoke of faith as the “condition of the new covenant,” he was careful to circumscribe his description of faith as a covenantal condition.

¹⁴⁶ Paul Helm, “Was Calvin A Federalist?” *Reformed Theological Journal* 10 (November 1994): 50.

¹⁴⁷ Helm, “Was Calvin A Federalist?” 51.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity, Contained in Sermons Upon the Assembly’s Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 107.

Q. *Why is faith more the condition of the new covenant than any other grace?*

Ans. To exclude all glorying in the creature. Faith is a humble grace. If repentance or works were the condition of the covenant, a man would say, It is my righteousness that has saved me; but if it be of faith, where is boasting? Faith fetches all from Christ, and gives all the glory to Christ; it is a most humble grace. Hence it is that God has singled out this grace to be the condition of the covenant.¹⁴⁹

Watson conceives of faith as “a most humble grace,” a grace of God and not a work of man. As a grace of God that “fetches all from Christ, and gives all the glory to Christ,” faith is a means not a prerequisite that merits.

In his book *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*, M. Charles Bell describes the views of the Scottish Presbyterian Hugh Binning (1627-1653), who before his nineteenth birthday was appointed a professor of philosophy at Glasgow University. Although he was cut down in the prime of his life, dying of consumption at the age of twenty-six, Binning’s collected works were published in three fairly large volumes in Edinburgh in 1839. Bell describes Binning’s unconditional covenant conception as follows:

At the failing of the covenant of works, God established a new covenant of grace with Christ that we might once again enjoy covenant union with God. Binning is conscious that there is much controversy about the condition of the covenant, and whether or not the covenant promises are conditional or absolute. Some teach that repentance and obedience to the new gospel law are required of us for entry into the covenant. However, Binning states pointedly that the truth is otherwise. Repentance “is not properly a condition” which is required of us. Rather is it “a promise to be performed in us, and the chiefest part of Christ’s redemption.”¹⁵⁰

A bit later Bell assesses Binning’s view by judging that “[t]he teaching of Binning is an example of Federal theology more clearly akin to the theologies of Calvin, Knox, and

¹⁴⁹ Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 108.

¹⁵⁰ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 133.

Craig, than of Rutherford, Dickson, and Durham,” adding that “he refuses to develop his teaching on the covenant of grace from the framework of a conditional covenant of works, and thus, clearly affirms the unconditional freeness of God’s grace in Christ.”¹⁵¹

Another of the lesser known Scottish Presbyterians of the seventeenth century whose views Bell describes is James Fraser of Brea (1639-1699). One of the major concerns of Fraser, says Bell, is the unconditional character of the covenant of grace.

Bell informs us that

Fraser criticizes those who teach that faith, with sincere obedience, is the condition of the covenant of grace. Such a notion is a “false and destructive Principle,” and “a Contradiction in itself.” This covenant is absolutely free and unconditional. Indeed, we must take care, warns Fraser, lest we make an evangelical call for holiness so strong as to lead one again to a covenant of works. The covenant of grace does not make a conditional proposition, but rather the absolute proposition that “I will give a new Heart, and I will be their God.”¹⁵²

And a bit later, Bell concludes:

Finally, it must be noted that Fraser is unquestionably opposed to any notion that faith is a condition of our salvation in the covenant of grace: “To say Faith is the Condition of the Covenant of Grace in a proper Sense and strictly, is neither true nor scriptural.” According to Fraser, the notion of conditionality is entirely foreign to the nature of saving faith. The good news of the gospel is entirely unconditional, though it does “depend on some Means to be used by us.” It is only as “a Means and Instrument” that Fraser allows faith to be termed a condition, however, such terminology is not to his liking.¹⁵³

Like Fraser, Thomas Halyburton (1674-1712) “reject[ed] the idea that faith is a condition of the covenant of grace that we must fulfill.”¹⁵⁴ Halyburton’s father George, one of the ejected ministers, died in 1682. In order to escape certain persecution, the

¹⁵¹ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 136.

¹⁵² Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 137.

¹⁵³ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 140-1.

¹⁵⁴ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 145.

young boy Thomas was taken by his mother to Rotterdam. They returned to Scotland in 1687. In 1696 Halyburton graduated from the University of St. Andrews and in 1710 he was appointed to the chair of theology at St. Andrews. After teaching for only two years, Halyburton died in 1712. Throughout his ministerial career Halyburton opposed what he considered to be the “Arminian conception of the covenant.” “A conditional covenant,” in his view, “would rob the believer of comfort and security, but because the promise is not conditional, there is ‘present and abiding comfort’ for the believer.”¹⁵⁵

Despite his involvement in the Marrow Controversy, Thomas Boston (1677-1732) was yet another opponent of the teaching of a conditional covenant. M. Charles Bell indicates what he believes to be Boston’s unique contribution to the controversy over the covenant.

Boston believes that Scripture teaches only two covenants, one of works, and the other of grace. For this reason, and for pressing theological reasons, Boston opposes the doctrine of a third covenant of redemption. He is aware that “some great and good men have taught otherwise,” yet he maintains that “The covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace are not two distinct covenants, but one and the same covenant.” It is at this point that Boston makes his unique contribution to Federal theology. Boston believes that the legalism and the element of conditionality which has attached to the covenant of grace in so much of contemporary teaching is accountable to this doctrine of a covenant of redemption. If one expounds a covenant in eternity between God and Christ wherein Christ contracted to fulfil all the conditions on behalf of sinners in order to purchase their redemption, and if this covenant of redemption is thought to be separate from the covenant of grace, then the way is open to viewing the covenant of grace as an agreement between God and man wherein man must fulfil certain conditions in order to his being instated in covenant with God... It is up to man...to contract with God, and fulfil the conditions of the covenant of grace in order to partake of the benefits of Christ’s work. Unlike Boston’s Federalist predecessors, he sees immediately the threat such teaching holds for the unconditional freeness of God’s grace as proclaimed in

¹⁵⁵ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 145.

Scripture. It undermines the Reformation principle of *sola gratia*. Moreover, argues Boston, man is a fallen creature, incapable of fulfilling even the slightest condition, and, therefore, there simply cannot be a conditional covenant proffered to man. For all these reasons, he rejects absolutely the notion of a covenant of redemption between God and Christ which is separate from the covenant of grace.¹⁵⁶

In his teaching on the covenant of grace, Boston emphasizes “that the covenant of grace is made for us in Christ, and not by us in ourselves.” In the covenant of grace,

[m]an does not, and cannot, make a covenant for himself with God. If it were otherwise, this would mean that the covenant is conditional upon man’s fulfilling his part of the bargain. But Boston sees that this is contrary to the nature of God’s covenant grace, which is free and unconditional. The covenant is not a bilateral pact between God and man, but is unilateral, having been made for man in Christ. In this way, Boston is able to inhibit the element of conditionality from entering the arena of grace.... Indeed, such is Christ’s role in the covenant of grace, that he himself is the covenant.¹⁵⁷

And a bit later, Bell adds:

Along with this, Boston is sure to insist that the faith which unites us with Christ, and instates us in the covenant is in no proper sense the condition of the covenant of grace. There are what he calls “conditions of connection” in the covenant, and faith may be understood in this sense. However, the only proper condition of the covenant is that which is fulfilled by Christ’s righteousness. Our faith is a promised benefit of this covenant and a part of our redemption purchased for us by Christ. This understanding of the covenant of grace, coupled with his rejection of the covenant of redemption, means that Boston has exchanged the notion of contract for union. This is a very striking contrast between the teaching of Boston and the earlier Federalists like Rutherford, Dickson, and Durham.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 155-6.

¹⁵⁷ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* 156.

¹⁵⁸ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 156-7.

In his study of the covenant theology of Boston, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*, A. T. B. McGowan concurs, for the most part, with Bell's assessment. He summarizes Boston's teaching on the covenant of grace:

Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, entered into a covenant with God on behalf of the elect. As a public person, or federal head, he stood where Adam stood and succeeded where Adam failed. He rendered to God full and perfect obedience thus fulfilling the conditions of the covenant of works for all those whom he represented in the covenant of grace, namely, his seed, the elect. For the elect the covenant is absolute and not conditional....¹⁵⁹

Clearly Boston supports the teaching of the unconditional covenant. He asks: "But how could an effectual conditional covenant for life be made with dead sinners, otherwise than in a representative?" And his answer is:

Dead souls cannot perform any condition for life at all which can be pleasing to God. They must needs have life before they can do any thing of that nature, be it never so small a condition: therefore a conditional covenant for life, could not be made with sinners in their own persons; especially considering, that the conditions for life were so high, that man at his best state was not able to perform them. Wherefore, if such a covenant was made at all, it behooved to be made with Christ as their representative, Rom. viii. 3. 4."¹⁶⁰

Boston goes on to insist that the covenant of grace "was designed for exalting the free grace of God," and therefore it cannot be suspended on conditions fulfilled by man.

"[F]or how low soever [may be] these conditions, undertaken and wrought by the sinner in his own person," they cannot be the conditions of the covenant of grace. If the covenant "is made with the sinner himself, standing as principal party, contracting with God, and undertaking and performing the conditions of the covenant for life," the

¹⁵⁹ A. T. B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*, Rutherford Studies in Historical Theology (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 1997), 15.

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Boston, *A View of the Covenant of Grace* (East Sussex: Christian Focus Ministries Trust, 1990), 22-3.

covenant is no longer a covenant of grace, but of works.¹⁶¹ The covenant of grace was made a “sure covenant,” and therefore was not made conditionally with man, but was made with “Jesus Christ the Son of God [who] was constituted head of the new covenant, to act for, and in the name of the spiritual seed: and that to the end, the covenant being in this manner sure in point of fulfilling of the condition, might be also sure in point of the accomplishment of the promise.” The covenant of grace as established with Christ and in Him with all the elect “is the very hinge of the stability of the covenant of grace....”¹⁶²

Thus, Boston goes on to explain:

The covenant of grace is absolute, and not conditional to us. For being made with Christ, as representative of his seed, all the conditions of it were laid on him, and fulfilled by him. Wherefore all that remains of it to be accomplished, is, the fulfilling of the promises unto him and his spiritual seed....¹⁶³

What this means is that “[f]aith and obedience are benefits promised in the covenant...and, in virtue of the promises of the covenant, they are produced in the elect: therefore they cannot be the condition of the covenant.”¹⁶⁴ “The bond of the covenant takes hold of...the seed of Abraham, that is, all the elect, or the spiritual Israel, called the house of Jacob, Luke i.33.”¹⁶⁵

John Brown of Haddington (1722-1787) was another very influential Scottish Presbyterian preacher and author. “Brown was a man sovereignly fitted with incredible gifts, who rose from the shadows of poverty and ignorance into the public spotlight as a herald of God’s Word. He was a man bleeding bible, who lead crowds of souls to the

¹⁶¹ Boston, *View of Covenant*, 23.

¹⁶² Boston, *View of Covenant*, 24.

¹⁶³ Boston, *View of Covenant*, 26.

¹⁶⁴ Boston, *View of Covenant*, 65.

¹⁶⁵ Boston, *View of Covenant*, 29-30.

Cross for eternal healing.”¹⁶⁶ By the time he was thirteen years old both of John’s parents had died and he was left to fend for himself in a harsh world in which there were only too many who were ready to prey on the more vulnerable. And as in most every age, widows and orphans were especially vulnerable. Because of his poverty, young John had few educational opportunities and was forced to support himself as a hired shepherd. Despite the fact that he was shut out of the educational institutions of his day, John was a diligent student who taught himself. Among the many subjects that he mastered on his own were several languages, including the biblical languages, Hebrew and Greek. Due to his own persistence, Brown was eventually admitted as a student for the ministry, even though he did not have a university education. Brown received his formal theological training under Ebenezer Erskine, whose theology text was Francis Turretin’s *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. After his ordination, Brown accepted the call from the congregation of Haddington, a village to the east of Edinburgh. Brown served this congregation for thirty-six years, from 1751 until his death in 1787. In 1767 Brown was appointed Professor of Divinity by the Associate Church Synod. For twenty years he taught theological students for three or four months a year, teaching the biblical languages, theology, church history, and homiletics.

Brown was a prolific writer, publishing more than thirty books. His systematic theology was first published in 1782 at the request of his students. “It offers biblical focus, exegetical insights, a covenantal theme, experiential depth, and compelling

¹⁶⁶ Tony Reinke, “The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington,” retrieved May 9, 2014 from <http://www.monergism.com/legacy/mt/sitepages/review-systematic-theology-john-brown-haddington>.

applications.”¹⁶⁷ It becomes immediately evident that the doctrine of the covenant is the organizing principle in Brown’s theology. Five of the seven books that make up his systematic theology expressly mention the covenant. The first two books, “Book I. Of the Regulating Standards of Religion,” and “Book II. Of God, the Author, Object, and End of all Religion,” are followed by “Book III. Of the Covenant Bonds of Religious Connection between God and Men,” “Book IV. Of Christ, the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace,” “Book V. Of the Principal Blessings of the Covenant of Grace,” “Book VI. Of the External Dispensation of the Covenant of Grace, by the Law, the Gospel, etc.,” “Book VII. Of the Church or Society, for, and to which, the Covenant of Grace is Dispensed.” Brown held to a two-covenant scheme, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. Book III consists of two chapters, the first is “Of the Covenant of Works” and the second “Of the Covenant of Grace.” At the beginning of the first chapter, Brown defines covenant: “A real covenant in general is, *an agreement made between different persons on certain terms*. Its necessary requisites are *parties*, a *condition*, a *promise*, and a *penalty*, if any of the parties be fallible.”¹⁶⁸ Brown goes on to set forth his view that Christ is the representative head of the elect in the covenant of grace, “being from all eternity constituted the Representative of his own elect seed in the remedial covenant of grace....”¹⁶⁹ In another place he says that “[t]he Son of God is the *party contractor* on man’s side.... He was considered...a publick head and representative of all his elect of mankind, as his spiritual seed, Eph. i. 3, 4, 6, 7. 2 Tim. i. 9. Psalm lxxxix. 3, 4. Isa. Liii.

¹⁶⁷ Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, “The Life and Writings of John Brown of Haddington,” introduction in the 2002 edition of *The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington*, published jointly by Christian Focus Publications (Geanies House, Scotland) and Reformation Heritage Books (Grand Rapids, MI), [q]. Much of the biographical information on John Brown of Haddington is taken from this introduction.

¹⁶⁸ Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 192.

¹⁶⁹ Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 195.

10, 11, 12.”¹⁷⁰ Brown is insistent that the covenant of grace is established with the elect alone. “The *party contracted for* in this covenant, were persons of mankind chosen by God to everlasting life.... Only they that were *chosen in Christ*, are *blessed in him*....”¹⁷¹ In another place he speaks of “Christ, as King of the covenant” as “powerfully confer[ring] his bequeathed blessings to his elect...in granting them the protection of the covenant...” and “bestowing upon them the eternal happiness promised in the covenant at death.”¹⁷²

M. Charles Bell’s assessment of the covenant view of John Brown of Haddington is that although in his day “many divines [spoke] of our faith as the condition of the covenant...this is only valid if one understands this to mean a ‘condition of connection’ whereby faith acts as an instrument by which we receive God’s blessings.” Brown’s position was that “faith, repentance, or sincere obedience, are not proper conditions of the covenant of grace. For, ‘the admission of any act or quality of ours as the condition, would destroy the whole form and grace of’ this covenant....”¹⁷³ As far as membership in the covenant of grace is concerned, “only the elect are the objects of God’s ‘more special and important administration’ of the covenant of grace, and the general administration to others occurs only for the promotion of the salvation of the elect.”¹⁷⁴

W. Wilson Benton is critical of those in the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian tradition who taught faith as a condition and reduced the covenant to a contractual agreement with mutual stipulations and conditions. He charges that those who taught “faith as a condition...turned the biblical concept of covenant as ‘communion’ into ‘contract’

¹⁷⁰ Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 230.

¹⁷¹ Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 232.

¹⁷² Brown, *Systematic Theology* 249-50.

¹⁷³ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 170.

¹⁷⁴ Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology*, 170.

analogous to the legal and commercial transactions drawn up between men.” He points out that “[t]hrough the Westminster Larger Catechism (Question 32) spoke of faith as a ‘condition,’ there was much controversy over this term and by no means a unanimity of opinion among federal theologians.” And he adds that “[w]hereas some regarded the covenant of grace, no less than that of works, as conditional, others thought it ‘an abuse of language to speak of any condition to be fulfilled on the part of the elect as distinct from Christ.’”¹⁷⁵ Benton echoes the criticism leveled several years earlier by C. G. M’Crie against a conditional covenant theology like that developed in *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*. M’Crie considered such a conditional covenant

objectionable in form and in application. Detailed descriptions of redemption as a bargain entered into between the First and the Second Persons of the Trinity, in which conditions were laid down, promises held out, and pledges given; the reducing of salvation to a mercantile arrangement between God and the sinner, in which the latter signifies contentment to enter into covenant, and the former intimates agreement to entertain a relation of grace, so that ever after the contented, contracting party can say, ‘Lord, let it be a bargain,’—such presentations have obviously a tendency to reduce the gospel of the grace of God to the level of a legal compact entered into between two independent and, so far as right or status is concerned, two equal parties. The blessedness of the mercy-seat is in danger of being lost sight of in the bargaining of the market-place....¹⁷⁶

This glance at the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and English Puritans, while not exhaustive, is adequate to demonstrate that many of the same troublesome issues that bedeviled the Dutch Reformed in their development of the doctrine of the covenant were also faced by their Reformed brethren off the continent. It also makes clear that from the

¹⁷⁵ W. Wilson Benton, Jr., “Federal Theology: Review for Revision,” *Through Christ’s Word: A Festschrift For Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, ed. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III (Phillipsburg: P. & R., 1985), 203. The quote within the quote is taken from Adams Brown, “Covenant Theology,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 4:224.

¹⁷⁶ C. G. M’Crie, *The Confessions of the Church of Scotland: Their Evolution in History* (Edinburgh: MacNiven & Wallace, 1907), 72.

beginning there were those who insisted that membership in the covenant of grace was limited to the elect, that Christ is the Head of the Covenant, and that the covenant is established and maintained unconditionally. These were precisely the distinguishing features of Herman Hoeksema's covenant doctrine. What this brief excursus indicates, once again, is that Hoeksema did not embrace and defend a novel view of the covenant. On the contrary, he stood on the shoulders of theologians who had gone before, theologians in the two main branches of the Reformation, theologians who understood the fundamental importance of a biblically consistent doctrine of the covenant of grace.

Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy

The Dutch Reformed Church of the early nineteenth century was a church on which liberalism and humanism had a stranglehold. The cardinal doctrines of the Reformed faith and of Christianity itself were being challenged in the schools, in the pulpits, and in the ecclesiastical press. In addition, the church was under the control of the government and the reorganization that William I had imposed on the Dutch Reformed Church in 1816. As a result of the reorganization, the church was ruled from the top down. The classes and synods were replaced by boards and deputies answerable to the king. The Church Order of Dort was set aside, subscription to the creeds suspended, and heretical doctrines, some of which were sung into the church by means of a mandatory new hymnal that replaced the singing of the Psalms, were introduced into the churches.

These were the factors that led to the secession movement of 1834 known as the *Afscheiding*, the leaders of which were Hendrik de Cock (1801-1842), Hendrik Scholte (1805-1868), Antonie Brummelkamp (1811-1888), Simon Van Velzen (1809-1896),

George F. Gezelle-Meerburg (1806-1855), and Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte (1811-1876). The *Afscheiding* was a reformation movement that aimed at restoring the Three Forms of Unity and the old Church Order of Dordt to their authoritative status in the Dutch churches.¹⁷⁷ In 1833 Hendrik de Cock published at his own expense a new edition of the Canons of Dordrecht. Arie Baars informs his readers that “[i]n the foreword, de Cock emphasized the importance of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God as confessed and defended in this creed, stating that only by a return to this truth, the deceptive spirit of free will and liberalism could be defeated and crushed.”¹⁷⁸

A good number of the founding fathers of the *Afscheiding* embraced the view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. This was the view to which Hendrik de Cock, Simon Van Velzen, and Anthony Brummelkamp were committed, as is widely recognized.¹⁷⁹ Not himself in sympathy with the view that membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect, Nelson Kloosterman says:

Within the Secession there was a stream of thought—the “Drentse richting”—whose view of the church and of the application of Christ’s work was strongly dominated by the doctrine of election. These folk defined the covenant of grace in

¹⁷⁷Works covering the history of the *Afscheiding* would include: D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 79ff.; John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 30ff.; Peter Y. De Jong and Nelson D. Kloosterman, ed., *The Reformation of 1834: Essays in Commemoration of the Act of Secession and Return* (Orange City: Pluim Publishing Inc., 1984); David J. Engelsma, ed., *Always Reforming: Continuation of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009), 45ff.; Arie Baars, *The Secession of 1834* (Mitchell, Ontario: Free Reformed Publications, 2011); C. Smits, *De Afscheiding van 1834*, 5 vols. (Dordrecht: J. P. Van Den Pol, 1971-1980); J. C. Rullmann, *De Afscheiding in de Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerk der Negentiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: W. Kirchner, 1916); G. Keizer, *De Afscheiding van 1834* (Amsterdam: J. H. Kok, 1934).

¹⁷⁸ Baars, *Secession of 1834*, 54.

¹⁷⁹ Confer, for example, E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946), 16ff.; C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1959); Anthony Andrew Hoekema, *The Covenant Theology of Herman Bavinck* (Clover: Full Bible Publications, 2007), 41ff.; Nelson D. Kloosterman, “The Doctrinal Significance of the Secession of 1834,” in *The Reformation of 1834* (Orange City: Pluim Publishing Inc., 1984), 35-41; David J. Engelsma, “The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession,” in *Always Reforming: Continuation of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation* (Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2009), 100-36.

terms of election; the **announcement** of the covenant took place in Paradise; the **application** of the covenant occurs in history, only within the elect; the **establishment** of the covenant is signified through the sacraments; but the **seal** of the covenant is only for the elect—for only the elect are “sanctified in Christ.”¹⁸⁰

Hendrik de Cock, founding father of the *Afscheiding*, taught that only the elect children of believers are included in the covenant of God. With respect to those in the Old Testament who were circumcised, but were unbelieving and lost, de Cock says that “the promise was not made to that child, but to Abraham, not with respect to every child head for head, but with respect to the elect children, to whom that reprobate child did not belong, Rom. 9:7, 8 and Gen. 17:10.”¹⁸¹ The promise of the covenant, “I will be your God and you shall be my people,” Genesis 17:7, includes “not all children head for head, but only the children of the promise, who alone are known to God.”¹⁸²

Anthony Brummelkamp intimated his view that only the elect belong to the covenant by his interpretation of the holiness of covenant children, as taught in I Corinthians 7:14. The language of this text is used in the first question asked of parents in the Reformed “Form for the Administration of Baptism,” and throughout the history of the Dutch Reformed churches has proved to be controversial. Brummelkamp makes clear that it was his view that not all baptized children are “sanctified in Christ,” but only the elect.

The word “holy” used by the apostle [in] I Cor. VII:14, concerning the children of believers, has the same meaning in this passage as it

¹⁸⁰ Kloosterman, *Reformation of 1834*, 38-9. In a footnote, Arie Baars calls attention to the two viewpoints on the matter of membership in the covenant that were taken within the *Afscheiding*: “There was a difference in emphasis in the Secession churches at this point—some strongly stressed the doctrine of election (the so-called *Drentse Richting*), while others preached with boldness the free offer of the gospel (the so-called *Gelderse Richting*)” (p. 62). Confer also C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, 12-23.

¹⁸¹ Hendrik de Cock, “*Korte Verklaring van den Kinderdoop*,” in *Vragen en Antwoorden, in Verzamelde Geschriften* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1986), 494. This book has not been translated; translations are mine.

¹⁸² De Cock, “*Korte Verklaring van den Kinderdoop*,” 496.

does at the beginning of the epistle [in] chapter 1:2 when the apostle addresses the congregation as sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, since the children of the congregation as well as the adults are included in the covenant of God, and the Lord has shed His blood as well for them as for the adults and has adopted them as His children and taken them into the covenant of grace (Bel. Conf., Art. 34 and the form of infant baptism). Giving this explanation, we must at the same time observe that we most vehemently deny that we are thereby saying: *that each and every child of the congregation head for head possesses or will possess a holiness worked in their heart by the Holy Spirit* (Dutch: *eene inklevende heiligheid*), as little as we would give such an explanation concerning every one of their parents, who show themselves to us as sanctified in Christ, although we treat them as such. For not because they are produced from the congregation according to the flesh are they all children of God, but the children of the promise are the holy seed (Rom. IX:7, 8). This holy seed, as well as all the other elect, is taken into the covenant of grace, in which covenant nothing is included that is unholy.¹⁸³

According to Smilde, Simon Van Velzen was “in agreement with de Cock and Brummelkamp,” in teaching that election controls membership in the covenant.¹⁸⁴ He says that “on the basis of Romans 9 Van Velzen held fast to the close connection between the covenant of grace and *election*.”¹⁸⁵ Van Velzen also applied the expression in the Baptism Form, “sanctified in Christ,” not to all the children who were baptized, but only to the elect children among them.¹⁸⁶ Van Velzen showed his commitment to the position that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect by his opposition to the contrary

¹⁸³ Translated and quoted by Engelsma in “The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession,” quoted originally in Helenius de Cock, Hendrik de Cock, *Eerste Afscheiden Predikant in Nederland Beschouwd in Leven en Werkzaamheid* (Delfzijl: Jan Haan, 1886), 569-70.

¹⁸⁴ Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd*, 32. David Engelsma notes that “Curiously, Canadian Reformed theologian Dr. Jelle Faber overlooked Van Velzen when he listed the representatives of the two contending covenant views in the churches of the Secession in the late nineteenth century. As a representative of the doctrine that election governs the covenant, Faber could only think of H. Joffers, whose personal reputation suffers among Reformed scholars (thanks in no small part to the “liberated” Reformed, who never fail to lament his narrow-mindedness and stubbornness) [cf. C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, p. 15 as an example], and who, in any case, does not belong to the fathers of the Secession. However, Faber could give a long list of Secession ministers who, according to Faber, taught a doctrine of the covenant from which election is strictly banished.” (“The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession,” 102-3.)

¹⁸⁵ Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd*, 31.

¹⁸⁶ Engelsma, “The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession,” 103.

doctrine that opens membership in the covenant to all baptized children. This was necessary because not all ministers in the Afscheiding churches “consistently maintain[ed] the views of the fathers of the Secession.”¹⁸⁷

Less than thirty years after the *Afscheiding* took place, controversy broke out in the churches over the issue of the relationship between election and the covenant. This controversy was sparked in large measure by two ministers in the *Christelijke Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk*, K. J. Pieters and J. R. Kreulen, who co-authored a book that was published in 1861. The book concerned infant baptism and the covenant and was entitled *De Kinderdoop volgens de Beginselen der Gereformeerde Kerk, in hare Gronden, Toedieningen en Praktijk. Op Nieuw Onderzocht, Beoordeeld en van Vele Schijnbare Zwarigheden Ontheven*.¹⁸⁸ About this book, Hoekema says, “These authors, in setting forth their doctrine of the covenant, do not take their point of departure in God’s decree. They do not wish to identify election with the covenant of grace. They say that when we consider baptism, we must let eternal election rest, and leave it aside.”¹⁸⁹ From this point of view, Pieters and Kreulen represent “opposition to the point of view ... of the fathers of the Secession.”¹⁹⁰

Hoekema’s evaluation is accurate, as Pieters and Kreulen make very plain. In the quotation above, Hoekema is undoubtedly referring to the following statement in their book.

¹⁸⁷ Hoekema, *Covenant Theology of Bavinck*, 42.

¹⁸⁸ K. J. Pieters and J. R. Kreulen, *De Kinderdoop volgens de Beginselen der Gereformeerde Kerk, in hare Gronden, Toedieningen en Praktijk. Op Nieuw Onderzocht, Beoordeeld en van Vele Schijnbare Zwarigheden Ontheven* (Franeker: T. Telenga, 1861). Unless otherwise specified, translation from the Dutch is mine. In 1856 Pieters and Kreulen had joined with Douwe Vander Werp, who would later become one of the first ministers in the Christian Reformed Church, in publishing a book vindicating the *Afscheiding* entitled *Is de Afscheiding in Nederland, van het Hervormd Kerkgenootschap, zooals het thans en sedert 1816 Bestaat, Uit God of Uit de Menschen?*

¹⁸⁹ Hoekema, *Covenant Theology of Bavinck*, 43.

¹⁹⁰ Hoekema, *Covenant Theology of Bavinck*, 44.

Let us then, with baptism, set aside and let rest eternal reprobation, that the promise of the covenant be imparted and offered according to the revealed counsel of God, and with reference to every baptized child in the visible church, without any exception.¹⁹¹

Thus, the explanation for failure of the covenant promise to be fulfilled “is absolutely not to be sought herein, as though the promises on God’s side were given to the one and not to the other; but the cause is to be found in this that the divine promises are not *unconditionally* given, signified, and sealed in baptism. . . .”¹⁹² In reference to the Baptism Form, Pieters and Kreulen state that “[i]t appears thus also that here on the whole there is no talk of an eternal covenant membership of the elect, in the Head, Jesus Christ, nor of a reception of the sanctified according to such a covenant membership.” “Sanctified in Christ” must not be understood as “elect in Christ.”¹⁹³ David Engelsma is correct in pointing out that Pieters and Kreulen deliberately universalize grace and make grace, at least God’s grace in the covenant, resistible.¹⁹⁴

The teaching of Pieters and Kreulen was challenged at the time that they were promoting their views in the *Afscheiding* churches. At the forefront of the opposition was one of the founding fathers, Simon Van Velzen. C. Veenhof says:

With the publication of their book, the two Friesen ministers—Pieters was minister at Franeker, Kruelen at Hallum—opposed Van Velzen concerning the doctrine of the covenant and baptism. That was no small matter. For Van Velzen was a respectable theologian, a keen polemicist, and an influential figure in the *Afscheiding* churches.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Pieters and Kreulen, *De Kinderdoop*, 48.

¹⁹² Pieters and Kruelen, *De Kinderdoop*, 48.

¹⁹³ Pieters and Kruelen, *De Kinderdoop*, 6.

¹⁹⁴ Engelsma, *Always Reforming*, 107-34.

¹⁹⁵ Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, 66.

Standing with Van Velzen was his younger colleague Hendrik Joffers. Joffers publicized his opposition to the covenant conception of Pieters and Kreulen in his book *De Kinderdoop, met zijn Grond and Vrucht*. Already in his “Short Notice to the Reader, Concerning the Purpose of the Author,” Joffers explained:

The reasons which have moved me to the writing of this work are: because there are so many in conflict with each other—and stand over against each other in differing viewpoints concerning baptism and its form in our church; and more so because in recent years a new viewpoint concerning baptism and its form is revealed in our church, namely, that all children at baptism are objectively in the covenant of grace, which destructive viewpoint seeks to rob parents of the comfort and assurance that they are able to have from the baptism of their children. And because this viewpoint has much influence in our church, the author desires through this work to oppose that destructive viewpoint, and if possible, to exterminate it.¹⁹⁶

Joffers defines the covenant as “[t]hat gracious arrangement of God with the elect sinner,” and goes on to insist that “[t]he covenant of grace is established by God with the elect, with them alone, and with them absolutely.”¹⁹⁷ And a bit later he contends: “However, this application [of the blessings of the covenant] the Lord works only in the elect. In the non-elect the covenant of grace is not realized, and they...never come into the covenant of grace.”¹⁹⁸ With regard to the Old Testament people of God, Joffers writes that “the non-elect Israelite, whether old or young, was not in the covenant of grace, neither *objectively* nor *subjectively*, and they did not also enter therein by circumcision, no less *objectively* as *subjectively*.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Hendrik Joffers, *De Kinderdoop, met zijn Grond en Vrucht* (Kampen: S. Van Velzen Jr., 1865),

3. Unless otherwise specified, translation from the Dutch is mine.

¹⁹⁷ Joffers, *De Kinderdoop*, 6.

¹⁹⁸ Joffers, *De Kinderdoop*, 16.

¹⁹⁹ Joffers, *De Kinderdoop*, 18.

Although the dispute over the doctrine of the covenant reached the broader assemblies of the *Christelijke Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk*, the controversy was never resolved synodically. And the result was that the two conflicting viewpoints remained in the denomination. Hoekema notes that although there was much opposition to the views of Pieters and Kreulen, there was no official condemnation of them.

The Synod of Franeker (1863) and the Synod of Amsterdam (1866) issued compromise formulations, which, while they did not condemn Pieters and Kreulen, refused to hail their conceptions as the most exact expression of the convictions of the Reformed Churches. Though these Synods did not adopt the “objective covenantal holiness” idea as the official doctrine of the church, neither did they really settle the dispute between these two divergent views of the significance of baptism.²⁰⁰

Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck

Standing in the rich Dutch Reformed covenant tradition are the two great Dutch Reformed theologians of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century: Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). Although Kuyper complained that he never heard mention of the covenant during his student days,²⁰¹ both men made much of the covenant in their mature theological thought. The importance of the covenant in Bavinck’s thinking is made plain by his frequently referenced maxim that “covenant is the essence of true religion.”²⁰²

There is convincing evidence that both Kuyper and Bavinck taught that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. Herman Hoeksema had great admiration for both men, in spite of the fact that he differed sharply with them on the

²⁰⁰ Hoekema, *Covenant Theology of Bavinck*, 44. Confer also Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop*, 49ff.

²⁰¹ Hoekema, *Covenant Theology of Bavinck*, 45.

²⁰² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ, Volume Three*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 2:569.

doctrine of common grace, and additionally with Kuyper over the issue of presupposed regeneration. In the development of his covenant conception, particularly in his insistence that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect, Hoeksema stood on the shoulders of these giants in the Dutch Reformed tradition.

Abraham Kuyper's view that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect is well-documented. The Liberated theologian Dr. J. Van Genderen states that

[f]or Kuyper the doctrine of election is the starting point for the doctrine of the covenant. He dismisses any suggestion of a contrast between covenant and election as a novelty thought out by recent theologians. The covenant of grace is intended exclusively for the elect. "Partners in that covenant are only those who have received grace or who are destined to receive it." The promises "are by no means offered conditionally at the risk of being rejected, but they are imparted to the elect children of the inheritance in light." True covenant children are only those and all those who have been ingrafted into Christ and are or will become partakers of eternal salvation. Those who are not elect only appear to be covenant children.²⁰³

The covenant of grace is quantitatively determined by election.²⁰⁴ Free Reformed theologian Carl Schouls says about Abraham Kuyper that

although there is not a succinct definition of his hand available [that is, written in his own hand], his recorded dogmatics [Kuyper's *Dictaten Dogmatiek*] make it clear that he saw the covenant established with the elect only. His covenant views, although not directly instrumental in the formation of the *Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland*, did mould those churches in a certain direction and were definitely one of the major causes for not all of the earlier (1834) Secession churches to go along with the Union of 1892. The fact that these views were ratified and made part of recognized church doctrine by the Synod of Utrecht in its "Conclusions" (1905), which conclusions were adopted by the CRC at its Synod of Kalamazoo (1908), gave further definition

²⁰³ J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995), 25. Van Genderen does not document his quotations from Kuyper.

²⁰⁴ J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election*, 26.

to the differences between various sections of the Reformed church world.²⁰⁵

It was because he taught that election determines membership in the covenant of grace that Kuyper also taught the doctrine that has become nearly synonymous with his name, the doctrine of presupposed regeneration.

Herman Bavinck also taught that membership in the covenant is determined by the decree of election.²⁰⁶ In his *Magnalia Dei*, translated into English as *Our Reasonable Faith*, Bavinck does not treat the doctrine of election separately, but incorporates his treatment of election into his chapter on “The Covenant of Grace.”²⁰⁷ In the chapter, Bavinck insists that election determines membership in the covenant of grace—exactly because it is a covenant *of grace*.

After all, when the covenant of grace is separated from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and becomes again a covenant of works. Election implies that God grants man freely and out of grace the salvation which man has forfeited and which he can never again achieve in his own strength. But if this salvation is not the sheer gift of grace but in some way depends upon the conduct of men, then the covenant of grace is converted into a covenant of works. Man must then satisfy some condition in order to inherit eternal life. In this, grace and works stand at opposite poles from each other and are mutually exclusive. If salvation is by grace it is no longer by works, or otherwise grace is no longer grace. And if it is by works, it is not by grace, or otherwise works are not works (Rom. 11:6). The Christian religion has this unique characteristic, that [it] is *the* religion of redemption, sheer grace, pure religion. But it can be recognized and maintained as such only if it is a free gift coming up out of the counsel of God alone. So far from election and the covenant of grace forming a contrast of opposites, the election is the basis and guarantee, the heart and core, of the

²⁰⁵ Carl A. Schouls, *The Covenant of Grace: Its Scriptural Origins and Development in Continental Reformed Theology* (Vineland: Ligonier Ministries of Canada, 1977), 7. Emphasis is the author’s.

²⁰⁶ In a recently published article by David Engelsma in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, the November 2012 issue, entitled “Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant,” Engelsma argues that Herman Bavinck taught a doctrine of the covenant governed by election.

²⁰⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), 266ff.

covenant of grace. And it is so indisputably important to cling to this close relationship because the least weakening of 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.²⁰⁸

Bavinck's treatment of the covenant of grace in his *Reformed Dogmatics* is found in volume three. In the section in which he treats the relationship between election and the covenant, Bavinck describes that relationship in this way: "The covenant of grace is the channel by which the stream of election flows toward eternity."²⁰⁹ Although election and the covenant of grace are to be distinguished, that distinction does not have to do with a difference in membership, for "the two are not so different that election is particular while the covenant of grace is universal, that the former denies free will and the latter teaches or assumes it, that the latter takes back what the former teaches."²¹⁰

In his book *De offerande des lofs*, translated into English as *The Sacrifice of Praise*, which contains a number of his published meditations, Bavinck teaches that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. He says that God "executes the election in the way of the covenant."²¹¹ And "[w]hile election only includes who shall infallibly inherit eternal salvation, the covenant of grace describes the way in which these elect are and shall be led to this, their destiny. Election and covenant are therefore not distinguished as a narrower and a wider circle, for they both consist of and include the same persons...."²¹²

²⁰⁸ Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 272-3.

²⁰⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:229.

²¹⁰ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:229.

²¹¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Sacrifice of Praise*, trans. John Dolfin (Grand Rapids: Louis Kregel, Publisher, 1922), 21.

²¹² Bavinck, *Sacrifice of Praise*, 27.

That Bavinck limits membership in the covenant to the elect is plain from the fact that he repeatedly refers to Christ as the Head of the Covenant. “The head of the covenant of grace is at the same time its mediator.”²¹³ And “the elect themselves...can as an organism only be gathered into one under Christ as their head in the way of the covenant.”²¹⁴ God “establishes His covenant organically with man, in Christ as Head...”²¹⁵ Inasmuch as Christ is the Head of the Covenant, only those who are in Christ—the elect—are members of the covenant.

The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant: The Early Years

In its origins, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was a house divided when it came to the doctrine of the covenant. An examination of her early history reveals that on the fundamental issue of the relationship between election and membership in the covenant, the CRC exhibited the same conflicting viewpoints that had manifested themselves in the churches of the *Afscheiding*. From the beginning there were those clergy and members who supported the view that the elect alone belong to God’s covenant of grace. But from the beginning there were also those who insisted that membership in God’s covenant extends to all the children of believing parents, elect and reprobate alike. Although these conflicting viewpoints co-existed for a good number of years, gradually a consensus emerged in favor of the position that God’s covenant was established not with the elect only, but with all who were baptized.

²¹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:229.

²¹⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:232. Additional references in this work to Christ as head of the covenant include pages 228, 229, 231, and 232.

²¹⁵ Bavinck, *Sacrifice of Praise*, 21. Additional references in this work to Christ as head of the covenant include two references on page 28.

Reflecting on the early history of the denomination, CRC theologian and historian

Dr. Henry Beets writes:

Many of the pioneers of the denomination accepted the stern type of Calvinism for which their respected leader, the Rev. S. Van Velzen, had stood in the Netherlands, with emphasis on God's sovereignty, rather than on His Fatherhood; on His decrees more than on the gospel offer. *That the Covenant of Grace embraced the elect and them only, was commonly believed. Only to the chosen ones grace was sealed in Baptism. Human spiritual inability was at times stressed in such a way as to destroy, in effect, human accountability. The border line of Fatalism was approached by some, if not actually crossed. But during the first decade of the period here described, the pendulum swung in an opposite direction—in fact it started to do so already a few years before 1880. Under the leadership of Professors Boer and Hemkes, and the Revs. L. J. Hulst and R. T. Kuiper, infra-lapsarism became the received doctrine, rather than the supra-lapsarism of Rev. Meinders. The Covenant of Grace as embracing believers and their children, like it was established with Abraham and his seed, became the popular conception rather than the one named above [“that the covenant of grace embraced the elect and them only”], held by the Rev. K. Vanden Bosch and others of his day.*²¹⁶

Dr. John Kromminga demonstrates the diversity of opinion regarding the doctrine of the covenant in his history of the CRC entitled *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy*. From the beginning there was widespread interest in the doctrine of the covenant, which was generally regarded as “a cornerstone of the theology of the Christian Reformed Church.” This doctrine “touched the spiritual life of the church members more directly and affected it more vitally” than any other doctrine.²¹⁷

Difference of opinion regarding the doctrine of the covenant manifested itself as early as 1875. In this year there appeared in the pages of *De Wachter*, the official Dutch language

²¹⁶ Henry Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1946), 89-90. Italics are mine and added for emphasis, RLC.

²¹⁷ John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 57.

periodical of the CRC, an article in the April 1 issue by a certain J. Van den Berge entitled “The Promises.” In the article Van den Berge took the position that “[all] children of covenant believers...on the strength of the covenant of God in which they are born...must be considered children of the Covenant.”²¹⁸ Van den Berge’s article “aroused speedy reaction, which took the form of letters to the editor.” Two of these letters, in which the authors took exception to Van den Berge’s position, were published. Both letter writers insisted that God’s covenant is with the elect children of believers alone, not with all the children of believers. Both insisted that “the sovereign election of God precluded such absolute assurance of the application of His promises to the children as Mr. Van den Berge had argued.”²¹⁹ Subsequently additional letters were published in *De Wachter* that clearly indicated the different answers that were being given in the CRC to the question, “Who are to be viewed as members of the covenant of grace?” The editor of *De Wachter*, who also served as Calvin Theological Seminary instructor, Prof. Gerrit E. Boer, allowed a free exchange of letters “because they reflected a considerable lack of unanimity on this doctrine within the bosom of the church, and a failure to understand the doctrine properly.” Kromminga notes that editor Boer then proceeded to explain the doctrine in substantially the same way as Van den Berge had in his original article.²²⁰

Nearly eight years later, in the February 8, 1883 issue of *De Wachter*, the Rev. E. L. Meinders contributed an article entitled “A Brief Word Concerning the Covenant Idea.” After citing various passages from the Old and New Testaments that contain the covenant promise, he adds that “these various citations...do not imply that thereby

²¹⁸ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 57.

²¹⁹ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 58.

²²⁰ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 58.

everyone who has received the Sacraments, person by person, has a seal of his personal, certain share in the benefits of the Covenant. In that sense, only the elect receive the seal.”²²¹ Then editor, Gerrit K. Hemkes, who was also “Docent” at Calvin Theological Seminary, responded to the view expressed by the Rev. Meinders with the judgment that Meinders’ view “differs in a considerable degree from the opinions of the Fathers of Dort.”²²² It is plain, therefore, that both the editor’s stand and the objections against it represented the same two viewpoints that had come to expression in the exchange that had taken place eight years earlier. Like his predecessor, editor Hemkes welcomed the free exchange of ideas because “[h]e recognized that the differences of opinion [on the doctrine of the covenant] were of long standing, and considered it high time that they were settled.”²²³ Disappointingly, not much discussion followed and there was no indication that the issue was even temporarily resolved. From time to time articles on the covenant of grace appeared in *De Wachter*. And a series of articles on the doctrine of the covenant appeared some years later in *De Gereformeerde Amerikaan* in its first volume year, which was 1897. But there was not very much open exchange of ideas between those who held to the two opposing views of membership in the covenant of grace, although the two viewpoints survived into the twentieth century. Dr. Abraham Kuyper, whose view that membership in the covenant extended only to the elect and spiritual seed of believers, continued to have his “adherents as well as his opponents in the Christian Reformed Church.”²²⁴

²²¹ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 59.

²²² Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 59.

²²³ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 59-60.

²²⁴ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 54.

“The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant” is the title of Dr. Anthony Hoekema's contribution to the book that was published as a tribute to Dr. John H. Kromminga on the occasion of his retirement as President of Calvin Theological Seminary, *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*.²²⁵ At the time, Hoekema was professor of systematic theology in Calvin Theological Seminary. In his chapter Hoekema examined Christian Reformed authors whose writings on the doctrine of the covenant were published from 1893 to 1974 (an eighty-year period in the history of the CRC). The list of authors included both CRC ministers and professors at Calvin Theological Seminary. Like Kromminga before him, Hoekema's research revealed the two conflicting viewpoints on the issue of membership in the covenant of grace. Hoekema cited nine CRC authors who addressed this issue. Of the nine, six rejected the view that the covenant of grace is limited in its membership to the elect, whereas three maintained that in at least some sense election controls membership in the covenant. The six who insisted that the covenant is wider than election were: Rev. Menno J. Bosma (1874-1912), Dr. William W. Heyns (1856-1933), Rev. Lammert J. Hulst (1825-1922), Dr. Foppe M. Ten Hoor (1855-1934), Dr. Louis Berkhof (1873-1957), and Rev. George W. Hylkema (1881-1942). The three who took the position that at least in some sense election determined covenant membership were: Dr. Gerhardus Vos (1862-1949), Rev. John Van Lonkhuyzen (1873-1942), and Dr. William Hendriksen (1900-1982).

Dr. Gerhardus Vos was Professor of Systematic and Exegetical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1888 to 1893. Although he is reported to have said at

²²⁵ Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant,” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*, ed. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 185-201.

one time in the course of his lectures on Dogmatics "that one cannot build a practically serviceable covenant conception on the basis of the supra position,"²²⁶ Vos held that in one sense the covenant was limited to the elect, while in another sense the covenant was broader than the elect. Although he mentions Vos' rectoral address, published under the title *De verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde theologie* ("The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology"), Hoekema opts to present Vos' covenant conception as set forth in his five-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek (Reformed Dogmatics)*. Hoekema reports on the way in which Vos settled the critical issue of the relationship between the doctrine of the covenant and election.

One of the problems involved in the doctrine of the covenant is the question of the relationship between membership in the covenant of grace and divine election (that is, God's choosing in Christ from eternity of those who are to be saved). In one sense membership in the covenant is restricted to the elect, since only the elect enjoy the fellowship with God which is the heart or essence of the covenant. In another sense, however, membership in the covenant of grace includes more than the elect, since many members of the covenant (through birth from believing parents) never arrive at true covenant fellowship.²²⁷

Hoekema continues his treatment of Vos' covenant conception by drawing the attention of his readers to a distinction that Dr. Vos made between the covenant as relationship ("the legal arrangement") and the covenant as fellowship ("the life of the covenant"). According to Vos, the former is the basis for the latter, and the latter is the fruit of the former.

We may think of the covenant first of all as a "relationship" (sometimes called a "legal relationship"), a bond between two parties.... The covenant in this sense exists even when nothing has been done to realize its goal. It then exists only as a relationship, as something which ought to be. Persons who live under such a

²²⁶ Kromminga, *Christian Reformed Church*, 54.

²²⁷ Hoekema, "CRC and the Covenant," 187-8.

bond are in the covenant, since they find themselves under the reciprocal stipulations of the covenant.

In the second place, we may think of the covenant as a fellowship. In this sense the covenant does not concern primarily what ought to be, but what actually is. Every covenant in the first sense looks forward to and is intended to become a covenant in this second sense: a “living fellowship,” or a “fellowship of life.”²²⁸

Although Hoekema makes only passing reference to Dr. Geerhardus Vos’ rectoral address given in 1891 before the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church (now Calvin Theological Seminary), *De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde theologie*, examination of its contents confirms Vos’ view of the relationship between covenant and election. The speech appears as a chapter in the collection of Vos’ shorter writings, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.²²⁹ In the speech Vos presents an overview of the history of the development of the doctrine of the covenant, making reference to the contributions of such men as: Zwingli, Bullinger, Jud, Snecanus, Olevianus, Ursinus, Vermigli, Cocceius, Roberts, Rollock, Blake, Ball, Polanus, Ames, Preston, Reynolds, Szegedin, Eglon, Cloppenburg, Musculus, Witsius, Voetius, Maastricht, and others.

Citations from many of these theologians demonstrate that from the beginning of its development among the Reformed, the prevailing view was that covenant and election were related in such a way that membership in the covenant was limited to the elect. A few references will make this clear. Citing his *Loci Communes*, Vos says that

Musculus distinguishes the general covenant made by God with the whole earth and its inhabitants, animals as well as men, from “the special and eternal covenant, which He deigned to make with the elect and believers.... This covenant is called ‘special’ because

²²⁸ Hoekema, “CRC and the Covenant,” 188.

²²⁹ Geerhardus Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), 234-67.

it is not relevant to all, but only to those who are elect and believers, viz., to Abraham as the father of believers and his seed.”²³⁰

A bit later Vos says that “Polanus is no different: ‘God made both covenants (old and new) only with the elect.’”²³¹ Peter Martyr Vermigli is in agreement:

We do not ascribe this (the enjoyment of the benefits of the covenant) to birth in the flesh as the principle and true cause, for our children’s salvation is only by the election and mercy of God, which often accompanies natural birth.... This is not out of necessity, for the promise is not generally applicable to the whole seed but only to that seed in which election converges....”

Vos quotes Vermigli’s response to those who objected to the Reformed doctrine of the covenant with the elect alone and the Reformed practice of baptizing all the children born to believing parents.

On that basis [of the covenant with the elect as the true “seed of saints”] we baptize them. We do not need to respond to those who object and ask whether the minister is deceived whether perhaps the infant is in truth no child of the promise, of divine election and mercy. Similar diatribes could be adduced with regard to adults, for we do not know whether they come deceptively, whether they truly believe, whether they are children of election or perdition....²³²

Both authors of the Heidelberg Catechism taught that the covenant of grace was established by God only with the elect, as is plain from Ursinus’ Larger Catechism (1562), which was written from the perspective of the doctrine of the covenant, and Olevianus’ treatise on the covenant entitled “On the Substance of the Covenant of Grace Between God and the Elect” (1585). It is because of his view that the covenant of grace includes only the elect, that Vos quotes Ursinus’ sharp warning against “anyone [who]

²³⁰ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 259.

²³¹ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 259.

²³² Vos, “Doctrines of Covenant,” 264.

considers the children of Christians to be pagans and non-Christians....”²³³ Vos concurs with Heidegger in maintaining “that there is a seed for the Lord among the seed of believers, for whom the covenantal promises hold without limitation.” At the same time it is true that “[n]ot to all the children of believers particularly, but only to the elect baptism seals regeneration and the total contents of spiritual grace.”²³⁴

Thus, from the beginning of their development of the doctrine of the covenant, Reformed theologians have taught that membership in the covenant of grace is circumscribed by election.

[It is] an essential feature of the [Reformed] covenantal outlook... that this outlook cannot function apart from the idea of election. The origin of the grace of God, the full benefits of which the Reformed believer enjoys by the covenant, always lies for him in election. If consciousness of the covenant is the right expression for the consciousness of faith in its Reformed form, then there must not only be a place in it for the idea of election, but it must be permeated by that idea. Otherwise its deepest, and most beautiful fragrance would be lacking.²³⁵

For the Reformed “the covenant presupposes acceptance and personal appropriation of its contents by faith on the basis of the electing grace of God, and the administration of the covenant starts from this presumption.”²³⁶ In the final analysis, “the essence of the covenant, its full realization, is found only in the true children of God, and therefore is no more extensive than election.”²³⁷

The fact that membership in the covenant is determined by election does not threaten the importance nor rule out the necessity of good works. Vos insists on the necessity of good works by the members of the covenant.

²³³ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 265.

²³⁴ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 264.

²³⁵ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 257.

²³⁶ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 258.

²³⁷ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 260.

There is a covenantal obligation in the state of grace. The new life obtained by Christ must be brought to action and development by having the stimulus of gratitude work on the renewed moral consciousness. This is the opposite of what was expected [by the opponents of this truth] from the strong emphasis on predestination.²³⁸

Good works performed out of gratitude—that is the fruit of electing (covenant) grace.

Precisely because election is the source of the covenant of grace, covenantal “participants are exempt from the demands of the law as the *condition* for eternal blessedness, but not from its demand as being normative for their [thankful] moral life.”²³⁹

The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant: The Twentieth Century

Dr. William Heyns was Professor of Practical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1902 to 1926, and was one of the professors under whom Herman Hoeksema studied. It was Heyns’ view of the covenant—the “Heynsian view,” as he referred to it—that Hoeksema rejected as “Arminianism injected into the covenant.” Heyns set forth his views on the covenant in his book *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*, which he later translated and published as *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*. In this book Heyns insists “[t]hat the covenant of which we read in [Genesis 17] was not a covenant ‘only with the elect’ is most evident. It was established with Abraham and his seed, his natural seed; every individual belonging to that seed....”²⁴⁰ He calls attention to the baptismal form, which speaks of baptism as including “an undoubted testimony...that we have an eternal covenant of grace with God.” According to Heyns God makes this testimony to every baptized child. From this language he concludes that “baptism can only be this [testimony] when it [is] regarded as such not for the elect only but, objectively, for all

²³⁸ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 260.

²³⁹ Vos, “Doctrine of Covenant,” 244. (Emphasis mine, RLC.)

²⁴⁰ Heyns, *Manual*, 142.

baptized children of believers.”²⁴¹ Heyns goes on to point out what, in his judgment, are “[v]ery grave consequences” when “the Covenant of Grace is in such a manner connected with election and placed under the control thereof, so that to be of the elect is regarded as an absolute requirement for being a covenant member....”²⁴² Included in these grave consequences, as Heyns perceives them, is the loss of the valid ground for the administration of baptism to the infants of believers, as well as the assurance of the salvation of covenant children dying in infancy.²⁴³

Throughout his ministry, Hoeksema expressed disagreement with the covenant doctrine of Heyns, engaging in extended polemics against his position especially in *Believers and Their Seed*, *Het Evangelie*, and his *Reformed Dogmatics*, as well as numerous articles that he wrote during his lengthy tenure as editor of the *Standard Bearer* and a considerable number of published pamphlets.

In agreement with his colleague in the seminary, Prof. Foppe M. Ten Hoor also taught that membership in the covenant extends beyond the elect and includes all the children of believers. Ten Hoor was one of Hoeksema’s seminary professors as well, in fact, his instructor in Reformed Dogmatics. In his *Compendium der Gereformeerde Dogmatiek; Een leidraad voor studenten in de Theologie*, Ten Hoor writes: “The covenant as an historical establishment of salvation includes more than the elect, for according to Holy Scripture the non-elect are also in the covenant.”²⁴⁴

²⁴¹ Heyns, *Manual*, 142.

²⁴² Heyns, *Manual*, 143.

²⁴³ Heyns, *Manual*, 143-5.

²⁴⁴ Foppe M. Ten Hoor, *Compendium der Gereformeerde Dogmatiek; Een leidraad voor studenten in de Theologie* (Holland: A. Ten Hoor, n.d.), 134-5. This book has not been translated. The translation is mine.

CRC minister Rev. John Van Lonkhuyzen dissented with the view of the two Calvin Seminary professors. Van Lonkhuyzen was an ardent disciple of Abraham Kuyper, and along with Kuyper “saw the covenant of grace as having been established with Christ as the Head of the elect, and with his people in him. The covenant of grace, he holds, is the means whereby God carries out his counsel of election; it is the stream through which he brings grace to his elect.”²⁴⁵ Van Lonkhuyzen, a contemporary of Herman Hoeksema, set forth his covenant conception in his book *Heilig Zaad*. In it he writes that “[t]here is but one covenant of grace, wherein lies all salvation. That is the covenant established with Jesus Christ as the Head of the elect, and with his people in Him.”²⁴⁶ For Van Lonkhuyzen the non-elect are false covenant members and hypocrites, but they are not in any sense members of the covenant of grace. Membership in the covenant is limited to the elect.²⁴⁷

Fellow CRC minister Rev. Lammert J. Hulst reacted strongly to Van Lonkhuyzen’s view, taking exception especially to his position that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect alone. In his book *Kentering in de Verbondsleer* Hulst presents several arguments against this position. First, he insists that the doctrine of the covenant of grace that is dominated by election was not a teaching found among the Reformers. Secondly, he argues that his viewpoint is contrary to Deuteronomy 29:29, “The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children....” Third, such a doctrine contradicts the teaching of Scripture concerning covenant-breakers, for if only the elect are members of the covenant

²⁴⁵ Hoekema, “CRC and the Covenant,” 191-2.

²⁴⁶ John Van Lonkhuyzen, *Heilig Zaad, Verhandelingen over den Heiligen Doop* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., 1916), 22. This book has not been translated. Translation of the Dutch is mine.

²⁴⁷ Van Lonkhuyzen, *Heilig Zaad*, 22.

of grace, he argues, there cannot be covenant-breakers. And finally, the view that only the elect are members of the covenant conflicts with the plain teaching of Scripture that places both Isaac and Ishmael, and both Jacob and Esau in the covenant.²⁴⁸

Dr. William Hendriksen and Dr. Louis Berkhof were contemporaries. In 1932 Hendriksen published a small book entitled *The Covenant of Grace*. Louis Berkhof was Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary at that time, serving in that capacity from 1926 to 1944. Both men defended the position that in one sense the covenant is with the elect alone, but in another sense it includes all the children of believers. Berkhof set forth his covenant conception in his two-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, which was later enlarged and republished in one volume under the title *Systematic Theology*. Berkhof “avers that Christ is not the head of the covenant of grace but is its Mediator,” thus deliberately rejecting the Christological title that identifies the position that membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect, for if Christ is the Head of the covenant, only those of whom he is the head, that is, the elect belong to the covenant of grace.²⁴⁹ Nevertheless, in his definition of the covenant of grace, Berkhof speaks of the covenant as “[t]hat gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner....”²⁵⁰ Hoekema observes that “[i]t would seem, therefore, that in his definition Berkhof is describing the covenant in its essential and most profound sense—the sense in which the covenant extends no further than those in whom the covenant blessings are fully realized. But he grants that the covenant may also

²⁴⁸ Lammert Jan Hulst, *Kentering in de Verbondsleer* (Holland: Holland Printing Company, 1917), 14ff.

²⁴⁹ Hoekema, “CRC and the Covenant,” 195.

²⁵⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 277.

be thought of in a wider sense.”²⁵¹ With this view of the covenant, Hendriksen is in basic agreement. He also maintains that in one sense the elect alone are included in the covenant, whereas in another sense it can be said that believers and their children, that is, *all* their children, are included in the covenant of grace.²⁵²

The last CRC minister whose position on the relationship between election and the covenant Hoekema cites is Rev. George W. Hylkema.²⁵³ His mimeographed study of the covenant of grace was published posthumously under the title *God’s Covenant with Man*. In his study, Hylkema expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that the doctrine of the covenant of grace had been developed under the dominating influence of the doctrine of predestination. This had contributed to a too narrow view of the calling of the members of the covenant and their responsibility as God’s partners to bring about His purpose with the creation. It is Hylkema’s view that God’s covenant includes more than only the elect.²⁵⁴

Surprising Omissions from Hoekema’s Survey

There are three rather surprising omissions to the list of CRC ministers and seminary professors whose views on the covenant and election were compiled by Hoekema: Dr. Henry Beets (1869-1947), Dr. R. B. Kuiper (1886-1966) and Dr. William Masselink, Sr. (1897-1973). All three were contemporaries of Herman Hoeksema and all three were within the historical parameters of Hoekema’s study. It is difficult to know the reason on account of which Hoekema may have excluded them from his study,

²⁵¹ Hoekema, “CRC and the Covenant,” 195.

²⁵² William Hendriksen, *The Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 60.

²⁵³ Although Hoekema references Andrew Kuyvenhoven and his booklet on the covenant entitled *Partnership*, published by the Board of Publications of the CRC in 1974, Kuyvenhoven apparently does not address the relationship between election and the covenant.

²⁵⁴ A summary of Hoekema’s analysis of Hylkema’s view, “CRC and the Covenant,” 197-8.

especially since all three made their views concerning the covenant of grace known in their published writings, writings which were easily accessible to Hoekema.

Dr. Henry Beets ministered in the CRC for over fifty years. Nearly half of that time he served as editor-in-chief of the *Banner*, the official magazine of the denomination. In fact, his editorship, which extended from 1903 to 1928 (twenty-five years), is the longest in the history of the *Banner*, with the exception of his successor, the Rev. H. J. Kuiper, who was editor-in-chief for twenty-eight years, from 1928 to 1956. Beets served as editor-in-chief of the *Banner* during the time that Herman Hoeksema was a contributing editor and writing for the “Our Doctrine” department of the magazine. All of Hoeksema’s articles would likely have been read by Beets before they appeared in the published issues of the *Banner*. Besides serving as editor-in-chief of the *Banner*, Beets also served, beginning in 1915, as the editor of *De Heidenwereld*, a missionary monthly that was published under the joint auspices of the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church. In 1920, Beets left the pastoral ministry in order to accept a synodical appointment to serve as the Secretary and Director of Missions of the Christian Reformed Church. In addition to his weekly editorials in the *Banner*, Beets also wrote several books, including *The Christian Reformed Church: Its Roots, History, Schools, and Mission Work*, *Johanna of Nigeria: The Life and Labors of Johanna Veenstra*, *The Compendium Explained*, *Toiling and Trusting: Fifty years of Mission Work of the Christian Reformed Church*, *The Reformed Confession Explained: A Popular Commentary and Textbook on the Belgic Confession*, *Navaholand and Zunitown: Christian Reformed Missions A.D. 1934*, and *The Man of Sorrows: A Series of Lenten Sermons Including Seven Sermons on the “Seven Words from the Cross.”*

Dr. Rienk Bouke Kuiper was educated at Calvin Theological Seminary, as well as Princeton Theological Seminary, where he studied under the great Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield. Besides serving several CRC pastorates, Kuiper taught at Westminster Theological Seminary on two different occasions, served as President of Calvin College, and came out of retirement in 1952 to serve as President of Calvin Theological Seminary. Kuiper's books include *As to Being Reformed, Not of the World, For Whom Did Christ Die? A Study of the Divine Design of the Atonement, God Centered Evangelism: A Presentation of the Scriptural Theology of Evangelism, While the Bridegroom Tarryes: Ten After-the-War Sermons on the Signs of the Times, To Be or Not to be Reformed: Whither the Christian Reformed Church?*, and *The Glorious Body of Christ*.

Dr. William Masselink, Sr. graduated from Grundy College (1918), earned a Th.M. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary (1919), attended the Chicago Divinity School in 1920, and then completed two doctorates, the first a Ph.D. degree from Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky (1921), and the second, a Th.D. degree from the Free University of Amsterdam (1937). In 1942, after serving the Second Christian Reformed Church in Englewood, Illinois for ten years, he joined the faculty of the Reformed Bible College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he taught until his retirement in 1963. Masselink is remembered as a key figure in the founding of what became known as Elim Christian School, a Chicago area Christian school that serves the mentally and physically challenged. The third and youngest child of Dr. Masselink and his wife Mary, their son Paul, was a special needs child. After persistent prodding, the Masselinks with a number of other parents of children with special needs, convinced the

Christian School Association of Chicago to take the first steps that led to the founding of the Chicago Christian School for Handicapped Children, which eventually became Elim Christian School. Masselink also wrote a number of books and pamphlets, including *Why Thousand Years?*, *Sermons of the Commandments*, *Common Grace and Christian Education*, *J. Gresham Machen: His Life and Defense of the Bible*, *General Revelation and Common Grace*, *I and the Children Thou Hast Given Me*, and *What is Wrong with the Lodge?*

Beets set forth his view of the covenant of grace in his *The Compendium Explained*. This book is an explanation of the abridgement (*Kort Begrip*) of the Heidelberg Catechism, the Compendium of the Christian Religion. At the time the Compendium was very popular and was used in catechetical classes among the Dutch Reformed in the Netherlands, as well as in North America (both the United States and Canada), in South Africa, and in the Dutch colonies scattered around the world. "In the all important work of indoctrinating the children and youth of the Churches of the Reformation, the Compendium has been a very helpful manual."²⁵⁵ Several explanations of the Compendium had been published in the Dutch language, but none existed in English until Beets' *The Compendium Explained* appeared in 1915. The book was well-received from the beginning and underwent several reprints and revisions. It was used especially by CRC ministers in catechizing the young people in their congregations, which was not only the design of the Compendium, but of *The Compendium Explained*,

²⁵⁵ Henry Beets, *The Compendium Explained: A Popular Exposition of the Abridgement of the Heidelberg Catechism, Known as the "Compendium of the Christian Religion," of the Reformed Churches of Holland, and of Holland Origin*. Third, revised edition. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., 1924), 7.

which contained an explanation of the questions and answers of the Compendium, but also included at the end of each chapter ten to twenty “Questions For Written Work.”

Beets treats the doctrine of the covenant in Chapter IV, “The Cause of our Ruin: The Fall. The Covenant of Works,” and in Chapter XIX, “The Covenant of Grace.” It is plain from his treatment that Beets does not consider the covenant to be established by God exclusively with the elect, at the very least the covenant is established with the elect in one sense, but with all the (physical) children of believers conditionally in another sense. He defines the covenant as “the gracious *agreement* between God and his people.”²⁵⁶ Already God’s covenant with Adam was a conditional covenant, inasmuch as that covenant contained a condition, “[t]he *condition* was perfect obedience to God.”²⁵⁷

With respect to the “two parties” who enter into covenant, Beets says:

There is *mutual agreement*, such as usually belongs to covenants, from God’s side expressed in his command and promise, and implied on the part of man in the fact of his perfect agreement with the will of God, as a perfect being, as well as in the reply of Eve to the serpent, and in Adam’s apology to God for his sin.²⁵⁸

In the chapter entitled “The Covenant of Grace,” Beets writes that “[t]he Covenant has truly been called ‘one-sided’ in the sense that the first party, God, proposes it according to his own good pleasure, and the only thing to do for the second party is to accept it on God’s own terms.” However, the covenant is also be viewed as two-sided inasmuch as “its full transaction requires believing acceptance, in the way of faith, from the side of its members.”²⁵⁹ Thus, in one sense the covenant is unconditional, while in another sense it is conditional. With regard to the Abrahamic covenant and Paul’s

²⁵⁶ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 246. Italics mine, RLC.

²⁵⁷ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 53. Italics the author’s.

²⁵⁸ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 54. Italics the author’s.

²⁵⁹ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 246.

statement in Romans 4:3 that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness,” Beets says:

This plainly shows that the great *promise* of the Covenant of Grace is: “I will be a God unto thee, and thy seed after thee,” and its *condition* faith in God, to be accompanied by a walk before God in harmony with the calling as members of the gracious Covenant given by a sovereign God of mercy.²⁶⁰

According to Beets, the covenant of grace is a conditional covenant. The promise of the covenant is conditioned on faith. Strictly speaking the covenant is not limited to the elect, but includes all the children of believers. “*Members of the Covenant of Grace* are all those who believe, like Abraham, and their seed.”²⁶¹ *All* their seed, *all* their children belong to the covenant. Beets appeals to various Scripture passages to support his view that all the seed of believers are included in the covenant of grace. In addition to Scripture, he appeals to the Prayer of Thanksgiving in the Baptism Form, which expresses thanksgiving to God that He has “forgiven us and our children all our sins,” has “received us through the Holy Spirit, as members of thine only begotten Son,” and has “adopted us to be thy children, and sealed and confirmed the same unto us by holy baptism.” Beets also appeals to the Reformed confessions, in particular Canons of Dordt, I, 17, which states “that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but **in virtue of the Covenant of Grace, in which they are included...**” and Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 74, which states that infants “as well as the adult, are included in the Covenant and Church of God.”²⁶² Beets only mentions that “[s]ome have spoken of Christ as *Head* of the Covenant of Grace, appealing for proofs to Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:4, 22, 23; 4:15, 16;

²⁶⁰ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 250.

²⁶¹ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 251. Italics is author's.

²⁶² Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 252ff.

5:23; I Cor. 12:12.”²⁶³ But this is the extent of his consideration of the fundamental truth that Christ is the Head of the Covenant—merely the mention that some hold to this view, without committing himself in any way to it or explicitly rejecting it.

Next we turn our consideration to the covenant view of Dr. William Masselink. In a set of mimeographed class-notes entitled *The Covenant of Grace and Infant Baptism*, Masselink addresses the question, “With Whom Is The Covenant Of Grace Made?” In his answer Masselink speaks of “Two Dangerous Extremes that Lead to Disastrous Results,” one of which is “That This Covenant Is Confined To The Elect Only.”

Concerning this extreme, Masselink says:

This is a dangerous view, because it fosters a spirit of self-complacency and ease, and may lead to self-delusion for time and eternity. Just because we are born of Christian parents and have received the covenant sign of baptism, is no guarantee that we shall ultimately be saved. We find many earnest warnings against this in the Scripture. “Woe unto them that are at ease in Zion” (Amos 8:1). This is a carnal ease, a fleshly security. This view is entirely without Scriptural basis. When the covenant was established in Gen. 17, it was certainly not limited to the elect. In Gen. 17 we read repeatedly of Ishmael as a covenant child. Ishmael was circumcised as an heir of the Covenant of Grace. In the Covenant of Grace there are the regenerate and the unregenerate. In this Covenant we also find the non-elect. The absolute and unmixed will not appear before the second coming of Christ...in Hos. 6:7 we read that the covenant was broken by Israel. They could never break the covenant if they were not in the covenant. There are also unbelievers in the covenant, Romans 3:2; 11:16.²⁶⁴

Clearly, Masselink rejects the view that the covenant of grace is established by God only with the elect, and not only rejects this view but regards it as a dangerous view “that may lead to self-delusion for time and for eternity.”

²⁶³ Beets, *Compendium Explained*, 255.

²⁶⁴ William Masselink, Sr., *The Covenant of Grace and Infant Baptism* (mimeographed class-notes, no publication information), 46-7.

In distinction from Beets and Masselink, Dr. R. B. Kuiper took the position that the covenant is restricted to the elect. In his book on ecclesiology, *The Glorious Body of Christ*—a book very favorably reviewed by Herman Hoeksema in the *Standard Bearer* at the time it was published—in a chapter entitled “God’s Friends,” Kuiper treats the doctrine of the covenant of grace.²⁶⁵ In a subsection, “Sovereign Friendship,” he writes:

Likewise it must not be supposed that Abraham sought God’s friendship. Contrariwise, God sovereignly offered him His friendship. Nor did God make this offer contingent on Abraham’s acceptance. Without consulting Abraham He made him His friend. Said God: “I will establish my covenant between me and thee,” and established it was.

He continues:

What is true of Abraham holds also of his seed. God did not inform Abraham that the covenant which He was establishing with him would be continued with his seed in case his seed should care to have it continued. From its very inception God included in the covenant Abraham’s seed as well as Abraham.

After these remarks, Kuiper introduces the doctrine of election into his discussion.

At this point election and the covenant of grace converge, and the latter complements the former. In election God was absolutely sovereign. “According to the good pleasure of his will” He foreordained individuals unto salvation (Ephesians 1:5). He loved Jacob and hated his twin-brother Esau (Romans 9:13). But that is not the whole truth. Without being bound in His choice by family relationships, He nevertheless chose to take them into account. By and large He elected unto eternal life certain persons together with their seed. And in doing that He was again completely sovereign.

The sovereign character of the divine friendship comes to forceful expression in the word employed in the Greek New Testament to designate the covenant of grace. It is not the word

²⁶⁵ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 330-8. In the February 1, 1959 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, in the rubric “As To Books,” Hoeksema reviews this book. Among other things, Hoeksema says, “This is a good book which I may heartily recommend to our readers. It presents the biblical and Reformed view of the Church of Christ. It criticizes in rather strong language the modern view of ecumenicity, in fact, it considers that view as contributory to the development and final realization of Antichrist, p. 48. It teaches that the true members of the Body of Christ are only the elect whom God has sovereignly chosen from before the foundation of the world, pp. 322ff. And it defends this view over against all forms of Arminianism.”

which is commonly used for a covenant or agreement made by men with equal rights. On the contrary, it specifically denotes a disposition made by one person in behalf of another. In some contexts it is properly translated *testament*. As one in his last will of his own free choice bequeaths his possessions to another, so God in the covenant of grace sovereignly bestows His friendship upon the elect.

Even in the response of those with whom God establishes his covenant, Kuiper underscores the sovereignty of God:

Never may it be forgotten that in the very nature of things a covenant has two parties. The covenant of grace is no exception. God alone established it, but in its operation God's people may not sit idly by. Friendship must needs be mutual. The covenant of grace places God's people under obligations of faith and obedience. Therefore Scripture says: "Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the friend of God" (James 2:23), and Jesus told His disciples: "Ye are my friends if ye do whatsoever I command you" (John 15:14). And yet, let no one think that this responsibility of God's people detracts aught from the sovereignty of the divine friendship. Rather, it stresses that sovereignty all the more. For it is of the sovereign grace of God that His own comply with the demands of the covenant. Both faith and obedience are gifts sovereignly imparted by the Holy Spirit to the elect. They work out their own salvation because God once worked, and ever keeps workings, in them both to will and to do of His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12, 13).²⁶⁶

Clearly, Kuiper limits membership in the covenant of grace to the elect. The elect and they alone belong to the covenant of grace.

This brings to a conclusion the summary of the development of the doctrine of the covenant in relation to the doctrine of election, from the time of the Reformation until Herman Hoeksema's day. What this summary indicates is that, beginning with Calvin,

²⁶⁶ Kuiper, *Glorious Body*, 331-32. In moving language, Kuiper concludes his treatment of "God's Friends" by describing the final realization of God's covenant: "And when at last [the believer] stands on the brink of the dread river of death, which he must needs pass over, his divine Friend takes him by the hand, and he whispers: 'I will fear no evil, for thou art with me' (Psalm 23:4). Presently he has crossed. Now he enters the house of the Lord, where he beholds his Friend face to face. That is his dwelling forever," *Glorious Body*, 338.

There have been those in the Reformed tradition who have taught that membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect, who have taught, in fact, that membership in the covenant is *determined* by God's sovereign decree of election. This was the position of Herman Hoeksema. It was a position that he maintained tenaciously and that he strove to work out consistently.

Greg Nichols begins his work on the covenant, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God's Covenants* with a survey of the teaching of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians with regard to the covenant of grace. He concludes his survey with a "Summary of the Classic Reformed Doctrine" of the covenant. Nichols judges that the classic Reformed doctrine "affirms that the covenant of grace is particular. It defines its partakers as Christ and God's elect (WLC 31)." Nichols cites Herman Hoeksema as an example of the classic Reformed position, noting Hoeksema's warning that "God's people...avoid 'injecting Arminianism'" into the covenant. Nichols also judges that Hoeksema "cogently observes that the organic continuity of the covenant pertains to the *spiritual seed* of believers," and thus not to all the physical descendants of believers.²⁶⁷

In light of this historical study, it is neither just, nor is it historically accurate, to make the charge that Herman Hoeksema was guilty of "Hyper-Calvinism" and "Hyper-Covenantism," thus banishing his covenant conception to Reformed orthodoxy's purgatory. For the fact is, as has been demonstrated, that Hoeksema's view that membership in the covenant of grace is limited to the elect and determined by election stands squarely within the Reformed tradition.

²⁶⁷ Nichols, *Covenant Theology*, 93-4. The emphasis is his.

Chapter 4

The Unconditional Covenant

Introduction: A Historical Survey of Hoeksema's Covenant Debates

Herman Hoeksema was convinced that membership in the covenant was limited to the elect. He was convinced that the doctrine of the covenant must be related consistently to the doctrine of sovereign predestination. On the basis of that conviction he also maintained that the covenant of grace was an unconditional covenant. God sovereignly establishes, maintains, and perfects the covenant. Membership in the covenant, the preservation of the members of the covenant in the enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant, and the realization with them and in them of the covenant promise do not depend at all on them. The covenant of grace is indeed a covenant of *grace*—an altogether gracious covenant. From the early years of his public ministry to the end of his life, Hoeksema championed the unconditional covenant of grace. Throughout that time he faced stiff opposition to his views and was forced to defend them over against opposing views of other Reformed theologians, most notably William Heyns and Klaas Schilder.¹ He never wavered from his position, not even when intense controversy engulfed the denomination that he helped to found and even when it appeared likely that the denomination might dissolve. To the very end of his life he steadfastly maintained that the covenant of grace is an unconditional covenant established by God with elect believers and their spiritual seed.

¹ Following the historical survey, the views of Heyns, Schilder, and other proponents of the conditional covenant will be discussed in separate sections of the chapter.

The main promise of the covenant is expressed in what is often referred to as the covenant formula: “I will be thy God and ye shall be my people.”² This promise is an unconditional promise. By way of promise, God proclaims to those with whom he is in covenant what he will do for them and what he will accomplish in them. The promise is God’s own word. The language of the promise is clearly unconditional and without qualification: “I *will be* thy God and ye *shall be* my people.” As a word of promise, it is God’s oath and pledge, which is the truth that the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews develops in Hebrews 7. The promise is *God’s* promise, oath, and pledge. God speaks the word, “I will be thy God and thou shalt be *my* people.” Inasmuch as the promise is God’s promise, it partakes of the character of God who speaks the promise. Partaking of God’s character, the promise is sovereign, unconditional, unchangeable, and efficacious. As God’s promise, the promise is dependent on no one and nothing outside of the promising God. The “I Am that I Am” is the God who goes on to say, “I will be thy God and thou shalt be my people.”

Early in his ministry and at the beginning of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Herman Hoeksema developed his unconditional covenant conception in a series of articles published in the *Standard Bearer* under the title *Geloovigen en hun zaad*, later translated and published as *Believers and Their Seed*. In this work Hoeksema gives a vigorous defense of the unconditional covenant as consistent with Scripture and the Reformed confessions. In addition, Hoeksema critically evaluates the conditional covenant conception of Prof. William Heyns, Professor of Practical

² Cf. Gen. 17:7, 8; Ex. 6:7; 29:45, 46; Lev. 26:12; 45; 2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; Ez. 11:20; 14:11; 34:30, 31; 36:28; 37:27; Hos. 1:9; 2:23; Zech. 8:8; 13:9; Rom. 9:25, 26; 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 8:10; Rev. 21:3.

Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, which was in his estimation “nothing else than the Old Pelagian error applied to the doctrine of the covenant.”³

Hoeksema further developed his unconditional covenant conception in a series of articles written in the *Standard Bearer* beginning in February of 1933 under the general title “*Het Evangelie of de Jongste Aanval op de Waarheid der Souvereine Genade*,” the translation of which is “The Gospel, or, The Most Recent Attack on the Truth of Sovereign Grace.” These articles were later gathered and published in a two-hundred-fifty-five-page book. In this book, Hoeksema was responding to a series of articles written by then emeritus Professor Heyns in *De Wachter*, the official Dutch language magazine of the CRC. In his articles, Heyns defended the view of the preaching of the gospel as a well-meaning offer of salvation to all who come under the preaching. Heyns maintained a twofold will of God: a will of God to save all men and a will of God to save only the elect. Hoeksema challenged Heyns’ view of the preaching of the gospel as an offer of salvation to all, including a desire of God to save all who come under the preaching of the gospel. He further challenged Heyns’ teaching that God promises salvation to all *on the condition of faith*, in other words, a universal, but conditional promise of salvation.

Besides this challenge early in his ministry, Hoeksema also confronted the conditional covenant view several years later in the controversy that took place in the 1950s within his own denomination. This controversy was precipitated by contact with the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)* and Dr. Klaas Schilder, the

³ Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, trans. Homer C. Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 14.

leading theologian of the Liberated.⁴ Almost from the outset of the controversy, Hoeksema took the position that Schilder's view was essentially the same as the view promoted many years earlier by Heyns, the view of a universal, but conditional covenant promise. And in response to the allegation of some at that time that those who were now condemning the conditional covenant view had formerly approved and defended it, Hoeksema wrote that

[i]n my dogmatics notes on Soteriology, which I taught twenty years ago...I wrote...to be rejected are the following modes of representation: b) As if faith were a condition on which God justifies us. There are no conditions on our part in the covenant of God. All the benefits of grace are bestowed upon us absolutely unconditionally. Never may the sentence, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved," be presented as condition and promise. Faith itself is an act of God and a benefit of grace bestowed upon us.⁵

Hoeksema also referred to his "elaborate criticism of the Heynsian conception of the gospel in the ninth volume of the *Standard Bearer*.... Throughout these articles I emphasize the truth that the promise of God is absolutely certain and unconditional, and is meant only for the heirs of the promise, that is, the elect."⁶

The conditional covenant conception of the Liberated was defended by a number of Protestant Reformed ministers, including Rev. Hubert De Wolf, who set forth and defended the theology of the conditional covenant in two sermons preached in the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Two different statements made by De Wolf in these two sermons were protested to and eventually condemned as

⁴ The English translation is "The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated)." I will refer to them throughout this chapter as the GKN(v), or simply as "the Liberated Churches" or "the Liberated."

⁵ Herman Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," *Standard Bearer* 26, no. 9 (February 1, 1950):196.

⁶ Hoeksema, "As to Conditions," 197. The reference to his "elaborate criticism of the Heynsian conception of the gospel in the ninth volume of the *Standard Bearer*" is a reference to the articles entitled *Het Evangelie of de Jongste Aanval op de Waarheid der Souvereine Genade*, that appeared in volume 9 of the *Standard Bearer*, beginning on p. 196.

heretical by Classis East of the PRCA. The condemnation of these statements and the demand that De Wolf apologize for them precipitated the split that took place in the PRCA in 1953.

A significant contributing factor in the split of 1953 was the adoption by the 1951 Synod of the PRCA of the document known as the Declaration of Principles. The Declaration, formulated by the Synod of 1950, defended the unconditional covenant as required by the Three Forms of Unity, and judged the conditional covenant view to be contrary to Scripture and the Reformed confessions. The position taken in the Declaration was nothing more than the official adoption by the denomination of the view that from the beginning of its history had been the accepted view, largely under the influence of the teaching of Herman Hoeksema. Rejection of the well-meant offer of the gospel, “the little point of the first point” of common grace adopted by the Synod of the CRC in 1924, included “by good and necessary consequence” rejection of the conditional covenant and its general but ineffectual promise to all who are baptized. Just as Hoeksema led the way in rejection of the well-meant gospel offer as fundamentally Arminian, so he also led the way in rejection of the conditional covenant view as “Arminianism injected into the covenant.”⁷

As the controversy over conditional theology took shape in the Protestant Reformed Churches in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Hoeksema wrote a number of significant series of editorials in the pages of the *Standard Bearer*. In 1945-46, Hoeksema wrote a series entitled “The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands.” This eighteen-part series was intended to introduce the members of the PRCA to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated), specifically to acquaint the members with the --

⁷ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 14.

conditional covenant conception held by the Liberated. In 1948-49 Hoeksema wrote a series of seven articles under the title “Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace.” In this series, Hoeksema commented on correspondence in a Dutch religious paper, *Eenigheid des Geloofs (Unity of Faith)*, between a minister in the GKN and a Liberated minister. These ministers were giving their reactions to a number of propositions regarding the covenant of grace. Hoeksema found occasion to disagree with both men, and took the opportunity to set forth his own, and what he considered to be the Protestant Reformed, view of the covenant of grace. This series was followed in 1949-50 by an eleven-part series entitled “As to Conditions,” a series that quite obviously focused on the nub of the issue that separated Hoeksema and the PRCA from Schilder and the Liberated, the issue of covenant conditionality. And in 1951-53 Hoeksema penned yet another series on the covenant of grace under the title “The Promise According to the Confessions.” In this series of ten editorials, Hoeksema examined the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity with regard to the promise of God. He demonstrated that the Reformed confessions support the view that God’s promise is unconditional, and sought to show that the confessions explicitly reject the contrary view, the teaching of a conditional covenant promise of God.

In all these series Hoeksema was not only polemical, engaging in refutation of the conditional covenant view, but he also sought to set forth the truth of the unconditional covenant of grace positively. He sought to instruct and to convince. He set forth the truth positively not only on the basis of the Word of God, but also on the basis of the Reformed confessions, which he regarded as authoritative in the life of Reformed churches. In Hoeksema’s judgment, to be Reformed was to subscribe to the Reformed

confessions. And Hoeksema was convinced that no one who considers himself to be a Reformed Christian, no Reformed officebearer, and no one who is bound by the Reformed standards could accept the teaching of a conditional covenant.

Advocate of a Conditional Covenant: William Heyns

The first advocate of a conditional covenant conception with whom Herman Hoeksema interacted was Prof. William Heyns, Professor of Practical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary from 1902 to 1926. Heyns set forth his conditional covenant view in his *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, published in 1926. The *Manual* had been published in Dutch ten years earlier under the title *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*. Heyns describes the covenant of grace as

that special institution for the salvation of man in which the Triune God binds Himself with a covenant and an oath to the believers and their seed, to be their God: their Father, their Redeemer, and their Sanctifier, and binds them to Himself to be His own and to serve Him, thus insuring their salvation, unless they break the Covenant by unbelief and disobedience, Gen. 17:7, Hebr. 3:18, 19.⁸

Initially, Heyns speaks of the covenant as unconditional.

That it is an unconditional Covenant is evident from the fact that the Lord established it not only with Abraham but also with his seed, with a seed that was still to be born, and even with that seed in its generations. If there were conditions to be fulfilled in order to participate in the Covenant, then, of course, it could not have been made with a still unborn seed.

And if it were a conditional Covenant, it would not be truly a Covenant of Grace, but a sort of Covenant of Works. To be actually a Covenant of Grace it must be a covenant in which full salvation is granted, merely of grace, and without conditions.⁹

⁸ William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1926), 125.

⁹ Heyns, *Manual*, 131. Heyns set forth his conditional covenant conception also in his catechetics manual, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Company, n.d.).

Whereupon Heyns proceeds to argue that the covenant of grace *is* conditional and that “we are accustomed to speak of conditions of the Covenant and mention faith and obedience...” as the conditions. The promise was *given* unconditionally, but the *fulfillment* of the promise is conditioned on faith and obedience. Just as “in the Covenant of Works the condition of obedience was not a condition for being taken into the Covenant, but for keeping the Covenant and for gaining its reward...[i]n the same way faith and obedience are conditions for keeping the Covenant of Grace and for inheriting the promise....”¹⁰ The covenant is initially established unconditionally: “Faith and obedience must not be regarded as conditions for becoming participants in the Covenant, for we are participants in it from the time of our birth.”¹¹ But although the covenant is initially unconditional, its continuance and fulfillment are conditional.

Heyns goes on to explain the contents of the conditional covenant promise using the language of the Reformed baptismal form. In terms of the form, God the Father incorporates all baptized children into the covenant: baptism signifies “that He doth make an eternal covenant of grace with us.” God the Son seals unto us that he “doth wash us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God.” Heyns takes the position that “all [these] terms express the actual bestowing of these benefits on those who are baptized.”¹² Thus the covenant and its benefits are “not for the elect only but, objectively, for all baptized children of believers.”¹³ In his *Handbook for*

¹⁰ Heyns, *Manual*, 131. Heyns’ correlation of the so-called covenant of works and the covenant of grace is ominous.

¹¹ Heyns, *Manual*, 131.

¹² Heyns, *Manual*, 136.

¹³ Heyns, *Manual*, 142.

Elders and Deacons Heyns maintains that “the children of Christians are [all] Covenant members.”¹⁴

“But with respect to the subjective application through the Holy Spirit it is said,” Heyns continues, “not that the Holy Spirit actually does that, or certainly shall do that, but that He will (is willing to) do that.” Thus, although God the Father and God the Son bear testimony in baptism to what they *have* done, the Holy Spirit bears testimony to what he is *willing* to do. The Holy Spirit testifies that he “is willing to make him [the one who is baptized] a participant thereof,” that is, a participant in the blessings of the covenant. He is *willing* to dwell in him, he is *willing* to sanctify him, and he is *willing* to apply unto him that which he has in Christ. But everything depends on the *willingness* of the one who is baptized.

It is in connection with the response of those who are baptized that Heyns teaches the doctrine of a subjective covenant grace, a subjective grace bestowed on all who are baptized, distinguishing them from all those who are unbaptized and enabling them to respond positively to the offer of grace.

It seems to us that there is Scriptural evidence unmistakably pointing to an actual bestowal on the Covenant members of a certain measure of subjective grace also, so that the subjective spiritual condition of Covenant children is different from that of children outside of the Covenant, heathen children, for instance. In John 15:1-7 the Lord presents Himself as the True Vine, of whom the Covenant members are the branches, and not only the fruitful but also the unfruitful branches are branches “in Him,” organically united to Him. Likewise in Rom. 11:17-21 the Covenant members are designated as branches which had “become partakers of the root and the fatness of the olive tree....” On the other hand these same passages show clearly that the grace referred to is not a grace which insures salvation. To be a branch in Christ is no guarantee against being taken away, Joh. 15:2; to be a branch partaking of the

¹⁴ William Heyns, *Handbook for Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1928), 192.

root and the fatness of the olive tree is no guarantee against being broken off, Rom. 11:21; and the vineyard of Is. 5 had brought forth wild grapes and was to be laid waste, Is. 5:5ff. Yet it is a grace which takes from the Covenant member all excuse for not bringing forth the desired fruit of the Covenant. If we accept that the granting of a larger measure of common grace belonged to the benefits of the Covenant with Noah, there is no reason why we should hesitate to accept that there is a granting of a certain subjective grace as one of the benefits of the Covenant with Abraham.¹⁵

Thus, in the covenant there is “a twofold imparting of grace.” “The first may be called an objective, and the second a subjective imparting. The first is granted to all Covenant members, even to all those who hear the Gospel, and the second is granted only to the elect.” What this comes down to is that all who receive the sacrament of baptism come into “objective possession” of the covenant promises. This objective possession “places the Covenant member in [such] a position that he has a claim to salvation, just as an heir has a claim on the heritage, but is not yet an actual possessor of it.” “Whether therefore that which is given to us will or will not really become ours depends upon our accepting or not accepting it...that those who are destined to grow up [in the covenant], have received a claim on salvation, the right to take it without money or price, so that if they take this wonderful gift of grace, they will become actual possessors and be saved, John 1:12; while those who neglect to take it will never become actual possessors and will be cast forth into outer darkness, Matt. 8:12; Luke 14:24.”¹⁶

Advocate of a Conditional Covenant: Klaas Schilder

The second advocate of conditional covenant theology with whom Herman Hoeksema interacted was Dr. Klaas Schilder (1890-1952). When Hoeksema and

¹⁵ Heyns, *Manual*, 136-7.

¹⁶ Heyns, *Manual*, 133-5.

Schilder first came into contact with each other, Schilder was Professor of Dogmatics at the Theological School of the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN). That was in the 1930s. Schilder made his first visit to the United States in 1939. Already at that time it was plain that Hoeksema and Schilder had significantly different views of the covenant of grace, but it was hoped that through discussion and interaction these difference could be resolved.

During World War II contact between Hoeksema and Schilder was interrupted. That interruption was due to Schilder's imprisonment during the first part of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. In August of 1940 Schilder was arrested by German security police because of his outspoken opposition to the National Socialist Movement and to the Nazis in *De Reformatie*, the weekly newspaper of which he was the editor. He was released in December of that same year with the warning to cease his writings. Later, fearing that he was about to be imprisoned again, Schilder went into hiding and remained in hiding until the end of the war.

During the time that Schilder was in hiding, the Synod of Sneek-Utrecht met in continued sessions, having first convened on August 29, 1939. On March 23, 1944 the synod suspended Schilder on the grounds of schism and refusal to abide by settled and binding decisions. On August 3, 1944 Schilder was deposed from his office as minister of the Word and dismissed from service in the Kampen Theological School of the GKN. His deposition was the climax of more than a decade of debate within the GKN over covenant, election, regeneration, and baptism—the same issues that had created tensions in the denomination after the union of the *Afscheiding* and *Doleantie* churches in 1892 and had resulted in the adoption of the Conclusions of Utrecht in 1905. Throughout the

1930s and early 1940s these issues resurfaced, and it was the intention of the Synod of Sneek-Utrecht, 1942-44, to resolve these doctrinal differences. The climax came with Schilder's deposition, the split within the GKN, and the formation, under the leadership especially of Schilder, S. Greijdanus, and B. Holwerda of a new denomination, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)*.¹⁷ After the formation of the new denomination, known popularly as "the Liberated," Dr. Schilder made his second visit to the United States in 1947. It was especially after this visit that a goodly number of ministers, officebearers, and members of the PRCA adopted Schilder's views and began to promote them throughout the denomination.

Schilder maintained a conditional covenant conception and adamantly opposed the view of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Hoeksema, and others that the covenant of grace is an unconditional covenant established by God with the elect alone. Schilder insisted that God gives a *promise* to infants of believers, not a presupposition. He said that "[t]he figure of an unconditional offer of salvation for the *elect* is fiction. It doesn't exist. There is...a dogma about the elect. But that which God announces as a promise, that which He promises, is not unconditional, but is...a conditional promise to the ones [to all] who are called."¹⁸ Schilder and his followers defined the promise as a *conditional*

¹⁷ The history of the doctrinal controversy, the actions of the Synod of Sneek-Utrecht, and the beginning of the *Vrijgemaakt* (Liberated) can be found in: W. W. J. Van Oene, "The Liberation of 1944," in *Inheritance Preserved: The Canadian Reformed Churches and Free Reformed Churches of Australia in Historical Perspective*, revised ed. (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1991): 35-48; Henry Vander Kam, "The Decade of the Thirties" and "The Decade of the Forties," in *Schilder: Preserver of the Faith* (New York: Vantage Press, 1996): 32-93; Douwe Van Dijk, *My Path to Liberation: Reflections on My Life in the Ministry of the Word of God* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 2004): 216-370; W. W. J. Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile: Our Reformed Heritage, 1795-1946* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1999): 289-367; H. Van Tongeren, *Mandate Maintained: The "Vrijmaking" in a Nutshell*, tr. Janette Veenema (Grand Rapids: American Reformed Church, 1965); J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston: Free Reformed Church of Australia, 1985): 53-89, 119-120.

¹⁸ Klaas Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger*, included in the same volume with *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*, by Jelle Faber (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996), 141.

promise. “Just because the Covenant is a mutual, two-sided obligation, the promise is, within the framework of this two-sided relation, accompanied by the threat. Both are ‘conditional,’ that means: the promise will be fulfilled if accepted by faith; the threat will be executed if the required obedience (faith included of course) is lacking.”¹⁹

As a conditional promise, the promise of God in baptism is not a promise addressed to the elect only, but is a promise that comes to everyone who is baptized:

[P]lease permit me to share the image which comes up now: He does not baptize via a loud speaker which proclaims a recorded general message over our heads. No, He comes down from the pulpit, stands right next to us and says, “Mary, name and surname;” “Cornelius, so and so, I baptize you.” He does not say something about a multitude which I in this life will never see, but He says something *to a specific person*, who has a name and family-name.²⁰

A bit later, Schilder affirms:

Therefore we read in the Form for Baptism that we receive a promise, but it goes together with a demand (two parts in each covenant) and thus the promise does not come to *unknown elect*, but to those *called* by name and surname [that is, all those who are baptized], who *are included* in the *covenant community*.²¹

All who are baptized “are *included* in the *covenant community*.” As those who are included in the covenant community, they are genuinely and fully members of the covenant. As members of the covenant, they enjoy all the benefits of the covenant, the benefits specified in the Form for Baptism: “the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ,” the Father’s “adopt[ing] us for his children and heirs,” the Son’s “wash[ing] us in his blood from all our sins,” and “incorporating us into the fellowship of his death and resurrection,” and the Holy Spirit’s assurance “that he will dwell in us, and sanctify us to

¹⁹ Schilder as quoted in J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (Launceston: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), 87. Kamphuis does not give the reference for the quotation from Schilder.

²⁰ Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding*, 142.

²¹ Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding*, 145.

be members of Christ, applying unto us that which we have in Christ.” This is what baptism “witnesseth and seaeth” unto every baptized child, according to Schilder.

When the Form for Baptism declares that, by baptism, God makes promises to us it clearly says, “He makes promises to *this by-name-mentioned-child*.” He can safely say this and also teach this to us, because the promise goes hand in hand with the demand. To *this child* is said, “You, child, under the condition (that is to say under emphasized assurance and stipulation) that your faith will be and must be the only way in which all this will happen (therefore you are called and *obliged* to this), the Father *will* provide you with all good and He *will* avert all evil or turn it to your benefit, the Spirit *will* avert all evil or turn it to your benefit, the Spirit *will* impart to you what we have in Christ.”²²

With regard to the view of Schilder and those who were in agreement with him,

W. W. J. Van Oene says:

The basic question is: Has the LORD God established His covenant with the believers and all their seed, or are only the elect truly and exclusively covenant children? Are the promises of the covenant given to all the children of believers or only to those among them who are chosen? And what is the nature of the promise of the covenant? Is it an unconditional assurance which evidently applies only to the elect, or is it a conditional promise given to all the children, which requires faith and repentance for its fulfillment?²³

Clearly Schilder’s answer to the “basic question” was that God establishes his covenant with all the children of believers, not the elect only. The promises of the covenant are made by God with them all. The covenant and its promise are conditional and are made conditionally with all the children of believers.

This was confirmed in a speech that Schilder delivered on August 31, 1944, entitled “The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant.” In the speech Schilder underscored his view that the covenant of grace is conditional, conditioned on the faith

²² Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding*, 145.

²³ W. W. J. Van Oene, *Patrimony Profile: Our Reformed Heritage Retraced, 1795-1946* (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1999), 307.

and obedience of the baptized member of the covenant. He says that “we do not want to speak of a covenant which can be called that because it touches only the elect.”²⁴ A bit later in the speech Schilder asks the rhetorical question:

When is any specific person ever addressed as an elect or chosen person? Never! The children are baptized with a formula in which the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit promise them something and demand something from them. For all the children there is only one Form for Baptism, with the same demand. There is no separate promise, either in spoken words or written with the ink of Scripture, which is only addressed to a specific person as elected. God does think about the elect; He thinks about them to their good and what He thinks is indeed bone and marrow of the covenant, His glorious promise. But what He says at baptism is not that He establishes His covenant with a specific person as an elect child. At baptism it is not said to a specific person that he is chosen or elect; this is only thought about in the election in God’s counsel.... That is why we must speak of hollowing out the covenant when people say that the actual covenant promises are not given to those who are not elect, but that the promise can really only be considered in connection with the elect.²⁵

Every covenant contains two parts, Schilder goes on to say in his speech. Those two parts are promise and demand, a demand that is conditional in form.

Yes, people say, but then man must again do something from his side. Isn’t man addressed with a condition? Because of this a report in the paper of a recently held speech spoke of a third view of covenant which has one condition that man must meet. I answer quietly that what I have just said is the continuing view of all Reformed theologians through the ages. [When they] speak in their dogmatics of conditions of the covenant by this they mean that the promise does not come to man if it is not accepted through faith. Now someone has said that actually you are speaking as a Remonstrant, because the Remonstrants teach that faith is the condition for salvation. No, no, we respond! You must watch out.... Yet we must speak of conditions: I will not receive it if I do not comply with the demand—faith is the first demand...He speaks to me with a concrete condition: immediately the demand

²⁴ Klaas Schilder, “The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant,” translated by T. van Laar: 8. SpindleWorks.com website. <http://www.spindleworks.com/library/schilder/covenant.htm>. (accessed March 14, 2013).

²⁵ Schilder, “The Main Points,” 9.

of faith is put forward. Promise and demand belong together; the two are one. Therefore God chooses the form of speaking with a condition....²⁶

In 1944 one of Schilder's colleagues at the Theological School of the GKN in Kampen, Dr. J. Ridderbos, published a booklet entitled *Kerkscheuring: Een woord over de crisis in de Gereformeerde Kerken*.²⁷ In early 1946 Schilder responded to Ridderbos with a booklet entitled *Looze Kalk*, the subtitle of which was *Een wederwoord over de (zedelijke) crisis in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, in which among other things he defended his conditional covenant theology.²⁸ It becomes clear early in the book that Schilder was writing out of the tension and division in the Dutch Reformed churches in the 1940s. It is also very plain that he harbored bitterness over his own and his colleagues' depositions from the GKN. Throughout the book he not only presents arguments in order to persuade his readers, but also along the way he often stoops to ridicule of his opponents. This is reflected in the very title of the book. The title of the book is taken from Ezekiel 13:10-15, which is a warning against those who daubed the wall of Jerusalem with untempered mortar, with the result that the wall fell to the ground. Schilder charges the GKN with daubing the many holes in the wall of the Dutch Reformed church with untempered mortar. The wall is weak and porous, but the Synod of the GKN has used theological terminology, philosophical distinctions, abstruse reasoning, scholastic argumentation, and erroneous interpretation of Scripture in order to hide the holes in its wall.²⁹

²⁶ Schilder, "The Main Points," 10-11.

²⁷ The English translation of Ridderbos' pamphlet is "Church Schism: A Word Concerning the Crisis in the Reformed Churches."

²⁸ The English translation of Schilder's booklet is "Untempered Mortar: A Contradictory Word Concerning the (Reasonable) Crisis in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands."

²⁹ Klaas Schilder, *Looze Kalk: Een wederwoord over de (zedelijke) crisis in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (Groningen: Erven A. De Jager, 1946), 39, and other places. This book has not been

Schilder insists that Reformed theologians throughout history and the *Vrijgemaakt* (Liberated) in the present speak of *voorwaarden* or conditions in the covenant. Not to do so would be un-Reformed in his judgment. But these *voorwaarden* are used by him in a Reformed sense, he claims, not an Arminian sense. He insists that the promise (*belofte*) and the demand (*eisch*) of the covenant apply to every baptized child of believers. The very first time the child comes to church, almighty God addresses that child in baptism with his promise and demand.³⁰ Every aspect of the promise obtains (*geldt*) for every child that is baptized. No amount of theologizing about election and reprobation, or lines of thought about an internal and external covenant, or distinctions about parts and parties in the covenant may be allowed to take the promise away from any child.³¹ According to Schilder we must take history and the historical moment that the promise is spoken to the child seriously. There must be no talk of eternal election in the moment of the administration of baptism, in which moment God speaks his promise to the baptized child. At baptism every baptized child is marked as a covenant member, who participates fully in the realities of the covenant.³² One must not begin with eternal predestination and God's eternal counsel when discussing the covenant promise, which is spoken in time. Predestination and all the distinctions that result from it only detract from time and history. The members of the covenant are "never addressed and thus never promised as elect.... An unconditional address of salvation to the elect does not exist."³³ We must

translated. I am indebted to Mr. Marvin Kamps for his invaluable assistance in helpful summary of certain sections of this book and translating with me other sections of the book.

³⁰ Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 72.

³¹ Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 65.

³² Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 51.

³³ Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 35.

leave election out of view, and then the promise and demand of the covenant apply to every baptized child.³⁴

In light of Schilder's emphatic insistence that election must be left out of view when talking about the covenant, in light of his insistence that there must be no mention of election when discussing the covenant promise, it is simply astonishing that Schilder's supporters can make the claim that "Schilder allows the doctrine of election to function fully in the doctrine of the covenant."³⁵ Function fully? On the contrary, Schilder is determined that election shall not function fully, shall not function *at all*, in fact, in relation to the covenant of grace. Election and covenant are two completely different topics that, so far as Schilder is concerned, have virtually nothing to do with each other.

Election and covenant have virtually nothing to do with each other because Schilder is insistent that the promise of the covenant is for *all* the children who are baptized. Time and time again he puts the words in bold-face type: "*Alle kinderen der geloovigen zijn kinderen des verbonds*," that is, "**All** children of believers are covenant children."³⁶ All the children are *truly* covenant children. It is not merely the case that they are all to be regarded as (*houdend voor*) covenant children. Rather, they are—they **all** are—covenant children. The theologians of the Liberation of 1944 insisted that all the children of believers are and are to be regarded as genuine covenant children: "Not only the elected children but Esau as well as Jacob" is included in the covenant.³⁷ "There is no

³⁴ Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 51.

³⁵ J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election*, tr. C. Pronk (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995), 97.

³⁶ Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 27, 32, 36, 39, 40, and other places.

³⁷ J. Faber, "The Liberation: The Doctrinal Aspect," in *The Liberation: Causes and Consequences (The Struggle in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands in the 1940s*, ed. Cornelis Van Dam (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 1995), 9.

distinction here between elect children and reprobate children.” What is spoken of the children in the covenant promise is “spoken of *all* the children of believers.”³⁸

In the course of the development of his conditional covenant conception, Schilder makes a significant concession. He makes that concession with regard to the children of believers who in the Old Testament died before the eighth day, that is, before they were circumcised. He makes the same concession in the New Testament with regard to those who die in their infancy, or at least before they are baptized. This is the situation addressed in the Canons of Dordt, Head I, Article 17: “Since we are to judge of the will of God from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they, together with the[ir] parents, are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children, whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy.”³⁹ The covenant child who dies before baptism, says Schilder, receives a different promise than the child who grows up and lives to maturity. The child who dies before baptism receives a “*bloote belofte*,” that is, a “naked promise,” a promise that is *unconditional*. A “*clothed belofte*” is a conditional promise. Suddenly, what is unconditional to the one because of election, becomes conditional to the other, the living, baptized, maturing covenant child.⁴⁰

This concession is telling. It indicates, of course, a serious weakness in the conditional covenant conception. That serious weakness is that no infant as an infant can

³⁸ Faber, “The Liberation: The Doctrinal Aspect,” 14.

³⁹ *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 159. More could be said about this article in the Canons and its support of the teaching that election determines membership in the covenant. The very fact that this article is in the “First Head of Doctrine: Of Divine Predestination” is testimony to this truth.

⁴⁰ Schilder, *Looze Kalk*, 21.

fulfill a condition, no matter what that condition may be. An infant simply does not have the capacity, the spiritual, psychological, intellectual capacity consciously to fulfill any condition. Even Schilder realized this. And if an infant cannot fulfill a covenant condition, that infant as an infant cannot be included in the (conditional) covenant. A conditional covenant in reality cannot possibly include infants. Infants as infants, therefore, cannot belong to a conditional covenant. This is a damning verdict against the conditional covenant view. How can such a view that excludes infants—all the infants, necessarily—hold claim to being Reformed? It cannot!

In addition to this significant concession, another matter of importance to note is that in the development of his conditional theology in *Looze Kalk*, Schilder did not view Romans 9:10-13 as normative for a proper understanding of the covenant. This, too, is of utmost significance. The covenant home of Isaac and Rebecca and God's revelation concerning their two sons must not inform the church's understanding of the covenant of grace. Rather, this history and what the apostle Paul teaches with regard to it is to be viewed as an isolated incident that has no bearing on the church's confession of covenant and predestination. With a wave of the hand, Schilder cavalierly dismisses Romans 9 as irrelevant to the discussion of the conditionality of the covenant.

S. A. Strauss, in his essay entitled "Schilder on the Covenant," takes note of Schilder's avoidance of the doctrine of election when discussing the covenant of grace. According to Strauss, in contrast to "[t]he popular view of Reformed dogmaticians... that one's point of departure should be the eternal decrees of God... Schilder preferred... to make his point of departure [in treating the doctrine of the covenant] the historical deeds

of God.”⁴¹ Strauss contends that “[i]nitially Schilder concurred with the generally accepted Reformed view that the covenant is unilateral (*monopleurisch*) in its origin and bilateral (*dipleurisch*) in its existence. Gradually, however, he placed more and more emphasis on the bilateral character of the covenant, just because [in his judgment] his opponents underestimated this aspect.”⁴² As a bilateral covenant, the covenant is conditional:

Schilder did not hesitate to speak about faith as a condition in the covenant. Of course, this does not mean *condition* in the Arminian sense of the word, as if man could earn something through his obedience, but *condition* in the Reformed sense. Faith, he writes, is indeed a gift of the God of the covenant, but it is, at the same time, also a condition set by Him. Evidently the concept *condition* can be interpreted in more than one sense. What Schilder had in mind with his “Reformed doctrine of conditions” is that God has decreed that salvation can never be realized without faith.... [I]n my baptism I receive a concrete address from God, a message that God proclaims to everyone who is baptized, personally: if you believe, you will be saved.⁴³

Writing in the same book of essays celebrating the teachings of Klaas Schilder, J.

M. Batteau, in his article entitled “Schilder on the Church,” says:

We may take the doctrine of the covenant, central in Schilder’s later ecclesiology, as a case in point. After the Synod of Dort, and perhaps as early as Olevianus, Reformed theology tended to think of God’s covenant as being made “substantially” with the elect. Kuyper and Bavinck had thus some legitimate historical grounds for calling their doctrine of the covenant, in which it is made substantially with the elect, *the* Reformed position. However, as Schilder develops his revised view of the covenant, he reaches back to Calvin for support in seeing the covenant as a *single* covenant of grace made with believers and all their children, as distinguished from eternal election by which only some, and not all, of such children will be saved.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Strauss, “Schilder on the Covenant,” 21.

⁴² Strauss, “Schilder on the Covenant,” 25.

⁴³ Strauss, “Schilder on the Covenant,” 28-9.

⁴⁴ J. M. Batteau, “Schilder on the Church,” in *Always Obedient*, 83.

Taking their lead from Schilder and his colleagues, the second generation of Liberated theologians continued to promote the doctrine of a conditional covenant of grace established with all the children of believers. Among them was Dr. J. Kamphuis, who studied under Schilder at Kampen, and later assumed the chair of dogmatics at the Theological School. Kamphuis contended that “[t]he promise is in itself an address from God’s side and therefore of a conditional character. God demands of us to believe His promise. He already did so when He addressed Adam in paradise. He continued to do so in Christ, in the Covenant of grace.”⁴⁵ Leaving out of view for the present the conflation and confusion of “condition” and “demand,” it is clear that Kamphuis maintains Schilder’s conditional covenant conception. The promise is “fundamentally, not an unconditional assurance of salvation addressed to the elect.”⁴⁶ Just as Schilder before him, Kamphuis insisted that making faith a condition is not the same as making faith a work of man. Faith as a condition in the covenant, he contended, is not faith in an Arminian sense.

Maintaining repentance and faith as conditions made by God in the Covenant does not add human performance as an essential element into the doctrine of the salvation to be obtained, but it aims to emphasize that it is God’s sovereign will to work salvation in this particular way. This road is *initiated* and even *built* by [God] Himself, and is trod by human feet only as a result of the regenerating work of His Spirit. Nevertheless in the meantime it remains a *real* road.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Kamphuis, *Everlasting Covenant*, 58.

⁴⁶ Kamphuis, *Everlasting Covenant*, 58.

⁴⁷ Kamphuis, *Everlasting Covenant*, 62.

So much is it the case that faith is a condition in the covenant, a real condition that man must fulfill, that “[i]n the Covenant [God] does not ask the question whether we belong to the number of the elect, but whether we accept Jesus Christ...”⁴⁸

Advocates of a Conditional Covenant Within the PRCA

A third front on which Hoeksema fought his battle against the conditional covenant was the homefront, the front within the Protestant Reformed Churches themselves. Hoeksema would certainly have agreed with the sentiment that the homefront is as vital in any war as the frontline. There were several factors that contributed to the controversy over conditional covenant theology that erupted in the PRCA. One factor was the growing influence that Dr. Klaas Schilder came to have over the members and clergy of the PRCA. This influence was heightened by the two visits that Schilder made to the United States on either side of the Second World War, the first in 1939 and the second in 1947. At the time of these visits, Schilder did not hide his disagreement with Hoeksema over the doctrine of the covenant, disagreement in particular over whether the covenant promise was conditional or unconditional.

Gradually the supporters of Schilder and his conditional covenant conception and the supporters of Hoeksema and his unconditional covenant conception became two well-defined groups within the denomination. Increasing dissatisfaction with Hoeksema’s influence in the churches added to the tension between the two factions. Support for Schilder was stronger in Classis West, and it was in the west that in June of 1944 a new magazine appeared within the denomination. *Concordia* soon became the voice of those within the PRCA who embraced and promoted conditional covenant theology. Rather

⁴⁸ Kamphuis, *Everlasting Covenant*, 22.

than to promote concord in the denomination, *Concordia* soon became an instrument for sowing seeds of division in the churches. Especially the Reverend Andrew Petter, “the most articulate defender of conditional theology,”⁴⁹ filled the issues of *Concordia* with his defense of conditions in the covenant and criticism of the contrary position, particularly when the contrary position became embodied in the Declaration of Principles. Soon after the Declaration was provisionally adopted, Petter wrote an entire series of articles in criticism of the document, undoubtedly in the hope that he would persuade delegates to the 1951 Synod of the PRCA to disapprove its final adoption.

Another factor that contributed to the controversy over the covenant in the PRCA was the large number of post-World War II immigrants that came to the United States and Canada, including thousands of immigrants from the Liberated Churches. Many in the PRCA were interested in the growth of the denomination through the addition of these immigrants. And the immigrants were encouraged by the leadership in the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands to join the PRCA, so long as they were allowed to retain their conditional covenant view. For the sake of receiving the immigrants, a number of leaders in the denomination promoted the view that the issue of an unconditional versus conditional covenant was a non-confessional matter. There was room, therefore, for both positions within the denomination.

That was the view promoted by the Reverends B. Kok and J. De Jong in a visit that these Protestant Reformed ministers paid to the Netherlands in the summer of 1949. Their visit was an unofficial visit; they were not sent by and did not represent the PRCA in any official capacity. Although they were not official representatives of the

⁴⁹ Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth's Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 278.

denomination, they met with the Committee for Foreign Correspondence of the Liberated Churches. Later it came to light that Kok and De Jong had informed the committee from the Liberated Churches that:

(1) Hoeksema's doctrine of election was by no means binding in the churches nor held by the majority of the people; (2) sympathy for the LC was widespread in the PRC; (3) there was ample room in the PRC for Liberated views of the covenant; (4) because such freedom existed in the PRC, the Liberated immigrants should be free to join these churches.⁵⁰

Encouraged by their leaders in the Netherlands, two groups of Liberated immigrants to Canada were organized as Protestant Reformed congregations, one in Hamilton, Ontario (April 19, 1949), and a second in Chatham, Ontario (March 23, 1950).

But not all shared the viewpoint that there was room in the PRCA for those who embraced the conditional covenant conception. One minister who took the contrary position was the Rev. Herman Veldman. Veldman strongly defended the position that the covenant of grace is unconditional and unilateral. In the providence of God, he became the first minister of the First Protestant Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. Because of his bold defense of the unconditional covenant and of the Declaration of Principles, Veldman and the lone elder in the consistory who supported him, Mr. Sam Reitsma, were unjustly deposed from office in January of 1951.⁵¹ Developments in the Hamilton congregation contributed in no small measure to bring the controversy over the doctrine of the covenant to a head in the PRCA.

⁵⁰ Hanks, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 288.

⁵¹ Veldman's own account of developments in the Hamilton congregation that culminated in his and elder S. Reitsma's removal from office can be found in the *Standard Bearer*, vol. 27, the February 15, 1951 issue, pages 231-4, and the March 1, 1951 issue, pages 251-4. Confer also Hanks, *For Thy Truth's Sake*, 301; and Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 173-4.

The conditional covenant controversy reached its climax in the aftermath of protests against the preaching of Rev. Hubert De Wolf. These protests were occasioned by two statements made by De Wolf in two separate sermons.⁵² At the time that he made the statements, De Wolf was a minister in the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan—a co-pastor in what was at the time one of the largest Reformed churches in North America. De Wolf, a known sympathizer of Schilder and his conditional covenant view, was one of three pastors in “First Church,” serving alongside of Hoeksema and Rev. Cornelius Hanko, both of whom were ardent defenders of the unconditional covenant of grace.

De Wolf’s first controversial statement was made in a sermon based on Luke 16:19-31, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and preached on April 15, 1951. Take note of the date: April 15, 1951. De Wolf preached his sermon between the time that the Declaration of Principles was provisionally adopted (Synod 1950) and the scheduled meeting of the synod that would consider permanent adoption of the Declaration (Synod 1951, scheduled to meet in the month of June). The statement, eventually condemned as heretical, was: “God promises every one of you that if you believe, you will be saved.” Note that his statement was not: “God promises everyone who believes that he will be saved.” That is not what De Wolf said, neither is it what he intended. As he explained in defense of his statement, De Wolf fully intended to teach that the promise of God is general, to “every one of you” who hears the preaching of the gospel, but conditional, “if

⁵² For the history connected to De Wolf’s sermons, consult: Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: The History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 173ff.; Herman Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake: A Doctrinal History of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 300-15; 376-381; and Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, *Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 26-33; 167-9.

you believe.” God on his part is willing to save everyone who hears the preaching of the gospel. His promise is made to them all, without exception. But whether the promise is realized is dependent on those to whom the promise comes.

De Wolf’s second statement was made in a sermon preached on September 14, 1952 and based on Matthew 18:3, “And [Jesus] said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” In the course of this sermon, De Wolf said, “Our act of conversion is a prerequisite to enter the kingdom of heaven.” De Wolf’s statement deliberately parallels the Liberated doctrine of a general and conditional promise, a covenant promise that is made to all who are baptized, the realization of which promise, however, depends on the child’s fulfillment of the condition of faith when later on the child grows up. Since conversion is a “prerequisite” to entering the kingdom of heaven, it is an act that man performs prior to his entering the kingdom, rather than the fruit of his being in the kingdom. In addition, since faith precedes conversion, rather than being the fruit of salvation and part of salvation, faith is made a condition *unto* salvation. This was the conditional covenant theology that De Wolf publicly endorsed in his statement from the pulpit of First Protestant Reformed Church.

Hoeksema’s Rejection of the Heynsian View of the Covenant

Hoeksema rejected the teaching of a conditional covenant, the teaching that the promise of God is for all who are baptized, dependent on their act of faith. In keeping with his conviction that membership in the covenant is limited to those who are the elect, Hoeksema taught that the covenant promise is for the elect and for the elect alone. As part of that promise, and in fulfillment of that promise, God works faith in the elect

members of the covenant. Faith is not a condition unto the covenant, but faith is the fruit of the covenant promise that is worked by God in the (genuine) members of the covenant. This was the position that Hoeksema defended already in the early years of his ministry. And this was the position he maintained with unwavering commitment, despite the challenges to that position, throughout his ministry.

Hoeksema did not reject conditional promises per se. He recognized the obvious, that men make conditional promises among themselves continually. A father may say to his son, "If you mow the lawn, I will take you fishing." A mother may say to her daughter, "If you clean your room, I will take you shopping." Or the conditional promise may be negative and threatening. The leader of one country may warn the leader of another country, "If you move your troops into the region, we will declare war on you." But although he recognized that men make conditional promises to other men, God's promise, in the nature of the case, is unconditional.

The promise of God is unconditional. In the covenant of God there are no conditions. Nor should we...ever allow the erroneous terminology that speaks of conditions in the covenant or of conditions for the promises of God to creep into our language. A conditional promise is a promise the fulfillment of which depends on certain terms that are to be met with by man. Such a promise on the part of God is impossible in the first place because man is never and can never be a party over against God, and secondly, because man is wholly incapable of himself to meet any conditions whatever that would either make him worthy of the promise or put him in a position to appropriate it.⁵³

Hoeksema's rejection of a conditional promise and a conditional covenant of grace rests on two fundamental premises. The first is the absolute sovereignty of God, and the second is the total depravity of man—the two great pillars in the temple of the

⁵³ Herman Hoeksema, "Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace," *Standard Bearer* 25 (May 15, 1949): 365.

Reformed faith. Because God is who he is and because man is who he is, the covenant of grace must be an unconditional covenant. Two of the most fundamental tenets of the Reformed faith, when applied to the doctrine of the covenant, yield an unconditional covenant of grace. Writing already in 1923, *while still a minister in the CRC*, Hoeksema wrote:

Therefore, men try to change God's grace into a work of man. They make all kinds of distinctions *and speak especially of conditions*. They speak of baptismal grace, preparatory grace, helping grace, *covenant grace*, and lastly now also of a common grace.... All these distinctions have actually no other purpose than to maintain something in the sinner over against God—a certain capability for natural or spiritual good, or a certain claim upon something in God, even though that be nothing more than God's compassion.⁵⁴

Hoeksema would have agreed with the early twentieth-century Presbyterian theologian Robert Alexander Webb, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary of Kentucky. Writing in his book *Christian Salvation*, he says:

Sinners are not contracting parties [in the covenant]. They are neither metaphysically nor morally capable of contracting with Almighty God. A holy being could enter into covenant relations with a sinless creature, but he could not enter into such an engagement with a creature whose moral depravity renders him incapable of complying with the very terms of such a covenant.⁵⁵

And a bit later he adds:

Sinful men need two things in order to become partakers of this covenant: (1) a legal right and (2) a conscious experience. The first is given by *election*, and the second by *conversion*. No man, and especially no sinful man, has a natural right—a right that inheres in and arises out of the very nature of the case—to be a

⁵⁴ Henry Danhof and Herman Hoeksema, *Sin and Grace*, tr. Cornelius Hanko (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 173. (Emphasis added.)

⁵⁵ Robert Alexander Webb, *Christian Salvation: Its Doctrine and Experience* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1985), 18.

beneficiary of this covenant. Such a legal title must be given him by grace. He must be appointed, or designated, an heir. This act of appointment Calvinistic soteriologists call *election*.⁵⁶

Hoeksema took issue, first of all, with Prof. William Heyns' conditional covenant conception.⁵⁷ Leaving out of view other differences regarding their respective doctrines of the covenant, Hoeksema considered this matter of the conditionality of the covenant an essential difference between himself and his former professor. Writing in *Believers and Their Seed*, published already in 1927, Hoeksema states that the covenant

promise, according to Heyns, is bestowed upon all without distinction who are born as seed of the covenant, born of believing parents. God very really declares in His covenant that He will save all the children of the covenant, that is, all the seed of the covenant in the natural sense. No, still more. Not only does the professor distinguish, but he also *separates* between the work of the Father, who establishes His everlasting covenant, and the work of the Son, who washes us in His blood, on the one hand, and the work of the Holy Spirit, who must make us partakers of salvation, on the other hand. The covenant can be established with us by the Father; we can be incorporated into Christ and washed by His blood; but that does not yet mean that we also become actual partakers of the benefits of the covenant. This last depends, according to Heyns, on something else; and that something else is that the covenant member is obligated also to accept in faith those benefits which were promised to him by oath in the covenant.⁵⁸

A bit later he writes:

This is exactly what Heyns wants to avoid [namely, making a distinction between the children of believers]. He wishes to describe the essence of the covenant in such a way that it includes all the children of believers, that this essence of the covenant indeed concerns all who are born in the sphere of the covenant in the historical sense. Hence, he also does not conceive of the promise of God as absolute and unconditional, but as relative and

⁵⁶ Webb, *Christian Salvation*, 19-20.

⁵⁷ Hoeksema studied under Prof. William Heyns at Calvin Theological Seminary. He is reported to have said at one point to his professor, "I do not know what the correct view of the covenant is, but I am sure it is not your view." Confer Gertrude Hoeksema, *Therefore Have I Spoken*, 58.

⁵⁸ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 11. Heyns makes use of the language of the Form for the Administration of Baptism in order to articulate his conditional covenant conception.

conditional. The essence of the covenant is the promise in the sense of a conditional offer. On his part, God promises, that is, He offers, to all who are born in the covenant that He will be their God, on condition that they also accept that promise of God and consent to the covenant. That conditional relationship in which God places Himself to the seed of the covenant, the realization of which depends on the consent and acceptance of the covenant member—that is for Heyns the essence of the covenant. Thus what we really have is a general offer, in the form of a pact, within the confines of the covenant in the historical sense. This, then, is also the so-called general covenant-grace.⁵⁹

In *Triple Knowledge*, Hoeksema's exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, in connection with Lord's Day 27, which deals with infant baptism, he devotes a chapter to "Different Views of the Covenant." In that chapter, Hoeksema calls attention to the view of Prof. William Heyns.

According to Prof. Heyns...[t]he promise is for all the children of believers, head for head, and soul for soul. God, in His part of the covenant, promises to all that He establishes His eternal covenant of grace with them.... On the basis of this promise all the children of believers that are baptized are *really* in the covenant. One does not deal in suppositions here, but in certainties. It is on the basis of this certainty that the promise is for all the children of believers that are baptized.... God bequeaths upon all the children of believers all the blessings of salvation. He gives them the *right by testament* to the riches of grace. And He solemnly seals this bequest, this testament, this objective right to the forgiveness of sin and eternal life, to them all by baptism.

But with this promise the command is inseparably connected: "Walk before me and be upright." The promise is conditional, and the condition connected with the promise is faith and repentance. All have the promise. On the part of God the bequest is made to all by promise. God swears to all in baptism that their names are written in His testament. But the blessings promised are applied only to those who accept the promise by faith.⁶⁰

As was mentioned earlier, an aspect of Heyns' covenant conception was his teaching of subjective covenantal grace, sufficient grace to all the members of the

⁵⁹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 16.

⁶⁰ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1971), 2:509-10.

covenant enabling them either to accept or reject the conditions of the covenant. Writes

Heyns:

It seems to us that there is Scriptural evidence unmistakably pointing to an actual bestowal on the Covenant members of a certain measure of subjective grace, also, so that the subjective spiritual condition of Covenant children is different from that of children outside of the Covenant, heathen children, for instance.⁶¹

“Heyns distinguished,” says Jelle Faber, “God’s common grace, God’s covenant grace and God’s saving grace.”⁶² It was Heyns’ view that God bestowed a special “covenant grace” on all who were outwardly members of his covenant of grace. In his book on catechetics, Heyns also taught his view of subjective covenantal grace. With appeal to John 15:5, Romans 11:17, Jeremiah 8:22, and Ezekiel 33:1,1 he says that

whether they want to or not, men will have to arrive at the conclusion that the Bible teaches us a bestowal of subjective grace to every covenant child, that is, to every child of believers, a grace sufficient to produce good fruits. To *each* child, not just to the elect alone, for it is more than clear that what is meant [in these passages] is not an un-forfeitable (un-losable) grace that proceeds from election.⁶³

And a bit later, he compares the Abrahamic covenant to the Noachic covenant and on the basis of the progress of revelation takes the position that the Abrahamic covenant is a richer, more glorious covenant than the Noachic covenant. The richer, more glorious character of the covenant with Abraham consists of the addition of subjective, covenant grace.

Why would it be unacceptable to have gone from that much more glorious covenant [in comparison to the covenant with Noah] sealed with Abraham to a bestowal of subjective grace on all the covenant

⁶¹ William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1926), 136.

⁶² Faber, “William Heyns,” 308.

⁶³ William Heyns, *Handboek Voor De Catechetiek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Company, n.d.), 144. Translation of the Dutch is mine.

children, which would be of such a quality, that the total incapacity of man by nature for the things that belong to the Spirit of God is removed to such an extent that there is with the covenant child [that is, every covenant child] a beginning [initial] capacity to fulfill the duties of the covenant.⁶⁴

Commenting on Heyns' view, Faber says that "[s]earching the Scriptures Heyns found many proofs of God's *covenant grace* distinct from [his] *saving grace*." These passages of Scripture indicate that "[p]arents, teachers, and ministers do not deal with 'unfit material,' with children who are completely blind and deaf spiritually." Thus "there is in the covenant child an initial or incipient capacity of covenantal nurture."⁶⁵ Says Faber, "Heyns went as far as speaking of such a subjective covenant grace for all members of the covenant that man's total incapacity by nature for the things that are of the Spirit of God is taken away, that there is in the covenant child an initial or incipient capacity of covenantal nurture."⁶⁶

It was this Heynsian view of the conditional covenant, with its teaching of subjective covenantal grace that Hoeksema rejected as "Arminianism injected into the covenant."⁶⁷ Referencing the apostle's affirmation in Romans 9:6, "Not as though the word [promise] of God hath taken none effect," Hoeksema says:

Was it thus, that God had promised something which He did not fulfill? Has His Word become of none effect? This would exactly be the case if the matter of God's covenant were as Heyns wants to present it. Then all would have obtained the promise; then all would have been children of the promise who were called the seed of Abraham according to the flesh. And then, surely, the Word of

⁶⁴ Heyns, *Handboek*, 145.

⁶⁵ Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996), 40-1.

⁶⁶ Faber, "William Heyns," 309.

⁶⁷ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 14. Besides what I mention of the criticism that Hoeksema offered of Heyns' view of subjective covenant grace for all the children born in the covenant enabling them to accept or reject the covenant promises, there is the glaring fault of teaching that God gives grace to reject grace, something unbiblical and unconfessional on the face of it.

God would have become of none effect, seeing that all did not obtain the fulfillment of the promise.⁶⁸

Thus, “[i]n that covenant [of grace] there are no offers and no conditions. The covenant is solely God’s. He establishes His covenant. He chooses and saves.”⁶⁹ To teach that our possession of all that is signified and sealed in baptism “depends upon our consent to and acceptance of God’s covenant” is a “course [by which] one comes into Arminian waters.”⁷⁰

Hoeksema was not alone in raising alarm over Heyns’ view of subjective covenant grace for all baptized children. A. C. De Jong—no supporter of Herman Hoeksema—says about Heyns’ view:

If we consider Heyns’ view of the well-meant offer against the background of his theory concerning subjective covenant grace we can understand the fact of Hoeksema’s reaction. It is difficult to see how such a view can be reconciled to the radical nature of the sinner’s depravity. Heyns’ view of an *innerlijke vatbaarheid* can scarcely be distinguished from the Remonstrant Limborch’s conception of some sinners as being very receptive to the working of saving grace. The objective-subjective schematism which plays such a large role in Heyns’ thinking leads to questionable constructions. Not the least important of these is that of the heir who has an objective right to the inheritance. It is no surprise that there were various reactions to some of the views of Heyns.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 27.

⁶⁹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 83.

⁷⁰ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 104. Frederic Platt in his article entitled “Arminianism,” in *Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908) says: “Theologically, Arminianism is a mediating system throughout. Its most characteristic feature is conditionalism” (p. 811). And a bit later, under the sub-heading “Underlying principles,” he says that “[t]he supreme principle of Arminianism is conditionalism” (p. 811). And still later: “...the old absolute unconditionalism [of Calvinism] became untenable.... On their cooperation with the Divine activity the results in salvation or reprobation depended. Thus the free will of man was regarded as conditioning the absolute will of God” (p. 812).

⁷¹ De Jong, *Well-Meant Gospel Offer*, 75f. In a footnote De Jong calls attention to Prof. S. Volbeda’s evaluation of and objections to his predecessor’s view of subjective covenant grace, voiced in his mimeographed class notes entitled *Catechetics*. These same mimeographed class notes and their expressed concerns over Heyns’ view are included by Mark J. Beach in his article entitled “The Promise of the Covenant and the Enigma of Unbelief: Reflections on Covenant Promise, with a Selection from Samuel Volbeda’s ‘Catechetics,’ Offering a Critique of William Heyns’ Doctrine of the Covenant and the Apostasy of Covenant Youth,” in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15 (2004):125-63.

In evaluating the well-meant gospel offer as it was referenced by the 1924 Synod of the CRC in connection with its adoption of the three points of common grace, Raymond Blacketer notes that “Reformed theology has generally been reticent to connect any common or universal grace with the process of salvation, particularly since the Remonstrant party, the Arminians, conceived of common grace as a factor that made all individuals capable or responding to the gospel call.” Besides the “numerous historical and logical errors in both the synodical report and [Louis] Berkhof’s [later] defense of the well-meant offer,” and the serious jump that the synod and Berkhof make,” which is the jump “from the concept of *call* to that of *offer*,” and “uncritically equat[ing] the serious call of Canon III/IV.8 with the well-meant offer,”⁷² still more serious in Blacketer’s judgment is the virtual concession that the teaching of a well-meant gospel offer makes to the Arminians. Writes Blacketer: “[H]ow can redemption be offered to those for whom it was neither intended nor actually obtained? Again, how can Christ be offered *to* the reprobate, when in fact he has not been offered *for* them?”⁷³ Blacketer ends his article by drawing the conclusion that “[t]he substantial error committed by the 1924 synod was its acceptance of the Arminian definition of the sincere call—a definition that is clearly rejected by Canons III/IV.8.”⁷⁴

The Arminian definition of the call of the gospel is contained in “The Opinions of the Remonstrants,” Article III/IV.8:

Whomever God calls to salvation, he calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely un hypocritical intention and will to save; nor do we assent to the opinion of those who hold that God calls

⁷² Raymond A. Blacketer, “The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (April 2000):40.

⁷³ Blacketer, “Three Points,” 57.

⁷⁴ Blacketer, “Three Points,” 64.

certain ones externally whom He does not will to call internally, that is, as truly converted, even before the grace of calling has been rejected⁷⁵

There is no fundamental difference between the Arminian view of the call of the gospel and the 1924 CRC synod's view of the well-meant offer of the gospel. Blacketer suggests that

[t]he concept of a well-meant offer of salvation may have its origin [in the CRC] in the teachings of William Heyns.... Heyns, who taught Practical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, proposed a view of the covenant and of divine grace that was clearly out of step with the Reformed confessions. Heyns spoke of a subjective covenant grace that, because it also imparted an intrinsic capacity (*innerlijke vatbaarheid*), was sufficient to bring covenant children to salvation if they made good use of the means of grace.⁷⁶

Hoeksema judged Heyns' covenant view with its general-but-conditional promise to be the application to baptism of the well-meant offer of the gospel. Indeed, Heyns himself identified the two. In a section of his *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* entitled "The Covenant Promise and the Gospel," he says that

According to the Reformed conception the promise of the Covenant and the promise of the Gospel are one and the same. The promise of the Covenant was the Gospel of the Old Testament, and the Gospel of the New Testament is the promise of the Covenant more fully revealed.... The offer of the Gospel, therefore, is an offer of all the benefits of the Covenant of Grace, and when the Gospel comes to the heathen they are offered all that is granted to the Covenant member.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Peter Y. DeJong, ed. *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 226-7.

⁷⁶ Blacketer, "Three Points," 64.

⁷⁷ Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 137.

The teaching of the well-meant offer of the gospel had been a part of the first point of common grace adopted by the 1924 Synod of the CRC.⁷⁸ Hoeksema's rejection of the teaching of common grace and the well-meant gospel offer, which rejection led to his expulsion from the CRC, compelled him also to oppose Heyns' teaching of a conditional covenant. Rejection of the one necessarily entailed rejection of the other.

In some circles they like to speak of a general covenant grace, a certain grace of which all covenant members, all those who are baptized become partakers. According to this view, taught for many years at Calvin College and Seminary by Heyns...all those who are baptized receive a certain subjective grace by which they are put in a position to accept or to reject God's covenant. Of course, this is pure and simple Pelagianism applied to the area of God's covenant in the world. This presentation is very dangerous, but it has nevertheless found wide acceptance in the Christian Reformed Church. According to it, the covenant is merely a promise to all. Those who are baptized must consent to that covenant, they must accept that promise, if they are to be truly members of God's covenant. And God bestows upon every covenant member sufficient grace either to accept or to reject that promise. Others do not go so far, but speak nevertheless of a certain general covenant grace in the same sense in which some also speak of a general, well-meant offer of salvation in the preaching of the gospel. That they are baptized, that they bear the sign and seal of the covenant on their forehead—the sign and seal in which the Lord God signifies and seals the benefits of the

⁷⁸ The First Point of Common Grace is: "Relative to the first point, which concerns the question of a favorable attitude of God towards humanity in general and not only towards the elect, synod declares it to be established according to Scripture and the Confessions, that, apart from the saving grace of God shown only to those that are the elect unto eternal life, there is also a certain favor or grace of God which he shows to his creatures in general." To support this point, the CRC Synod of 1924 offered two sorts of proof: proof from the confessions and proof from Scripture. Under the heading of proof from Scripture, the first proof consists of "Texts which speak of a well-meaning offer of salvation: Ezekiel 33:11 and Ezekiel 18:23." The synod simply assumed the teaching of the well-meant offer of the gospel, and appealed to it as proof that the grace of God extends beyond the elect. The teaching of the well-meant gospel offer came to be referred to in PR circles as "het puntje van het eerste punt," that is, "the little point of the first point." Hoeksema often said that the widespread assumption within the CRC in 1924 that the preaching of the gospel was a well-meant offer expressing the desire of God to save all who come under the preaching was due to the fact that a multitude of ministers serving in the CRC at the time had been trained by Heyns to view the promise of the covenant as a general promise to all who were baptized. "Heyns' presentation has for years been imbibed by many who now serve as ministers in the Christian Reformed denomination. If we keep this in mind, it is no longer surprising that the doctrine of a general offer of grace on God's part in the preaching of the gospel to all who hear that gospel not only could find a reception but also could be so readily officially adopted by the Synod of 1924 as the only pure Reformed presentation." *Believers and Their Seed*, p. 14.

covenant—that they may enjoy a covenant upbringing and may be under the good Word of God from earliest childhood, that some of them may even sit at the table of the covenant, in a word that with the church they may enjoy all the means of grace—this, then, is grace for all who live and grow up under the covenant. And in all this they may see the grace of God, God’s well-meant offer of His covenant.⁷⁹

With respect to this view, the Heynsian view of the covenant, Hoeksema says:

On the basis of Scripture and also on the basis of the Reformed line of thought, especially as the latter is set forth in our baptism form, we may, therefore, first of all, come to the negative conclusion that the presentation of Heyns is to be rejected. The essence of the covenant does not consist in a promise in the sense of a general offer. All the children of the flesh, or rather, all the outward children of the covenant, all “covenant members” [Dutch, *bondelingen*] do not receive a certain life. God does not promise salvation in Christ to every child of believers. No more than there is a general offer in the preaching to everyone who hears, no more is there such a general promise in God’s covenant. This presentation must be totally rooted out. It lies wholly in the line of Pelagius and Arminius.⁸⁰

And again, he writes:

It is simply not true that God in holy baptism promises and seals something to all who are baptized. No more than this is the case with His word, with the gospel of salvation, no more is it true with respect to the seals of God’s covenant. In holy baptism the Lord God, in the final analysis, seals something to no one else than to those who believe. For it is the *righteousness which is of faith* which is sealed and confirmed both in baptism and in the Lord’s Supper. The Lord does not lie—not even when the reprobate and ungodly receive the seal of the covenant! When the Lord affixes His seal upon this truth that He reckons faith for righteousness, then it is surely plain that such a seal is *particular* in its content and that no unbeliever can ever appeal to it.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 144-5.

⁸⁰ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 28.

⁸¹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 145.

“As to Conditions”: Hoeksema’s Rejection of the Liberated View of the Covenant

Just as he rejected the Heynsian view of the covenant, so did Herman Hoeksema reject also the view of the covenant advocated by Dr. Klaas Schilder and the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands. Hoeksema’s rejection of the Liberated view of the covenant included his rejection of the conditional covenant conception that was being promoted by many within the PRCA in the years leading up to the split that took place within the denomination in 1953.⁸²

It is true that there was an important difference between the covenant view of Heyns and that of Schilder. That difference concerned subjective covenantal grace. Schilder rejected Heyns’ view of subjective covenantal grace for every baptized child. Faber indicates that Schilder’s rejection of Heyns’ view of subjective grace may have been a concession to Hoeksema, although Faber is of the opinion that “[i]n his ecumenical zeal Schilder went too far when he wrote about the utterly wrong paths of Heyns and argued that Heyns, in his statements about ‘subjective Covenant-grace,’ sympathized with the Arminians.”⁸³

Despite this difference over subjective covenantal grace, Hoeksema judged the teaching of Heyns and that of Schilder and the Liberated Churches to be fundamentally the same: “the so-called Liberated Churches of the Netherlands favor the same covenant

⁸² Two things are worth noting in connection with Hoeksema’s rejection of Liberated covenant theology. First, Hoeksema often pointed out that both the advocates of the Liberated conditional covenant conception and the advocates of Kuyperian presupposed regeneration erred by making the grace of God in the covenant wider than the elect. The Liberated extended the covenant to include all the children of believers; the advocates of presupposed regeneration went on the “presumption” that all the children of believers were elect. Neither covenant conception was biblically informed by election. Second, Hoeksema also frequently pointed out that in reality there were no infants in the Liberated covenant. For according to the Liberated only they who accept the conditions of the covenant are included as members of the covenant. And clearly, infants and children cannot accept conditions.

⁸³ Faber, *American Secession Theologians*, 48.

idea [as Heyns] and have repeatedly appealed to him as a sort of authority on the subject.”⁸⁴ Hoeksema concluded his series of editorials entitled “The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands” in the June 15, 1946 issue of the *Standard Bearer* with the assessment that he had made several times in his series of editorials: “That we still less agree with the stand of the Liberated Churches on the covenant. In following Heyns they leave the track of Reformed truth.”⁸⁵ In the February 15, 1952 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, Hoeksema lamented:

Strange to say, Dr. Schilder since he was here the first time [1939], and therefore approximately during the war [World War II], changed his entire conception about the covenant and the promise and now embraces the Heynsian conception, except in as far as that subjective preparatory grace of Heyns is concerned. I first was in hopes that he really did not fully agree with the Liberated theology, but gradually it has become more and more evident that he is in complete agreement with it.

This implies that there is rather a fundamental difference between him and us as Protestant Reformed people.

When he speaks of the covenant, he does not mean the same thing as we do....

When he speaks of the promise, he means something quite different from what we mean by it. For him the promise is for all the children of the covenant, head for head and soul for soul, elect and reprobate, Jacob and Esau. For us the promise is only for the elect. For Schilder the promise is only an objective bequest. For us it includes all the blessings of salvation, as they are applied to the elect by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of promise. *For Schilder, therefore, the promise is necessarily conditional. For us, for all truly Protestant Reformed people, it is unconditional.*⁸⁶

The fact that the Liberated share the same basic conditional covenant conception with Heyns was made plain in the publication in 1997 of *Calvin's Books: Festschrift for Peter De Klerk*, the festschrift on the occasion of the seventieth birthday of the esteemed

⁸⁴ Hoeksema, *Triple Knowledge*, 2:508.

⁸⁵ Hoeksema, “The Liberated Churches in the Netherlands,” *Standard Bearer* 22 (June 15, 1946): 414.

⁸⁶ Hoeksema, “Promise and Prediction,” *Standard Bearer* 28 (February 15, 1952): 223. Emphasis is mine.

theological librarian of Calvin College and Seminary. In the book it fell to Liberated theologian Dr. Jelle Faber to contribute the chapter that celebrates the covenant theology of Prof. William Heyns: “William Heyns as Covenant Theologian.” Faber says that “Heyns was a real covenant theologian.”⁸⁷ He points out that “[i]n an elaborate review of a book by G. Ch. Aalders on the covenant,” the book entitled *Het Verbond Gods (The Covenant of God)*,

Schilder referred to American Secession theologians and especially Heyns whom he had rediscovered during his first journey to America in 1939.... [H]e quoted William Heyns extensively on the concept of God’s covenant of grace as established with the believers and *all* their children and therefore as numerically not identical to God’s election. Christ is not the Head of the covenant and the covenant of grace can be broken.⁸⁸

Faber adds that “Heyns’s publications provided Schilder with ammunition in the theological battle in which he saw his ecclesiastical and academic position endangered.” In all that Schilder published in defense of his covenant conception and in repudiation of the decisions adopted by the GKN Synod of Sneek-Utrecht 1939-1942, “[t]he impact of the covenant theology of William Heyns on Klaas Schilder is evident.”⁸⁹ “The Kampen dogmatician Klaas Schilder clearly demonstrated his kinship with the American covenant theologian William Heyns.”⁹⁰

Hoeksema repudiated the Liberated conception of the conditional covenant. As vehemently as he had rejected the view of Heyns some twenty-five years earlier, he rejected what he considered to be fundamentally a duplication of the same wrong view.

⁸⁷ J. Faber, “William Heyns as Covenant Theologian,” in *Calvin’s Books: Festschrift for Peter De Klerk*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser, Herman J. Selderhuis, and Willem van ‘t Spijker (Heerenveen: J.J. Groen en Zoon, 1997), 301.

⁸⁸ Faber, “William Heyns,” 312.

⁸⁹ Faber, “William Heyns,” 313.

⁹⁰ Faber, “William Heyns,” 314.

Although temporarily incapacitated by a severe stroke, he recovered and was instrumental in leading the denomination of which he was a founding father through the doctrinal crisis that erupted over conditional theology. He was adamant in his position that acceptance of conditional covenant theology would entail denial of the PRCA's right to separate existence as a denomination. For fundamentally the same doctrinal issues that were at stake in the common grace controversy of 1924, in particular the issue of the well-meant gospel offer, were at stake in the controversy over the conditionality of the covenant in 1953. The Liberated

say that all the children of the covenant are received unto grace in Christ, head for head and soul for soul, in the promise. And that promise is conditional. And so, just as Heyns would interpret this clause [in the Reformed Baptism Form], infants are received unto grace in Christ if in the future they will accept the obligations of the covenant. But if they do not accept these obligations, and if they reject this promise by their unbelief, they were nevertheless in their infancy received unto grace in Christ. God's promise is sincere, and sincere for all. If this is not common grace, and common grace too in the Arminian sense, applied to the sphere of the covenant, and if this is not the same as a well-meaning offer of grace on the part of God to all that are born under the historical dispensation of the covenant,—in other words, if this is not the same as the doctrine of the First Point [of common grace] with its proofs from the Confession and from the Scriptures, we cannot understand what they do mean.⁹¹

Use of “Condition” by Calvin and Others

Before consideration of Hoeksema's reasons for rejecting the teaching of the conditional covenant, it is necessary to make a couple of observations with regard to the use of the word “condition” by Calvin and others in line with Calvin. When Calvin, and others who agreed with Calvin, spoke of conditions they were only responding to the

⁹¹ Hoeksema, “The Promise According to the Confessions,” *Standard Bearer* 29 (November 1, 1952): 54.

conditional grammatical structures found in Scripture. A number of the covenants recorded in Scripture contain “If...then” clauses. For example, God says to the children of Israel in Exodus 19:5, “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine.” Negatively, the Lord warns Israel through Moses, “If thou wilt not observe to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that thou mayest fear this glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD; then the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance,” Deuteronomy 28:58, 59. And there are many other similar passages.

But does the presence of conditional grammatical structures in Scripture mean that God’s covenant is a conditional covenant? That is the question. Does the presence of conditional language in Scripture imply that the covenant is conditional? David Dean’s answer is an emphatic, “No.” His position is that “it is a logical *non sequitur*” to conclude that conditional language implies the theology of the conditional covenant, or that the covenant is breakable and nullifiable.⁹² He goes on to insist that God’s covenant “remains purely unilateral, although Abraham and his heirs in the line of the covenant are now called to obey the covenant regulations of circumcision and a godly walk before YHWH.”⁹³

It is worth observing in this connection that Hoeksema granted the possibility of a proper use of the term “condition.” He freely admitted having used the terms “condition”

⁹² David Andrew Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence: New Terminology and a Case Study in the Abrahamic Covenant,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 2 (June 2014): 290-3.

⁹³ Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence,” 302.

and “conditional” himself, as indeed an examination of his pre-1953 writings and published sermons indicates.⁹⁴ And he granted that Reformed writers in the past had spoken of conditions without falling prey to the errors inherent in conditional covenant theology. By “condition” they had often referred to the “necessary means, manner, or way” of salvation. The seventeenth-century Reformed theologian Francis Turretin (1623-1687) made use of the word “condition” in this sense. He spoke of faith as a “condition” in the sense of “instrumental cause” for the reception of the promises and admittance into the fellowship of the covenant.⁹⁵ And further: “Faith has the relation of a condition in this covenant...as it is the means and instrument of our union with Christ.”⁹⁶

The Westminster Larger Catechism speaks of faith as a condition in the sense of “necessary means” or “instrumental cause.” The 32nd Q. is: “How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?” The question specifically concerns God’s grace in the covenant of grace. The answer is: “The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and *requiring faith as the condition* to interest them in him....” The rest of the answer makes plain that faith is spoken of here as a condition in the sense of necessary means or instrument. For the answer goes on to teach that God “promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to

⁹⁴ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer* 26 (May 15, 1950): 364.

⁹⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, tr. George Musgrave Giger and ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1992-1996), 12.3.3; 2:185.

⁹⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 12.3.3; 2:187.

salvation.”⁹⁷ Two things are especially worth noticing in this part of the answer. First, this “faith as the condition to interest” in the Mediator is faith that the Holy Spirit works in “all God’s elect.” The elect alone are they in whom the Spirit works the condition of faith. Second, the Holy Spirit “enable[s] them unto all holy obedience...as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation.” The enabling work of the Holy Spirit spoken of in WLC, Q.A. 32 concerns “the way” of salvation.

This was also one way in which Herman Bavinck spoke of conditions. He says, for example:

Rebirth, faith, and conversion are the conditions for the following benefits of the covenant of grace: they are the only way by which humans can receive and enjoy the forgiveness the forgiveness of sins and adoption as children of God, peace and joy, sanctification and glorification.⁹⁸

As Bavinck himself explains, “[r]ebirth, faith, and conversion” are “conditions,” not as prerequisites that human beings must fulfill and on which are suspended the blessings of salvation, but they are “conditions” as “the only way by which humans can receive and enjoy” the blessings of salvation.

In this connection Herman Hanko writes:

The PRC are aware of the fact that the use of the word “condition” has not always been Arminian. As was shown at the time of the controversy in the early 1950s, many ministers, including the leaders of the denomination, had used the word repeatedly. The word was often used in the past as a way of making God’s work of salvation a particular and not a general work. The condition defined the objects of salvation. “If one believes, he will be saved.” That is, only believers will be saved. No one else can or ever will inherit salvation.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ The Larger Catechism, *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons Ltd., 1955), 57.

⁹⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:179.

⁹⁹ Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake*, 358.

Faith is the way, the God-ordained way of salvation, as well as the instrumental means of salvation. In this sense earlier Reformed and Presbyterian theologians spoke of conditions. At the same time, they always insisted that faith is the work and gift of God in the elect.

Additionally, with regard to the use of the word “condition” it is plain that earlier Reformed theologians used the word at times to refer to what the Reformed baptismal form calls “our part” in the covenant. By “our part” in the covenant the form is describing the calling of the members of the covenant, fulfilled out of love and gratitude and as a fruit of God’s covenant grace. That calling, which is the obligation and responsibility of those who belong to God’s covenant, some Reformed theologians in the past referred to when they spoke of the “conditions” of the covenant. They did not intend to introduce contingency into the will of God, that is, in God’s decrees, but rather referred to the “conditions” that God according to his sovereign will established within the covenant.

Calvin spoke of conditions in God’s covenant in this sense. Calvin insisted, of course, that God’s covenant was a covenant of grace, and that the members of the covenant have their place in the covenant and enjoy the benefits of the covenant, not on the basis of anything that they have done, but only on account of God’s free and sovereign grace. He affirmed “the gratuitous nature of the covenant of God...asserting it to have no other cause or origin than the gratuitous goodness of God.”¹⁰⁰ And if, indeed, “the cause or origin of this covenant is sought for, we must necessarily fall back upon the

¹⁰⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, tr. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 2:147.

Divine election.”¹⁰¹ In contrast to Schilder and the Liberated theologians, Calvin had no reservations about relating covenant and election. A bit later, commenting on the twenty-eighth verse of Psalm 89, “My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him,” Calvin says:

By placing *his mercy* first in order, and then adding *his covenant*, he points out the cause of this covenant, intimating in one word, that it is gratuitous, and that his grace is not only the foundation on which it rests, but also the cause why it is preserved inviolate.¹⁰²

Calvin once again underscores the gracious character of the covenant in his lecture on Jeremiah 31:3.

[W]hatever blessings God has at any time conferred on his ancient people, they ought to be ascribed to his gratuitous covenant, and that that covenant is eternal: and hence there is no doubt but that God is at this day prepared to secure the salvation of all the godly; for he remains ever the same, and never changes; and he would also have his fidelity and constancy to shine forth in the covenant which he has made with his church.¹⁰³

That God sovereignly and graciously establishes his covenant does not rule out, but calls forth the response of the members of the covenant. That response is at once their calling and the fruit of God’s grace in the covenant.

Indeed, in all covenants of his mercy the Lord requires of his servants in return uprightness and sanctity of life, lest his goodness be mocked or someone, puffed up with empty exultation on that account, bless his own soul, walking meanwhile in the wickedness of his own heart [Deut. 29:19]. Consequently, in this way he wills to keep in their duty those admitted to the fellowship of the covenant; nonetheless the covenant is at the outset drawn up as a free agreement, and perpetually remains such.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, tr. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1949), 3:421.

¹⁰² Calvin, *Psalms*, 3:437.

¹⁰³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, tr. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 4:58.

¹⁰⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill and tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.17.5; 1:808.

Commenting on God's word to Abraham in Genesis 17:9, "Thou shalt keep my covenant," Calvin says that "[w]e now consider how the covenant is rightly kept; namely, when the word precedes, and we embrace the sign [of the covenant, that is, the sacrament] as a testimony and pledge of grace; for as God binds himself to keep the promise given to us; so the consent of faith and of obedience is demanded from us."¹⁰⁵ In his very first sermon on the book of Deuteronomy, Calvin makes clear the place that the law of God has and ought to have in the life of the covenant people.

[T]he Law was not only given as a rule whereby to live well; but [it is] also grounded upon the covenant which God had made with Abraham and his offspring. And by virtue of that covenant, we are become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, as showeth Saint Paul. To seek our salvation, we must resort to the promise that was made to our father Abraham; and to be of the household of God's Church and members of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must be of Abraham's spiritual lineage. Hereby we see that this doctrine not only served till the coming of the Son of God, but also serveth still to our behalf, and shall do so still to the world's end. For it is a building that is founded upon the everlasting covenant, from whence as from the true fountain thereof, our salvation springeth as I said before.¹⁰⁶

John Hesselink's judgment is no doubt accurate that "Calvin's concept of the law cannot be rightly understood and appreciated unless it is recognized that the law is essentially the law of the covenant."¹⁰⁷

"Condition" in Reference to "Our Part" in the Covenant

There can be denying of the fact that Calvin often used the term "condition" and spoke even of a conditional covenant and conditional promises. "God made a covenant

¹⁰⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, tr. John King (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 1:452.

¹⁰⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Deuteronomy*, Facsimile of 1583 edition, tr. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 4.

¹⁰⁷ John Hesselink *Calvin's Concept of the Law*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series, Dikran Y. Hadidian, general editor (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1992), 87.

with Abraham on this condition—that he should walk perfectly with him: this is indeed true....”¹⁰⁸ Concerning the sin of Ishmael and Esau, he said that “[b]y their own defect and guilt...Ishmael, Esau, and the like were cut off from adoption. For the condition had been laid down that they should faithfully keep God’s covenant, which they faithlessly violated.”¹⁰⁹ In his comments on Psalm 132:12, God’s word to David, “If thy children will keep my covenant and my testimony that I shall teach them, their children shall sit upon thy throne for evermore,” Calvin says:

God, on the one hand, took vengeance upon the people for their ingratitude, so as to show that the terms of the covenant did not run conditionally to no purpose; while on the other, at the coming of Christ, there was a free performance of what had been freely promised.... The obedience which God demands is particularly stated to be the obedience of his covenant, to teach us that we must not serve him by human inventions, but confine ourselves within the prescription of his word.¹¹⁰

More than once in his sermons on Deuteronomy Calvin speaks of condition of the covenant. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 7:7-10, Calvin warns his hearers:

But yet for all that, look that ye walk warily, for the covenant is made with condition, that ye must be found and have a right meaning heart. Therefore think not but that your God can drive you out of his house and out of his Church, if he find you unworthy of the benefit which he that offered unto you. With that meaning doth Moses speak, when he putteth here a difference between them that love him and keep his commandments, and them that hate him.¹¹¹

Later in his series of sermons, preaching on Deuteronomy 27:11-15, Calvin again refers to conditions in the covenant.

[I]t remaineth that seeing God hath chosen us out, and set us apart for his service, we may not take liberty to all manner of

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Jeremiah*, 2:243.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.6; 2:929.

¹¹⁰ Calvin, *Psalms*, 5:156.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy* (Facsimile of 1583 edition), tr. Arthur Golding (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 317.

wickedness, but endeavor to obey him. For this cause we must be quickened up and pricked forward by his promises to serve him. Thus ye see how the conditional promises shall not be in vain in respect to us, namely, when they are referred unto the freely bestowed goodness of God, whereby he receiveth us although we be not worthy to be received....¹¹²

Towards the end of his series on the book of Deuteronomy, while preaching on Deuteronomy 32:20-22, Calvin again warned the members of his congregation:

God is more grievously displeased, when such as ought to honor and serve him, do forsake him than when it is done by silly ignorant unbelievers. And not without cause. For God adopteth us with this condition, that his glory should shine forth in us; and therefore must it not needs be a doubling of the offence, when we be a reproach to him? If a father be despised in his own house, even by those whom he hath begotten, will it not grieve him much worse, than if someone of his neighbors should misuse him? Seeing then that God hath vouchsafed to choose us to be his children, and hath done us the honor whereof we were not worthy: let us beware that our conversation be such as our faults and misdeeds may not provoke him, not the thing befall us which Moses addeth here, namely, that he will hide away his face.¹¹³

In a sermon based on Micah 2:8-11, the eighth verse of which reads, “Even of late my people is risen up as an enemy: ye pull off the robe with the garment from them that pass by securely as men averse from war,” Calvin said to his parishioners, “Therefore, let us learn to be obedient before God, to live in peace and amity, and God will shower us with his loving affection.” He continued: “Micah specifically says that the people of God, or those who were supposed to be so, were called to fulfill that condition.”¹¹⁴ God’s people are called to live obediently before God, in peace and friendship among themselves. Thus they “fulfill that condition” of God’s covenant.

¹¹² Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 923-4.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 1134.

¹¹⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, tr. and ed. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003), 112.

It ought to be clear that Calvin, and some theologians subsequent to Calvin, meant something quite different by “condition” than do those who advocate “conditional covenant theology.” While on the one hand, it is the case that at times Calvin’s use of the term “condition” can be questioned, on the other hand it ought to be clear that by “condition” Calvin is usually referring to the faith and obedience demanded from believers *in the covenant*, out of thankfulness for their place in the covenant. This is what Calvin often referred to as the “condition” of the covenant, and what the Reformed faith came to refer to as “our part in the covenant.” At the same time, by referring to the covenant as conditional, Calvin warned the members of the covenant against careless and profane living in the covenant. He is warned against the attitude that since one is a member of the covenant, he may safely live as he pleases—wickedly and worldly—all the while secure in his place in God’s covenant. Calvin is vehement in rejecting such an antinomian spirit.

Calvin himself makes plain that this was his concern in the warnings he issued with regard to the conditions of the covenant. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 14:21-23 Calvin says:

So then, let us mark well, that whereas God calleth us unto him, it is with this condition, that we should not live anymore after the manner of the ignorant wretches which wot not how to order their conversation: for they do follow their own beastly lusts.¹¹⁵

Note well what Calvin says: “That we should not live *anymore*....” God has called His people unto himself, sovereignly and efficaciously, altogether apart from their works and worth. Having called them unto His covenant, and made them members of His covenant, they “should not live anymore” after “their own beastly lusts.” In a later sermon on

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 563.

Deuteronomy 26:16-19, Calvin makes plain that by the conditions of the covenant he has in mind the godly living of those who are members of the covenant. The quotation speaks for itself:

For he has become our God upon this condition, that we also should be his people. And how shall we be his people? It is not by saying simply with our mouth, We are the people of God, for the veriest hypocrites will boast as much as that...but we must show by our deeds that we are the people of God, in that we obey him, listening to the voice of that shepherd which he has given unto us. When we live quietly under the guidance of our Lord Jesus Christ, then do we make certain proof that we keep the covenant of our God, without falsifying the faith which we promised unto him.¹¹⁶

And in the same sermon he says:

But there withal, let us also understand on what condition it is that [God] is so bound unto us. For when we be once bound after that fashion; if we make little reckoning of so inestimable a benefit, or if we received it and disdained it; think we that such contempt of ours shall remain unpunished. Woe be unto them therefore which have the knowledge of the Gospel, and unto whom God hath so communicated himself, if they be not answerable thereunto in true obedience, and humbleness, and submit not themselves unto him, and that in such sort, as they may shew by their deeds even in their whole lie, that they hold him for their God, and be also of his flock, that is to say, they be willing to give themselves fully and wholly unto him.¹¹⁷

In his sermon on Deuteronomy 7:11-15, Calvin reconciles God's free grace in the establishment and maintenance of the covenant and the use of conditional language.

Howbeit, to the intent that things may be the better understood, let us see first of all how it may agree, that God should bless us of his own free goodness, and make us to prosper: and yet notwithstanding match it with this condition, that we serve and honor him. For at the first sight there seemeth to be some disagreement in it. If God love us without respect of our deservings, there ought to be no iffes nor conditions in the matter. But he putteth them to it, as we see in this text: yea and all the whole Scripture is full of the same doctrine, namely that God

¹¹⁶ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 915.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 915.

recompenceth every man as they shall have feared him. How can it then be that God should both have respect to our life and also love us of his own free mercy? Let us mark well the words that Moses useth here. For he saith that God will perform his covenant and mercy according as he hath promised, if he be honored and feared. In saying that God will perform his covenant and mercy, he showeth us well that we must not begin at our own service, as though we would bring anything unto God to move him to love us. For whereupon is his covenant grounded? Even upon his mercy.¹¹⁸

Calvin was himself sensitive to the potential abuse of “conditional” language. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 7:11-15, he made this clear:

But as soon as the ignorant sort do hear of the word condition, they bear themselves in hand that God maketh some payment, and that when he showeth us any favor, he doth it in recompense of our desserts. And by that means the wretched Papists do blind themselves with vain presumption, and quite overthrow themselves by perking up after that fashion against God, and therefore they must at length be cast down in their own loftiness. For whereunto do they lean? Behold (say they) God telleth us that he will bless us if we serve him; therefore it followeth that all the promises which he maketh are conditional. Yea, but they have ill studied the Holy Scripture, when they cannot discern the promises as they be set down in the Law, and the things that God addeth to them to supply our default. For if we take the promises so rawely [that is, crudely]; that is, to wit, that God will bless none but them that serve him: we shall all of us be shut out from hope. For which of us serveth God with all his heart and with all his soul as God hath expressly commanded us?¹¹⁹

Calvin concludes his discussion of the abuse of the language of conditions with this warning:

Then let us not be so blind as the wretched papists, who when they hear that God addeth any condition to his promises, do by and by step up with their ergoes, and fall descanting of their own free will and deservings. But contrariwise, let us assure ourselves that when God speaketh to us in such order of speech as is shewed us here, although he come to us with gentleness: yet doth it nothing avail

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 321.

¹¹⁹ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 322.

us, until he use his own mere mercy to save us throughout, not for any dessert of ours, but because it pleaseth him so to do.¹²⁰

Summarizing Calvin's position, Andrew Woolsey says:

For Calvin, entry into the covenant proper had nothing to do with personal moral performance; it was entirely of grace, through the operation of the Spirit in the heart. Consequently, the faith and obedience by which Calvin said the covenant was kept were not meritorious human achievements, but rather evidences of life, of divine election, and personal participation in the covenant of grace....¹²¹

For Calvin there was no possibility that sinful man could fulfill any condition whatever and merit his place in God's covenant. For God's covenant of grace is an everlasting memorial to the condescending goodness of God.

We are poor worms of the earth: as touching our bodies we are vile carrions and rottenness: and as for our souls there is yet far greater wretchedness in them: and yet notwithstanding God entereth into covenant with us such as we are: and what equal match is there between us? Would an earthly king or some great Prince vouchsafe to come unto a swineherd or some other man of base degree, and say, we will covenant one with another.... A Prince (which yet is but a mortal creature) would think himself too much disgraced, if he should enter into covenant with such an abject...and yet our God vouchsafeth to stoop as low unto us.¹²²

Following Calvin's lead, a number of later Reformed and Presbyterian theologians assumed what was basically his view of conditions. Among them was Wolfgang Musculus, whose view Richard Muller describes:

The *foedus speciale* is conditional or bilateral, inasmuch as in all of its forms it is a mutual covenant under which the human participants have the responsibility to fulfill stipulations. The presence of stipulations ought not, however, to be understood as in any way compromising the utter graciousness of salvation since both the faith and the good works of believers rest on the grace of

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 322.

¹²¹ Andrew Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 316.

¹²² Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 912-3.

God: faith is a gift to the elect and good works arise out of the agency of the Holy Spirit.¹²³

In a similar way, while denying a conditional covenant, as we will see presently, Herman Bavinck nevertheless spoke of the covenant of grace “assum[ing] this demanding conditional form.” What he meant by “this demanding conditional form” he indicates when he immediately adds:

The purpose is to acknowledge humans in their capacity as rational and moral beings; still, though they are fallen, to treat them as having been created in God’s image; and also on this supremely important level, where it concerns their eternal weal and eternal woe, to hold them responsible and inexcusable; and, finally, to cause them to enter consciously and freely into this covenant and to break their covenant with sin.¹²⁴

Accompanying the present-day resurgence of interest in covenant is the renewed attention that is being paid to the matter of covenant conditionality. There are those, on the one hand, who want to preserve covenant conditionality and the language of conditionality in fundamentally the same sense as Calvin. Along with Calvin, they intend by “conditions” to refer to the calling of the members of the covenant within the covenant of grace. At the same time others, very likely taking into consideration the Arminian distortion of covenant, see the danger of teaching that the covenant is conditional. They sense, it seems, the inconsistency involved in maintaining that the covenant is a covenant of *grace*, while at the same time being a conditional covenant. And they go so far as to insist that the covenant is unconditional and unilateral.

¹²³ Richard Muller, “Divine Covenants, Absolute and Conditional: John Cameron and the Early Orthodox Development of Reformed Covenant Theology,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 18.

¹²⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:230.

Johannes G. Vos, in his commentary on the book of Genesis, when treating God's covenant with Abraham, underscores the unconditional and unilateral character of the covenant of grace. He says that we must

note the divine initiative in establishing the covenant. "I will establish my covenant between me and thee." God takes the initiative. Establishing the covenant is an act of God, not an act of man, nor an act of God and man jointly. This divine initiative is greatly obscured by the common idea that the covenant is essentially an agreement or contract or compact. This idea seems to lead naturally to the notion that God and man are, in some sense, in equality in establishing the covenant relationship. But no such idea can be admitted. God was the maker and establisher of this covenant; man was only the recipient of it. Abraham was not even consulted as to his likes or dislikes, his preferences or objections. The terms and provisions of the covenant were all stipulated by God. The covenant, therefore, proceeded from God's sovereignty.

Victor P. Hamilton, in his commentary on Genesis 17 makes remarks that are very similar to Vos.

It may be no accident that the word *eternal* is present in ch. 17 [of Genesis] but absent in ch. 15. Is it not interesting that in the chapter where at least four covenant stipulations are placed before Abraham—walk before me; be blameless; keep my covenant; circumcise yourselves—the covenant should be thrice described as an *eternal* one? This repetition of *eternal* emphasizes that God's covenant with Abraham has not suddenly shifted away from the unilateral emphasis of ch. 15 to a bilateral pact here in ch. 17. To be sure, God has expectations concerning Abraham's behavior, but these do not become grounds for the establishment and authentication of God's covenant with Abraham. Rather, the covenant remains a personal commitment by God in which he binds himself to this open-ended promise to Abraham.¹²⁵

David Dean is of the same mind. In his recent article in the *Journal of the Evangelical Society*, "Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence: New Terminology and a Case Study in the Abrahamic Covenant," Dean points out that "[t]he imposition of

¹²⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 465-6.

covenant regulations does not render a covenant bilateral.”¹²⁶ He points out that the promises spoken by God to Abraham are just that “promises, not potential rewards conditioned upon Abraham’s yet-to-be-demonstrated obedience.”¹²⁷ A bit later he insists that “[t]he covenant in view remains purely unilateral, although Abraham and his heirs in the line of the covenant are not called to obey the covenant regulations of circumcision and a godly walk before YHWH.”¹²⁸ And he adds that “no conditionality (in the sense that he can nullify the covenant) can remain, because God is faithful.”¹²⁹ “The claim that Genesis 22 [Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac] proves that the covenant is conditional and therefore subject to later nullification is flawed....”¹³⁰ Clearly, “[t]he Abrahamic covenant is founded upon the promise of God himself and does not depend upon the performance of its vassal party, Israel. Its fulfillment is as certain as the faithfulness of God himself, who does not lie.”¹³¹

Scott Hafemann concludes his analysis of the Old Testament covenantal structure by saying that

God, as the Sovereign Ruler (‘King’), always takes the first and decisive step in establishing the covenant relationship. As the ‘Divine Kinsman’ (‘Father’), God does so by invading history (and the human heart!) with his great deeds of deliverance and provision on behalf of his people (‘family’).... Brought about by divine initiative, characterized by benevolence and extended to those who are not by nature his own, these divine provisions are acts of unconditional grace. Hence, to speak of a covenant relationship is to speak first and foremost of God’s sovereign, self-determined election motivated by his love. Throughout redemptive history,

¹²⁶ David Andrew Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence: New Terminology and a Case Study in the Abrahamic Covenant,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 2 (June 2014): 287.

¹²⁷ Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence,” 295.

¹²⁸ Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence,” 302.

¹²⁹ Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence,” 304.

¹³⁰ Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence,” 304.

¹³¹ Dean, “Covenant, Conditionality, and Consequence,” 308.

God takes the initiative in establishing, swearing, keeping and remembering his covenant with his people.¹³²

In his book on the covenant, *The Bond of Love: God's Covenantal Relationship with His Church*, David McKay stresses the unilateral character of the covenant. He writes:

It is important to stress that a covenant is first and foremost a promise. When God makes a covenant, His is the initiative. He is the almighty, sovereign God who freely decides to enter into covenant. His covenant with His people is not in any sense an agreement between equals. God and man do not sit down together to hammer out the terms of their relationship, like management and trade union negotiators. God decrees the terms: it is for man to accept them humbly and willingly. This asymmetry between the parties to the covenant must always be kept in mind, especially in relation to salvation.¹³³

In a sub-section entitled "Condition(s)," McKay continues: "Without in any way compromising the sovereignty of God, Scripture also stresses the necessity of a response of faith and obedience on the part of those who are to be His covenant partners." He then refers to the example of Abraham to whom God gave commandment, "Walk before me, and be thou perfect" (Genesis 17:1). It is in connection with "the necessity of a response of faith and obedience" that McKay goes on to speak of "the conditions of the covenant."

This is how it must always be in the covenant. The divine initiative must be met by the response of faith, which inevitably issues in obedience if it is genuine. As Ephesians 2:8-9 demonstrates, even such faith is the gift of God. By the gracious working of the Holy Spirit, God enables His people to fulfill the conditions of the covenant. All the glory, therefore, belongs to God.¹³⁴

¹³² Scott J. Hafemann, "The Covenant Relationship," in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 35-6.

¹³³ David McKay, *The Bond of Love: God's Covenantal Relationship with His Church* (Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), 12.

¹³⁴ McKay, *Bond of Love*, 12-13.

At this point, McKay acknowledges that “[s]ome Reformed writers have balked at the use of the term ‘condition’ in relation to the covenant, believing that it compromises the sovereignty of God and opens a door to the unbiblical ideas of human merit as a contribution to salvation.” Although he does not mention Herman Hoeksema by name, as his bibliography makes plain, he has read Hoeksema and is aware of his position. McKay notes that “[m]ost covenant theologians...have recognized that it is proper to speak of a condition attached to the covenant if the term is carefully and biblically defined in the way that we have sought to do. To speak of a ‘condition’ in this sense does not compromise God’s sovereignty or grace in any way.” McKay cites Scripture passages in which “God commands His people to keep the covenant that He has made with them, by their obedience to His commandments.”¹³⁵ It is clear that by the conditions of the covenant, McKay is referring to the calling of believers in the covenant.

The Reformed Presbyterian pastor/theologian Gordon J. Keddie treats the matter of covenant conditions in a similar way. He insists on what he refers to as the “unilateral divine initiative” in establishing the covenant.

It follows that when God makes a covenant, it has to be *unilateral*. It is one-sided. It is monergistic—that is, initiated by Him. It originates with the Triune God and, therefore, involves what the *Westminster Confession* calls “voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” The essence of God’s covenant is not that of a compact or agreement with terms negotiated by the parties, but rather the disposition of God’s sovereign purpose from all eternity to save a people who would be brought into covenant with Him. It comes from one side—His side—and is initiated by Him, freely and sovereignly, by His grace, from eternity (Eph. 1:4).¹³⁶

Keddie goes on to emphasize that the essence of the covenant is “personal relationship.”

¹³⁵ McKay, *Bond of Love*, 13.

¹³⁶ Gordon J. Keddie, *God’s Covenant and Your Life* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2011), 16.

God's covenant dealings with us are about *relationships*. The heart of all covenants is the personal relationship of unswerving commitment that is set by the terms of the covenant.... The divine covenant is about personal union and communion with the living God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God therefore assures His people, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev. 26:12), and “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3). God desires fellowship with a people that are His. His covenant reaches out and secures that relationship in which the creature is enabled by grace to know his Creator, so as to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.¹³⁷

A bit later Keddie underscores the unconditional character of the covenant.

It is an *unconditional* covenant, in the sense that no one can ever merit covenant blessing by fulfilling God's requirements for righteousness. Christ alone, in the place of sinners, fulfills the conditions, through His atoning death for sin and His perfect obedience to God's holy law. God accepts Christ and accepts believers because they are “in Christ” through saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and are washed in the blood of the Lamb (Acts 20:21; Rev. 7:14).¹³⁸

Although, according to Keddie, there is a sense in which the covenant is clearly unconditional, there is also a sense in which it is conditional. Although he is at pains to stress the unconditional character of the covenant, he is nevertheless determined not to overlook a conditional dimension to the covenant. For, “[f]aith is a kind of ‘condition’ of entering into life, but we must not forget that it too is ‘the gift of God’ (Eph. 2:8).”

Keddie refers to the response of the members of the covenant, the response of faith and obedience, as “a kind of condition.” Says Keddie:

The covenant also *requires a response*. Man is addressed as a rational and responsible being made in the image of God. The gospel, which is the cutting edge of the claims of the covenant,

¹³⁷ Keddie, *God's Covenant*, 16-7

¹³⁸ Keddie, *Christ's Covenant*, 30. The bold is Keddie's.

comes to us as a commandment, admonishing us to repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).¹³⁹

It is the response to the “claims of the covenant” that Keddie views as the condition of the covenant.

In the February 2013 issue of *Table Talk* magazine, a number of the daily devotionals focus on passages from the prophecy of Hosea. This prophecy highlights God’s covenantal relationship to Israel, pictured in the relationship of the prophet to his “wife of whoredoms,” Gomer. The meditation for February 14, 2013 is based on Hosea 11:8-12. In the meditation editor Burk Parsons notes that “Scripture depicts the interplay of covenant grace and covenant obedience in various ways...every covenant God makes with man is unconditional in one sense and conditional in another.” He then goes on to cite the Abrahamic covenant as an example of the interplay between covenant grace and covenant obedience, the sense in which the covenant is unconditional and the sense in which it is conditional. On the one hand, the covenant was “an unconditional promise” according to which God “pledged” and “guarantee[d] its fulfillment.” And yet the covenant with Abraham and his seed was also conditional, for “[s]till the people in the Abrahamic covenant had to meet certain conditions to participate in the blessing: they had to walk before the Lord in faith and obedience (Gen. 17:1-14).” Parsons adds immediately: “Of course, even this conditional aspect of the covenant is ultimately unconditional, for the only ones who trust and obey the Lord are those whom He has elected unconditionally (Eph. 1:3-6; 2:1-10).”¹⁴⁰ Clearly, Parsons is uncomfortable with, or at least sensitive to the dangers connected to the teaching that God’s covenant of grace is a conditional covenant.

¹³⁹ Keddie, *Christ’s Covenant*, 30.

¹⁴⁰ Burk Parsons, “The Lord’s Tender Compassion,” *Table Talk* 37, no. 2 (February 2013): 43.

The issue in the conditional covenant controversy in the PRCA, and the issue on account of which Herman Hoeksema found fault with the teaching of Heyns, Schilder, and the Liberated was the presentation of faith as a condition *in the context of a general promise*. The issue was a promise of God to all who are baptized, a promise of God to all who are born to believing parents, and faith as a condition that had to be fulfilled by man before he could claim the promises as his own. God's promise, therefore, depended not on God who spoke the promise, who spoke the promise with an oath (Hebrews 7), but on those to whom the promise was spoken. Faith as a condition of the covenant was not only faith as a condition *in the covenant*, but also necessarily faith as a condition *unto the covenant*.

"Now, what is the idea of a condition (*voorwaarden, beding*)?" asks Hoeksema.

He answers:

Whatever else it may mean, it certainly denotes something that must be fulfilled prior to something else. If I say, "I will take my car to Chatham [Ontario, Canada] on condition that the weather is favorable," the condition of favorable weather must be fulfilled before I take my car to Chatham. The latter is contingent upon the former. If I say to someone, "I will lend you a thousand dollars on condition that you pay me back within three months," then in the mind of him that promises the thousand dollars the three months' term must be fulfilled prior to the lending. It is a conditional promise, for a condition is something demanded or required as a prerequisite to the granting or performance of something else. It is something that must exist if something else is to take place; and that something else is contingent on the condition. Even if you understand condition in the sense of "each of the concurring antecedent circumstances viewed as contributing causes of the phenomenon" (*New English Dictionary*, James H. Murray), the condition is still antecedent to that which is contingent upon it. Thus, for instance, I may say, "The air I breathe is the condition of my life; it is not its cause." Even then, the air is prior to my breathing and therefore to my life. The same thing is true of the

Dutch *voorwaarden* or *beding*. Also a *voorwaarden* is antecedent, is prior to what which is contingent upon it.¹⁴¹

It was this teaching of conditions as applied to the doctrine of the covenant that Hoeksema rejected.

The promise of God is unconditional. In the covenant of God there are no conditions. Nor should we...ever allow the erroneous terminology that speaks of conditions in the covenant or of conditions for the promises of God to creep into our language. A conditional promise is a promise the fulfillment of which depends on certain terms that are to be met with by man. Such a promise on the part of God is impossible in the first place because man is never and can never be a party over against God, and secondly, because man is wholly incapable of himself to meet any conditions whatever that would either make him worthy of the promise or put him in a position to appropriate it.¹⁴²

Thus, “[t]o speak of conditions of the covenant is hardly Reformed. There are no conditions in the covenant of God. He establishes his covenant unconditionally.” Faith and obedience “are not conditions of God’s establishing his covenant with us, but rather the fruit and manifestation of the covenant of God in and through us.”¹⁴³

In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, at the very beginning of the chapter on “Saving Faith” and immediately following the definition that he offers for saving faith, Hoeksema rejects the teaching “that faith is a condition.” He says: “We may not say that faith is a condition that we must fulfill before God is willing to give us the salvation merited by Christ for us. There are no conditions whatsoever unto salvation. It is free and sovereign.”¹⁴⁴ Hoeksema then goes on to deny that faith is the human response to the general goodwill of God and desire of God to save all men.

¹⁴¹ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer* 26 (April 15, 1950): 316.

¹⁴² Herman Hoeksema, “Propositions Concerning the Covenant of Grace,” *Standard Bearer* 25 (May 15, 1949): 365.

¹⁴³ Hoeksema, “Propositions,” 341-2.

¹⁴⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:62.

Nor is faith to be presented as the hand by which we accept the salvation proffered by God. Often it is presented thus. Salvation is compared to a beautiful gold watch that I freely offer to someone. I hold it in my extended hand and beg the person upon whom I would bestow this gift to take it. It is his for the accepting. But he will never actually possess that watch unless he will extend his own hand to take it from mine. Similarly, it is alleged, faith is the hand by which we take hold of the salvation proffered in the gospel.¹⁴⁵

“But this,” he says, “is not true... the natural man has no hand whereby he is able to accept the salvation of God in Jesus Christ.”¹⁴⁶

In agreement with this opposition to conditionality is the testimony of the two great biblical types of the covenant of grace to which Hoeksema so frequently appealed: the marriage relationship and the parent/child relationship. The love, honor, and submission that a Christian wife shows to her husband is not a condition fulfilled in order to be married or to remain in the marriage, but are her grateful response motivated by love for her husband. A son’s or daughter’s obedience to their parents is not a condition to be received into or remain in the family. Rather, it is their thankful response to God for giving them believing, Christian parents.

With Appeal to the Reformed Confessions

In evaluating the language and theology of the conditional covenant, Hoeksema turned first to the Reformed confessions. It was his judgment that “in order to have a fruitful discussion on the matter from a Reformed viewpoint, it seems but proper that we first of all consult our confessions, the Three Forms of Unity, and the Reformed confessions in general,” including the Reformed liturgical forms.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:62-3.

¹⁴⁶ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:63.

¹⁴⁷ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” 29.

The question is, of course, whether faith may be presented as a condition of salvation, and whether the establishment and continuation of God's covenant with us is in any sense of the word contingent upon our fulfilling the conditions of faith and obedience. This, unless we juggle words, is the plain and simple meaning of the question....

But I dare say that, in this sense, the term condition not only has no room in the Reformed system of doctrine, but is, as far as our confessions are concerned, thoroughly unreformed.¹⁴⁸

In turning to the confessions, Hoeksema considers it extremely significant that “the term ‘condition’ never even once occurs in any of our Reformed Standards.” Not once do the Three Forms of Unity speak of a conditional covenant or of a conditional promise. For several reasons, Hoeksema contends, this is not to be dismissed as a mere *argumentum e silentio*. First, the fathers were certainly well aware of the term, its use going all the way back to Calvin. “Yet the Reformed fathers in the composition and formulation of our confessions studiously avoided the term condition, or at least had no room for it anywhere in the expression of Reformed thought.” Additionally, the Reformed confessions are “rather elaborate expositions of all the fundamental doctrines of the Reformed Faith.... Surely if the term condition had represented an important element in Reformed thinking it would be met with more than once in this elaborate exposition of our truth as we confess it. Yet it is never once used.” And he concludes: “I think this makes this *argumentum e silentio* rather weighty and valid. It proves definitely, if not that our Reformed fathers consciously rejected the term and purposely avoided it, yet that they had no need of it, and that they found no room for it in the system of Reformed truth.”¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” 29.

¹⁴⁹ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” 29.

Not only do the Reformed confessions not make use of the term “condition” in their positive exposition of the truth, but significantly the fathers in the Canons of Dordt several times put the term “condition” in the mouth of the Arminians. Hoeksema points out that “[t]o the fathers of Dordt it [‘condition’] represents, not a Reformed, but an Arminian notion.” He continues:

This should certainly teach us a lesson. Dr. Schilder wrote in one of his articles in *De Reformatie* that there are Reformed people that are “vuurbang,” i.e., afraid as of fire, of the term “condition.” Well, I belong to them. And I dare say that I am in good company. The fathers of Dordt also were “vuurbang” of the term, witness the fact that they never use it for the positive exposition of the Reformed truth, although they were well acquainted with the term, but always mentioned it as an Arminian term expressing an Arminian idea. And why, pray, should we play with fire?¹⁵⁰

Hoeksema was neither the first nor the only Reformed theologian to oppose the teaching of conditions, in particular faith as a condition. Limitations of time and space do not permit any extensive demonstration of this assertion. But a few references will suffice to stimulate further investigation by the interested reader. Lyle Bierma writes that for the Swiss Reformers, Zwingli and Bullinger, “the benefits of God’s covenant of grace do not ultimately depend on faith and obedience; they *include* faith and obedience.”¹⁵¹ Calvin says in comments on Hebrews 8:11: “For God does not promise what is in our power, but what He alone can perform for us.”¹⁵² In commenting on Galatians 3:18,

¹⁵⁰ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” 77. In the Canons of Dordt the word “condition” is always attributed to the Arminians. In the First Head, Article 9 the fathers deny that election is founded on “foreseen faith, and the obedience of faith, holiness, or any other good quality or disposition in man, as the prerequisite, cause or condition on which it depended.” In the next article the fathers deny that the cause of election “consist[s] herein, that out of all possible qualities and actions of men God has chosen some as a condition of salvation....” The remaining references to “conditions” are found in the “Rejection of Errors” sections. Confer: Canons I, B, 4; II, B, 3; and V, B, 1.

¹⁵¹ Lyle Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 38.

¹⁵² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, tr. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 192.

Calvin denies that salvation depends on the “condition” of obedience to the law. God “gave” the inheritance to Abraham by promise, “by free promise, for if you view it as conditional, the word *gave*, (κεχάρισται,) would be utterly inapplicable.”¹⁵³

Stephen Strehle observes that after the Reformation the matter of conditionality in the covenant, particularly faith and repentance as conditions, became increasingly controversial as “many of the Calvinists did sense a tension between *sola fides* or irresistible grace and this doctrine.”¹⁵⁴ Ursinus’ successor in Heidelberg, Jerome Zanchi, was one who taught that the *foedus evangelicum* is unconditional, according to John L. Farthing: “In fulfilling the terms of the covenant, God himself in Christ takes the initiative, providing to the elect all that is needed for the covenant to remain in effect forever.... In Christ all these are affected by God, whose promise is unconditional and eternally secure.”¹⁵⁵ A bit later he comments:

Thus Zanchi finds in the discussion of God’s covenant, beginning with Abraham, an appropriate occasion for articulating a thoroughly Reformed *sola gratia*. Here Zanchi stresses the substantial continuity between the old covenant and the new: In its substance, even the old covenant is gracious, because it is unconditional. Similarly, the promise by which God establishes the new covenant is evangelical because it is unconditional. There is no *if* attached to the promise; thus the covenant is purely gracious, grounded not at all in human achievement but in God’s own mercy and goodness (*ex sua misericordia et bonitate*). The core of the covenant is God’s twofold promise: “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33), and it is God alone who provides all that is necessary in order to fulfill both of these conditions. Zanchi celebrates the perpetuity of the covenant by emphasizing that God’s promise is unconditional and thus utterly gratuitous—and thus incapable of being nullified by human

¹⁵³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, tr. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 98.

¹⁵⁴ Stephen Strehle, *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of the Covenant* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), 320-1.

¹⁵⁵ John L. Farthing, “*Foedus Evangelicum*: Jerome Zanchi on the Covenant,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29/1 (April 1994): 153.

weakness or failure.... What fulfills the covenant, even from the human side, is what God in sheer grace bestows upon the elect: "I will take away your heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh," God promises (Ezek. 11:19), and that promise is utterly without condition.¹⁵⁶

The English Calvinist theologian Augustus M. Toplady (1740-1778) defended the unconditionality of the covenant of grace.

God's covenant love to us in Christ is another stream, flowing from the fountain of unmingled grace. And here...every truly awakened person disclaims all title to praise.... How is it possible that either God's purposes, or that his covenant concerning us, can be in any respect whatsoever suspended on the will or the works of men; seeing both his purposes and his covenant were framed, and fixed, and agreed upon, by the persons in the Trinity, not only before men existed, but before angels themselves were created, or time itself was born? All was vast eternity, when grace was federally given us in Christ ere the world began.... Repentance and faith, new obedience and perseverance, are not conditions of interest in the covenant of grace (for then it would be a covenant of works); but consequences and tokens of covenant interest.¹⁵⁷

Francis Turretin says that if "condition is taken antecedently and *a priori* for the meritorious and impulsive cause and for a natural condition, the covenant of grace is rightly denied to be conditioned."¹⁵⁸ And later he says: "If the covenant of grace was said to depend upon an unstable human condition, its efficacy and immutability would be overthrown. But because the condition is supernatural and divine (produced by the efficacy of omnipotent grace), so far is it from being weakened by it that on the contrary it is more and more strengthened."¹⁵⁹

In a recently published book entitled *Christ and the Condition: The Covenant Theology of Samuel Petto (1624-1711)*, Michael Brown sets forth the covenant theology

¹⁵⁶ Farthing, "Foedus Evangelicum: Jerome Zanchi on the Covenant," 153-5.

¹⁵⁷ Augustus M. Toplady, *The Works of Augustus Toplady* (1794; repr. Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1987), 356.

¹⁵⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 12.3.3; 2:185.

¹⁵⁹ Turretin, *Institutes*, 12.3.7; 2:186.

of this little-known Puritan whose “understanding of conditionality in the covenant of grace was very close to Turretin’s.” “Both Turretin and Petto flatly rejected any notion of antecedent conditions in the covenant of grace, for that would make the believer’s work the ground of justification. Likewise, both Turretin and Petto affirmed a consequent condition of the covenant of grace (i.e., faith), which is also the gift of God and founded on Christ’s obedience alone, functioning as the instrumental cause for receiving the promises of the covenant. Brown quotes at length from Petto’s work entitled *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant Stated and Explained: With an Exposition of the Covenant of Grace in the Principal Discernments of It*. Petto states:

There can be no such antecedent condition by the performance of which we get and gain entrance or admittance into Covenant.... Neither is there any subsequent condition to be fulfilled by us, the use of that is, for the continuation of a right, and upon the failing thereof all is forfeited, as in the case of Adam.

Reflecting on this quotation, Brown says:

He refused to call faith, repentance, or obedience “conditions,” either antecedent or subsequent ones. He acknowledged that if there was a condition for believers in the new covenant, it would seem to be faith, yet that cannot be the case. A condition “properly taken,” he argued, earns the right to the benefit promised. This, said Petto, cannot apply to faith, because faith *receives* a benefit; it does not earn a right to it. While recognizing that the New Testament often uses conditional language to speak of the necessity of faith, repentance, and obedience, he stressed that these are gifts earned by Christ’s obedience and bestowed upon believers by the inward working of the Holy Spirit. “In the very Covenant itself, it is promised that he will write his Laws on their hearts, Heb. 8.10. and that implyeth Faith, Repentance, and every gracious frame” (*Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, 208).¹⁶⁰

Earlier Brown had indicated Petto’s denial of covenant conditionality on the ground that nothing but the work of Christ can be the basis for the covenant of grace: “If the covenant

¹⁶⁰ Michael Brown, *Christ and the Condition: The Covenant Theology of Samuel Petto (1624-1711)* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 112-13.

of grace is conditional upon anything in an individual believer, even faith, then the work of Christ set forth in the covenant of grace is not the real basis of salvation....” In

demonstration he quotes Petto:

“And so *faith* cannot be it [the basis of salvation], for the promises were not made to Jesus Christ upon *Condition* of our believing, but upon what he himself should do and suffer; rather therein he hath a promise, assurance that we shall believe.... It would highly derogate from the honour of the Lord Jesus to say, that the efficacy and effect of all his undertaking had dependence upon any act of ours, as that of believing” (*Difference between the Old and New Covenant*, 33).¹⁶¹

Although there is no indication that Herman Hoeksema was influenced by or was even aware of Samuel Petto, there were those of whom he was aware and who did undoubtedly influence his denial of conditions in the covenant of grace. In his defense of the unconditionality of the covenant of grace, Hoeksema was clearly influenced by Herman Bavinck. Bavinck frequently refers to the covenant of grace as an unconditional covenant. In *De Offerande des Lofs* (*The Sacrifice of Praise*) he says:

It is not true, that we first for awhile wander about outside of and without the covenant and thereafter by faith and conversion as by deeds of our own free will come into that covenant... faith and conversion are not conditions without and unto the covenant of grace, but they are profits and benefits in that covenant, revealing participation in and communion and fellowship with Christ and opening the access unto the enjoyment of His merits.¹⁶²

He writes in *Our Reasonable Faith* that

the covenant of grace, which really makes no demands and lays down no conditions, nevertheless comes to us in the form of a commandment, admonishing us to faith and repentance (Mark 1:15). Taken by itself the covenant of grace is pure grace, and

¹⁶¹ Brown, *Christ and the Condition*, 40.

¹⁶² Herman Bavinck, *De Offerande des Lofs: Overdenkingen voor en na de Toelating tot het Heilig Avondmaal* (Kampen: Kok, 1937), 24. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

nothing else, and excludes all works. It gives what it demands, and fulfills what it prescribes.¹⁶³

In his work *Saved by Grace*, Bavinck says that

[f]aith is not a condition *unto* the covenant, but a condition *within* the covenant: the route to be followed in order to become partaker and to enjoy all the other commodities of that covenant. Yet faith itself is already a fruit, a benefit of the covenant, a gift of God's grace and thus a proof that God has received us in His covenant. For God bestows all the gifts of His grace in and along the pathway of the covenant.¹⁶⁴

And finally in the following citations from his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Bavinck defends the unconditionality of the covenant of grace.

In the beginning Reformed theologians spoke freely of “the conditions” of the covenant. But after the nature of the covenant of grace had been carefully considered and had to be defended against [Roman] Catholics, Lutherans, and Remonstrants, many of them took exception to the term and avoided it.¹⁶⁵

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.¹⁶⁶

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....¹⁶⁷

The covenant of grace is unalterably grounded, not in our virtues and works, but in God's mercies.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*, tr. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), 278.

¹⁶⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Saved By Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration*, tr. Nelson D. Kloosterman, ed. J. Mark Beach (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 76-7.

¹⁶⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, tr. John Vriend and ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003-2008), 3:229.

¹⁶⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:230.

¹⁶⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:204.

¹⁶⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:205.

The covenant relation did not depend on the observance of [the] law as an antecedent condition; it was not a covenant of works, but rested solely in God's electing love.¹⁶⁹

Commenting on Bavinck's unconditional covenant conception, Anthony Hoekema says:

It is true that the covenant of grace imposes obligations on those with whom it was concluded. Those obligations, however, are not to be considered conditions for entrance into the covenant, for the covenant was established and rests only in the mercy of God. But these obligations describe the way in which those who have been received by grace into the covenant now must walk. Regeneration, faith and conversion are not conditions which man must first fulfill in his own strength, in whole or in part, in order to be taken into the covenant. But they are blessings which already flow out of the covenant of grace, out of the *unio mystica*, out of the gift of Christ's person.¹⁷⁰

The covenant of grace precedes faith. Faith is not a condition (for entrance) into the covenant; it is the way whereby all the other benefits of the covenant can be obtained and enjoyed. But faith itself is already a fruit, a blessing of the covenant, a gift of His grace, and thus a proof that God has taken us into His covenant. For God bestows all the gifts of His grace in the way of His covenant.¹⁷¹

So then we may say that the covenant of grace precedes the regeneration of the children of the covenant, and that regeneration, faith, and conversion are not preparations for the covenant which take place outside of Christ and the covenant of grace, nor conditions which man must fulfill wholly or partly in his own strength, but blessings which flow to man out of the covenant of grace.¹⁷²

Analyzing Bavinck's covenant doctrine, Hoekema says:

In general we may say that Bavinck had a mediating influence on the history of covenant theology in the Netherlands. He made an earnest attempt to mediate between extreme views on the covenant and the significance of baptism. On the one hand, he took a strong position over against that represented by men like Pieters and

¹⁶⁹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:494.

¹⁷⁰ Anthony Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant* (Clover: Full Bible Publications, 2007), 125.

¹⁷¹ Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant*, 126.

¹⁷² Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant*, 134.

Kreulen [who taught to a conditional covenant view]... On the other hand, he also took a stand against the opposite extreme, represented particularly by Abraham Kuyper and his followers: that baptized infants of believers must be understood to have been, as a general rule, regenerated already before baptism, and that such presupposed prebaptismal regeneration is the spiritual ground or basis for baptism.¹⁷³

Clearly the issue regarding the unconditional covenant of grace is not just the issue of one word, and the use of one word: condition. The issue concerns much more. The issue concerns the promise and the teaching of the confessions concerning the promise of God. The issue concerns faith and the teaching of the confessions concerning faith. The issue concerns the seed of the covenant and who are to be regarded as the true see (children) of Abraham, the genuine members of the covenant. The issue concerns election and the relationship of election to the doctrine of the covenant.

All of these issues in their relationship to the doctrine of the unconditional covenant were set forth in the Declaration of Principles, which was adopted by the PRCA Synod of 1951. “[T]he Declaration demonstrates that the [Reformed] confessions teach the following:

1. All the covenant blessings are for the elect alone.
2. God’s promise of salvation is only for the elect, and He always fulfills His promise.
3. Election is the sole cause and fountain of all our salvation, out of which flow the gifts of grace, including faith.
4. Faith is a gift of God, and a God-given instrument whereby God’s people appropriate salvation in Christ.
5. The preaching comes to all, and God seriously commands to faith and repentance, and that to all those who come and believe God promises life and peace.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant*, 167.

¹⁷⁴ “Introduction to the Declaration of Principles,” *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 411.

Hoeksema was unwavering in his support for the Declaration of Principles. He served on the special synodical committee that composed the Declaration, and in fact composed on behalf of the committee, the first draft of the Declaration. In editorial after editorial, speech after speech, and sermon after sermon he defended the Declaration. It is accurate to say that the unconditional covenant conception set forth in the Declaration was nothing more or less than Hoeksema's covenant conception.

Conclusion: Always His View

The unconditional covenant conception was the view of the covenant to which Hoeksema remained committed throughout the years of his public ministry. It was the view embraced by the Protestant Reformed Churches from the time of their origin, as is expressed in the "Preamble" to the Declaration of Principles. The Declaration sets forth those truths, which "have always been maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches...."¹⁷⁵ Inasmuch as Hoeksema was a founding father of the PRCA and from the beginning of their existence its leading theologian, what was the view of the churches on so major a doctrine was certainly also from the very beginning his view.

As has been demonstrated, the unconditional covenant was Hoeksema's view when as a young minister he disagreed with a respected former seminary professor. It was his view when in the early years of the existence of the fledgling denomination that he helped birth, he gave instruction to its members concerning the covenant of grace. It was the view that he articulated in the religious magazine of which he was editor for over forty years, a magazine that contained hundreds of articles that he wrote, in so many of which he developed his doctrine of the gracious, unconditional covenant of grace. It was

¹⁷⁵ *Confessions and Church Order*, 412.

the view that he taught for decades to young men whom he trained for the ministry, even though there came a time when a number of those men rejected his view in order to embrace the view of a conditional, breakable covenant. It was the view that he proclaimed in his regular preaching in the First Protestant Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan and in his Sunday afternoon messages on the *Reformed Witness Hour* radio program. It was the view that he championed when controversy over the issue of the unconditional covenant of grace threatened and eventually resulted in a split in the denomination that he loved and in whose service he stood to the end of his life.

He was fearless! He was uncompromising! He was convinced not only of the truth of the unconditional covenant, but of its importance for faith and for life! He was convinced that at stake was the issue than which there is none more important—the glory of God! He makes that plain in his conclusion to his consideration of the covenant in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

This, then, is the conclusion of the matter concerning God's covenant: God wants to reveal his own glorious covenant life unto us; as the Triune God he ordains his Son to be Christ and Lord, the firstborn of every creature, the first begotten of the dead, the glorified one, in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead; unto this end he ordains the church and gives her unto Christ, and he elects by name all those who in the church will have a place forever, in order that the one fullness (πλήρωμα) of Christ may scintillate in a thousandfold variation in the church to the praise of his glory. Around that Christ and his church and that purpose of the revelation of the glory of God's covenant life, all things in time and in everlasting eternity concentrate. The end of it all is that we fall down in adoration before that glorious sovereign God and exclaim, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and

through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever.
Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).”¹⁷⁶

Hoeksema would have expressed wholehearted agreement with Olevianus’ identification of the purpose of the covenant of grace:

And the purpose of the covenant of grace lies in the fact that God would (1) be the cause of all salvation to His elect, in such wise that the glory of the redemption belongs to Him alone and His absolute glory is made manifest; and (2) institute in His elect sure comfort in an eternal sonship to God that fadeth not away.¹⁷⁷

For Hoeksema the issue of the unconditional versus the conditional covenant was not merely academic. It was more than merely a debate between theologians and differing theological positions. At bottom, Hoeksema was convinced that the issue concerned the glory of God in the truth of the gospel. Because of that he was fearless! For that reason he would not compromise! Out of that conviction he was willing to be put out of a denomination in which he was fast becoming a respected leader. At the end of the day the issue was the free and sovereign grace of God as opposed to the heresy of free will.

In other words, one must choose between the error that salvation is, wholly or in part, which means the same thing, dependent upon the free will of man, or he must deny that there is a conditional element in salvation, and confess that salvation is of the Lord alone.... I challenge anyone to make plain that the proposition “faith is a condition” can be used in a truly Reformed sense. If he takes up this challenge, I promise that I will make plain to all that can read that either he camouflages the term *condition* or somehow he tries to make salvation dependent on the free will of man.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:479-80.

¹⁷⁷ Caspar Olevianus, *De Substantia Foederis Gratuiti inter Deum et electos item que de mediis, quibus ea ipsa substantia nobis communicator, libri duo* (Geneva, 1585) as quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 384-5.

¹⁷⁸ Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” *Standard Bearer* 26 (February 15, 1950): 221-2.

Because he was persuaded that the glory of God in His sovereign, efficacious grace was the underlying issue, Hoeksema stood firm even when it appeared as though the denomination to which he had given his life was about to break up. He was convinced that this truth was the peculiar treasure of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and that if this treasure was lost, the Protestant Reformed Churches had no real reason to continue to exist. Because of the threat posed by the conditional covenant view, Hoeksema expressed publicly his sorrow at the time of the celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his beloved denomination: “Are you surprised, then, that on this twenty-fifth anniversary, I rather mourn than celebrate with rejoicing?” He went on:

If you ask me what is the most peculiar treasure of the Protestant Reformed Churches, I answer without any hesitation: their peculiar view of the covenant.

And what is their particular conception?

It stands closely connected with their denial of common grace, and with their emphasis on the doctrine of election and reprobation.

Moreover, it emphasizes and carries out the organic idea.

Briefly stated it teaches that God realizes His eternal covenant of friendship, in Christ, the Firstborn of every creature, and the First-begotten of the dead, organically, and antithetically along the line of election and reprobation, and in connection with the organic development of all things.

That is, in a nutshell, the peculiar Protestant Reformed heritage.

He that has been captivated by this beautiful Reformed truth must have nothing of anything that smacks of Heynsian theology, nor will he ever retrogress into a traditional conditional theology.

But rather than go backward, he will go forward and continue to develop the pure Protestant Reformed truth of God’s eternal covenant.

To do this is the specific calling of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

Failure to do this is our death. It is the end of our distinctive existence.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ Herman Hoeksema, “Protestant Reformed,” *Standard Bearer* 26 (March 15, 1950): 269.

It was for the sake of “this most peculiar treasure of the Protestant Reformed Churches” that Hoeksema devoted his life to the service of these churches. Throughout his lifetime he maintained, defended and developed the unconditional covenant of grace. In response to an advocate of the conditional covenant, whom Hoeksema charges with misrepresenting what he taught in the past concerning conditions, he wrote in February of 1950: “The brother leaves the impression with his readers that I, too, have changed my mind, and that therefore our churches cannot safely follow so untrustworthy a leadership as I offer them. I therefore want to state emphatically that I always opposed the standpoint...that faith is a condition and that the covenant is conditional.”¹⁸⁰ He goes on to refer to a number of books that he wrote, with page references in the books to his teaching of the unconditional covenant. And he cites a number of passages from his dogmatics class-notes from which he had taught for more than twenty years the truth of the unconditional covenant.

The 1953 Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America contains the “Transcript of the Address Delivered by Rev. H. Hoeksema to the Synod of 1953 on June 18,” which was entered into the record and published as Supplement X. Hoeksema’s address to the synod begins:

Mr. Chairman, and Delegates to Synod:

The motive why I like to make this talk or speech for the record, for the Acta, is, in the first place, the contents of this report [to synod], especially one item in it, where it is suggested that I too in the former times taught conditions...and that in the very heat of our debate with the Three Points. That I think, Mr. Chairman, is not true. And therefore, my first motive is that I want to correct that in the Acta. And I’m going to prove that that is not true. My second motive is, Mr. Chairman, that it’s often said that I changed, and that in former years I did not teach the same as I do now. Also that is not true, as I can plainly show from the records. And in the

¹⁸⁰ Herman Hoeksema, “As to Conditions,” 196.

third place, Mr. Chairman, it begins to look to me as if we are at the end of the road. That's not hoping that that is so; but it looks very much as if we are not going to stay together. And therefore, this may be the last opportunity to address you and to have anything for the record. And that is my motive for asking for the floor in connection with that item in the report of Committee A regarding the contents of the Declaration.

Hoeksema continues:

Now, Mr. Chairman, in the first place, I want to say that it is certainly not Reformed to speak of a conditional promise or a promise for all on condition of faith...or anything like that.

And, Mr. Chairman, that I never taught anything else than I do now, ought to be very plain to the Synod from the following quotations.

Hoeksema begins with quotations from sermons he preached in Fourteenth Street CRC in Holland, Michigan, his first ministerial charge. After referencing a number of sermons, Hoeksema refers to a sermon he preached in either 1916 or 1917. In that sermon he stated:

“And instead of maintaining that also faith is a gift of God, and already part of our salvation, the whole thing is represented as if faith were the condition upon which God will save us and realize His covenant with us. And therefore, we do not for a moment hesitate to say that we reject this entire view and all that belongs to it, as against Scripture and against our Reformed Confessions.”

From a sermon preached in 1917 on Lord's Day 27, he quotes the following:

“We do not belong to the covenant of grace because of our personal consent. Nor must you have the idea that you must fulfill certain conditions in order to enter into that covenant. For that would again place the burden of the covenant upon your personal responsibility. And this is not so at all. Surely, there are obligations also in the covenant of grace. But these obligations flow forth from our being in the covenant. Christ, therefore, has fulfilled all the conditions. The covenant was established with Him as the Head in all eternity. And therefore He came in time to fulfill the conditions as the Head of His people. And as their Head He suffered, as their Head He died, as their Head He fulfills the

law. And having fulfilled all, His people have nothing at all to fulfill anymore. There are no conditions in the covenant of grace. They are saved by grace.”

He pleads at this point: “Don’t ever say that I changed, please!”

In another sermon in the same year and the same series on Lord’s Day 27, he exhorted his congregation:

“Never must you imagine that the obligations to serve and glorify God are conditions of the covenant of grace. Once more, we wish to emphasize: there are no conditions in the covenant of grace, for Christ has fulfilled them all. And salvation is a free gift.”

After a good number of additional quotations from his sermons and books, Hoeksema says:

One more quotation, and then I think I’ll quit. This is from the same work (*The Triple Knowledge: Baptized into Christ*, vol. 6), p. 139: “Our part in the covenant is not a condition which we must fulfill in order to enter into the covenant of God or to remain in it, but rather our expression as moral creature of the covenant relation which God establishes with us by His grace. The covenant is first established with us through ‘God’s part.’ And our part follows and is the fruit of that gracious act of God.”

Here, Mr. Chairman, I’ll close. There are plenty more quotations that I can give, of course. In all I wrote over 20,000 pages of print. And I say I can quote plenty more. All I did was show you that as far as my view on the covenant and the elect and conditions and faith is concerned, I have not changed one whit. That is abundantly proven from my quotations, because, Mr. Chairman, I quoted, as I said, from the very beginning of my ministry in the sermons that I preached in Fourteenth Street from 1915 to 1920, and I quoted from all my works and writings up to the present time. This, Mr. Chairman, is Protestant Reformed. Conditional theology is not Protestant Reformed, and has never been.¹⁸¹

There can be no question that through the years Herman Hoeksema developed in his understanding of the doctrine of the covenant. He underscored important aspects of the truth of the covenant that belonged to the distinctive Reformed conception of the

¹⁸¹ 1953 *Acts of Synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 264ff.

covenant: the essence of the covenant as friendship; God's covenant of grace with his people a reflection of his own Triune covenant life; the covenant as including believers and the children of believers; the unilateral character of the covenant; the truth that membership in the covenant is limited to the elect. From his point of view, he corrected certain aspects of the Reformed tradition with respect to the doctrine of the covenant: the traditional teaching of the *pactum salutis*; the traditional teaching of the covenant of works; and the teaching that the covenant is a means to an end, rather than the highest end itself.

But the teaching that he most vigorously defended was the unconditionality of the covenant of grace. Without compromise he opposed the teaching that the covenant of grace established by God with believers is a conditional covenant. This view, he was convinced, was incipient Arminianism. This view contradicted the Reformed confessions and the fundamentals of the distinctive Reformed faith. And this view, if accepted, he was convinced, robbed the PRCA of its right of existence as a separate denomination.

This was the position to which he remained committed throughout his life. There was no change of his position. No reversal of opinion. Certainly not a major adjustment of his view. From the beginning to the end of his public ministry, Herman Hoeksema taught what he was convinced was the truth of the Word of God and consistent with the Reformed confessions, that God's covenant of grace is an unconditional covenant.

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