

**A Comparison of the Covenant Views
of the Liberated Churches
and the
Protestant Reformed Churches**

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Scriptures cited are taken from the King James (Authorized) Version of the Bible.

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“But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:14)

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*And I will walk among you, and will be your God,
and ye shall be my people.*

—Leviticus 26:12

I.

A Brief History

WHEN WE WERE IN SINGAPORE ministering to the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church (CERC) in November and December 2011, the editor of *Salt Shakers*¹ asked me to write a series of articles on the differences between the views of the covenant held by the Liberated Churches and the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). The Liberated Churches include the *Gereformeerde Kerken (Artikel 31)* in the Netherlands, the Canadian Reformed Churches in Canada, the American Reformed Churches in the United States, and the Free Reformed Churches in Australia. There are other Liberated Churches as well, as for example, in South Africa, but the ones I mention are the ones

¹ *Salt Shakers* is a bi-monthly magazine published by the youth in the Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church (CERC).

with which we are most acquainted.

I gladly do this, for this controversy over the doctrine of the covenant is one that has bearing on many great truths of God's word; the truth of the covenant runs like a golden thread through the whole of the Scriptures, and the differences between the Liberated view of the covenant and the view held in the PRC are important and significant. The fact of the matter is that the view held by the PRC is the historically Reformed view and has the imprimatur of the *Three Forms of Unity*.

Brief History

While all the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, from the time of the Reformation, were agreed that the Scriptures required the baptism of the children of believers, there was dispute in the churches over the question of the *grounds* for infant baptism. What does Scripture teach concerning the reason why infants are to be baptized as well as adults? The question took on a measure of urgency when it was also frankly believed by all that baptism is a sign and seal of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to His people. If Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness by faith, how can *infants* receive that righteousness?

Further, all admitted that although God established His covenant in the line of generations, that is, with believers and their children, not all the children of believers are actually saved, because the lines of election and reprobation run through the lines of the covenant. Jacob was saved but Esau was not, though both were circumcised as a sign of the covenant. The majority of the nation of Israel was not saved even though all were circumcised. Why should all the children of believers receive the sign of the covenant when they were not actually saved by God and brought into the

covenant.

Different answers were given to these questions, and the answers that were given shaped the doctrine of the covenant that a church held.

The Views of Professor William Heyns

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a Christian Reformed professor who taught in Calvin Theological School came up with what was actually not an original idea, but was one that he popularized, and that became the view of the Liberated. His name was William Heyns.

It is interesting that Rev. Herman Hoeksema, who did much to develop the biblical doctrine of the covenant, studied theology under William Heyns and was taught the view that later became the view of the Liberated Churches.

Rev. Hoeksema, himself a student in the seminary, said to his professor, “I do not know what the correct view of the covenant is, but I am sure it is not your view.” It is not surprising that the development of the biblical view of the covenant was high on the list of priorities in Rev. Hoeksema’s ministry.

William Heyns’ doctrine of the covenant consisted of the following main points:

1. The covenant of grace is not established with the elect only, but with *all that are baptized*.²
2. There are two senses in which “covenant” is used. One is an outward establishment of the covenant with all who are baptized;

² William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1926), p. 132.

the second is the actual bestowal of the covenant blessings.³

3. Though all baptized babies are in the covenant outwardly, only those who, when come to years of discretion, fulfill the conditions of the covenant are in the covenant inwardly.⁴ He thus believed in a *conditional* covenant.
4. Those who do not fulfill the conditions of the covenant and therefore do not receive the blessings of the covenant are “covenant-breakers.”⁵
5. A special grace is given to all who are baptized, which, while not saving, does *make it more likely* that the one baptized will fulfill the conditions of the covenant.⁶
6. The conditional covenant is much like the gracious and well-meant gospel offer which teaches that the gospel, which comes to all men, does not necessarily impart salvation, but gives one who hears it the warrant for accepting it. It thus teaches that although one has the right to the blessings of the gospel’s promises, he will receive those blessings and salvation only when he accepts the offered salvation as his own. Thus, he will receive salvation *only when he fulfills the conditions necessary*.⁷

On this foundation laid by William Heyns, the Liberated built their

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

⁵ Note that being a “covenant breaker” implies that one was once *in* the covenant but *is no longer*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

doctrine of the covenant. There is little difference between what Heyns said about the covenant and what the Liberated say. The Protestant Reformed Churches differ radically on almost every point.

Questions for discussion:

1. What two problems did the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands face when they held to the doctrine of infant baptism?
2. Why were these problems such difficult ones for the church to answer?
3. William Heyns and the Liberated Churches hold to a conditional covenant. What does the word “condition” mean?
4. Is there a good sense in which the word “condition” can be used? If your answer is “yes,” what is that good sense?
5. Why is the view of William Heyns almost the same as the error of the gracious and well-meant gospel offer?

II.

Dr. Klaas Schilder

THE COVENANT VIEW OF THE LIBERATED CHURCHES was especially developed by Dr. Klaas Schilder, who was deposed by the Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1944. I knew Dr. Schilder personally, for on two different occasions he stayed in our home, once in Illinois and once in Montana. I was only a boy of about nine years old the first time he stayed with us, and about 15 the second time. But I well remember that he and my father argued almost continually about the doctrine of the covenant. While their arguments were always carried in in a rather quiet and peaceful way, I could sense that both considered their views very important and that the doctrine they were debating was one of great significance. It left a deep impression on me.

Dr. Schilder was deposed by a synod that met during World War II, when Nazi Germany had conquered the Netherlands. Dr. Schilder spent

some time in a concentration camp but was released. He went into hiding for the rest of the war, because he feared he would be sent again to a concentration camp for his opposition to Hitler's National Socialism.

He was deposed, therefore, by a synod that met without him and gave him no opportunity to defend himself. This was very unjust.

The Liberated View of the Covenant

I can best describe the Liberated view of the covenant by using a figure. The figure comes from the Liberated themselves. I first ran across it in a book called *Appel*, written, as I recall, by Prof Veenhof, a Liberated professor in the Liberated Theological Seminary in Kampen, the Netherlands.

The figure goes like this: At baptism, God gives to the child being baptized a cheque.

The cheque has written on it, "Pay to the order of (the child being baptized), the sum of salvation." The cheque is signed by God.

A person can do three things with that cheque when he grows up. He can frame it and boast about it and hang it on the wall of his dining room. But it does him no good. He is like a man who boasts of being a child of God but is a hypocrite.

He may also tear up that cheque and throw the pieces into the waste basket. The man who does that is a covenant-breaker. He despises the cheque and wants nothing to do with God or God's promise.

The third thing he can do is *cash* the cheque and thus become a possessor of the salvation promised him on the cheque. He is the one who fulfills the condition of faith that makes the covenant a reality in his life.

And so, the cheque is God's promise to save the one who is baptized.

The giving of the cheque is the sacrament of baptism itself. The condition for receiving what the cheque's promises—salvation—is faith in God and obedience to him.

Thus, the Liberated teach that God wants all who are baptized to be saved and even gives them His promise, so that they have every right to salvation. They have the cheque in their hands! But whether the value of the cheque actually *becomes* their own depends upon their believing the promise of God—cashing the cheque. The cheque belongs to them. God wants them to have it and to cash it in the bank of heaven.

The promise of God is something worth having. If a man promises me a thousand dollars, that can only mean: 1) that he has it to give; 2) that he wants very much to give it to me; and 3) that I will receive it if the man is trustworthy.

How much more trustworthy is the promise of the living God. God is entirely trustworthy. He will surely do what he promises. If He promises me salvation, He has it available to Him; He wants me to have it; and He will surely give it.

But there is a hitch. The man who promises me a thousand dollars tells me that he will not give it to me unless I promise to cut his lawn with his lawn mower for a year. Now that is not such a bad deal, and I would be foolish not to take him up on it. But I do have to do something to receive the thousand dollars.

And so, it is with the promise of God. All that is implied in a promise from God is true, but I will not actually *get* salvation unless I do something myself. I have to believe in Christ and walk in obedience. Only then will I actually *receive* the salvation promised. Even though God has promised it to me, the promise means nothing unless I do my part and fulfill the

condition.

Now, this is downright Arminianism and leaves salvation in the hands of a man. The Liberated want to be Reformed, of course, and so they overthrow the charge of Arminianism by two additional statements.

The first statement is that we have to have this view of the covenant in order to *preserve the responsibility of man*. If God does *everything* for our salvation and we need do nothing, then we become robots or puppets without ourselves being responsible for our salvation.

The second thing they say is that the condition God requires of a man to be saved is actually a condition that *God* fulfills.

Now this is playing games with the truth. And we may not do that. Of course, we are not robots who do things because God pushes certain buttons. I recall that my minister, during the years of my youth used to say from the pulpit, “We don’t go to heaven fast asleep in the sleeper of a train.” We are required to believe in Christ and to walk in obedience.

Indeed, that is true. But our faith in Christ and our obedience are not *conditions to our receiving the promise and being saved* but are *the fruits of being saved*. Because we are saved, we are by grace able to believe in Christ and obey God. We do absolutely *nothing* to gain salvation. We are totally depraved.

Another figure will show this clearly.

Supposing that I am on a platform in an auditorium facing fifty men, all of whom have no legs. I say to all fifty, “I will give each of you a thousand dollars, if you will get out of your seat, walk up these steps and come to me here on the platform. But, of course, they cannot do it.

And so I “fulfill the condition.” I walk down there and pick up, one by one, ten of them, chosen at random, carry them to the platform and hand

them the thousand dollars. Have they fulfilled the condition? And what about the forty men whom I left in their seats? I had promised them the same thing as the others. I wanted to give them, as well, the \$1000.

Was my promise a joke? Was I teasing them? Was I giving them false hope when I promised them a thousand dollars, because I had no intention of ever carrying them up on the platform? People would say that I was a cruel man to promise something I never intended to give.

So you see, the whole idea is rather ridiculous. The only way it all makes any sense at all is if, while God promises every baptized infant salvation on the condition of faith, that infant, when come to years of discretion, must make the choice by his own free will. But free-willism is Arminian and condemned by the confessions of the Reformed churches.

In other words, if God's promise is extended to people other than His people, the condition attached to it necessarily implies the free will of man.

The covenant view of the Liberated is Arminianism of the worst sort.

Questions for discussion:

1. What two problems did the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands face when they held to the doctrine of infant baptism?
2. Can the word “condition” be used in a good sense when the promise is made to far more than are actually saved? Why not?
3. What is our responsibility in the covenant? See the part of the Baptism Form that begins with the words, “But as in all covenants there are contained two parts ...” Does the Baptism Form teach conditions here?
4. Why are there so many conditional sentences (those that begin with the word “if”) in the Bible?
5. Can God ever promise anything to a man that He does not intend to give?
6. If God promises salvation to more people than those who are saved, does that not mean that salvation is available to them? What does this imply about the cross of Jesus Christ?

III.

The Liberated View of the Covenant

THE LIBERATED, WITH THEIR VIEW OF THE COVENANT, have adopted the idea that the covenant of grace is a contract or agreement between God and man, in which both must do their part for the covenant to be realized. The Liberated hold strongly to a covenant of works that God established with Adam in Paradise, in which covenant Adam, if faithful, could merit eternal life.

That covenant of works consisted of God's promise of eternal life to Adam, provided Adam obeyed the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam on his part agreed with that arrangement.

The covenant God establishes after the fall of Adam and Eve is, as far as its form is concerned, identical with the covenant of works. The covenant is still an agreement between God and man in which God

promises eternal life on the condition of faith in Christ and obedience to God's commands.

With this view of the covenant, the PRC sharply disagrees, a point I shall discuss at greater length later.

The Covenant is Divided into Two Parts

The Liberated also believe that baptism only signifies an outward incorporation into the covenant. One possesses the covenant outwardly because he is in possession of God's promise as this promise is given to all who are baptized on condition of faith and obedience.

One is taken inwardly into the covenant and given the specific blessings of the covenant *only upon the fulfillment of the condition of faith and obedience*. If he fails to believe or be obedient, he is a "covenant breaker," for he was actually in the covenant, though outwardly. He had the promise of the covenant.

The Covenant is Conditional

A person will not be fully taken into the covenant until he fulfills conditions. And he must do this by his own free will.

The Liberated will never agree that man has a free will, but it is a necessary part of their view. If the promise is made to all baptized children, and if only some are saved, the ones who *are* saved have set themselves apart from the others *by their own choice*. I showed this to be true in the last chapter.

God Gives Grace to All who are Baptized

William Heyns taught this doctrine of a common grace of the covenant in

his *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, as I showed in the first chapter.

Interestingly, while Dr. Schilder taught this common grace of the covenant in his early years as leader of the Liberated, he later repudiated the idea. Dr. Faber claims in his book, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism & Extra-Scriptural Binding*,⁸ that Schilder's denial of this common grace of the covenant was due to the influence of Herman Hoeksema, but, says Faber, it was probably the only theological mistake Schilder made.

The common grace that God gives to each baptized child enables him to fulfill the conditions of the covenant, but does not guarantee that the baptized child will do this.

Common grace in the covenant makes it possible for a person to make the choice. Or, to put it another way, common grace *gives man a free will*.

The Covenant is Only a Temporal Arrangement

The covenant is made with man while he is in this world. When he goes to heaven there is no more covenant. If he rejects the promise of the covenant and goes to hell, there is surely no more covenant.

It is understandable that this is Liberated theology because the covenant is *conditional* and the arrangements or conditions pertain *only to this life*.

The Promise and the Covenant are Identical

The essence of the covenant taught by the Liberated Churches and its basic idea is God's general and conditional promise that comes to all who are

⁸ Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism & Extra-Scriptural Binding* (Neerlandia, Canada, Inheritance Publications, 1996).

baptized but is conditional in its execution.

Election has nothing to do with the covenant

The Liberated are very strong on this, for God's covenant is only His *promise* and His promise is made to *many more than those who are saved*. This is, of course, in flat contradiction to what Paul teaches in Galatians 3, where the promise of the covenant is said to be made to *Christ*, and, in Christ, to *all who belong to him*.

The Liberated do not really want the doctrine of election, much less reprobation.

Election, they say, belongs to the "hidden things" of God, and we have nothing to do with the hidden things of God. It is strange that Scripture has so much to do with election.

Christ is not the Head of the Covenant

This assertion also follows from the Liberated's denial that election controls the covenant. The elect are elect *in Christ*, and only because they belong to Christ as Head are they the heirs of the covenant and its promises (Gal. 3:16, 29). However, the covenant in Liberated theology is established, at least outwardly, with *all who are baptized*.

Christ Died for All Men

While the Liberated are reluctant to speak of a universal atonement of our Lord—because it is contrary to the creeds (see *Canons 2.8*)—they are compelled to do this to avoid making God insincere when He promises salvation conditionally to all men. Is salvation *available* to all men? If it is not, God's promise is a mere mockery, for it promises something God *never intends to give nor can give*.

In a recent forum on common grace I had occasion to engage in some correspondence with a Liberated minister who refused to answer me when I asked him whether Christ died for all men.

I have read of a minister who claimed in his sermon on John 3:16 that by the word “world” the text means “all sinners.” Hence, God loves all men and, consequently, Christ died for all men. This is contrary to Scripture and the confessions.

A conditional promise is only a gracious and well-meant gospel offer in the covenant

The Liberated teach a common grace of the covenant in the same way that the gospel is a common grace to all who hear it. And, as the *salvation* offered to all men in the gospel is conditional and depends for its fulfillment of man’s choice, so the *promise* which comes to all the baptized children also depends for its fulfillment on man’s choice.

The Liberated appeal to “apparent contradiction” to justify their contradictory position

No one can explain how God loves all men and yet only some are saved. No one can explain how Christ died for all men and yet only some are saved. No one can hold to both sovereign election and reprobation and teach that God desires all men to be saved. And so, appeal is made to “apparent contradiction” as the only way out. That is, that what is contradictory to us is not contradictory in the mind of God.

Questions for discussion

1. Prove from Scripture and our confessions that God does not love all men and that Christ did not die for all men.
2. Prove from Scripture that God's covenant is a covenant that is everlasting.
3. Can you make any distinction between these doctrines of the Liberated and Arminianism? If so, what distinction can you make?
4. Show that a general promise that is conditional cannot use the word "condition" in a Reformed way.
5. Discuss the fact that the doctrine of the covenant is important for us, for it affects many other doctrines of God's word.

IV.

The Protestant Reformed View

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, I DISCUSSED THE VARIOUS other doctrines which were part of the doctrine of the covenant that is held by the Liberated Churches. In this chapter I will briefly elaborate on the view of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). If you compare these views with the views of the Liberated, you will see that great and important differences exist between the two.

The Idea of the Covenant

The Liberated Churches hold to an idea of the covenant that defines the covenant as a treaty, a pact, an agreement, or an arrangement between God and man.

The PRC reject that idea as unbiblical and define the basic idea of the covenant as a *union of fellowship and communion between God and his people in Christ* (Gen. 17:7-8).

God is a covenant God

One fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith established as truth by the church at the Council of Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 is the doctrine of the trinity. This is the truth that God is one in nature or essence and three in person.

Because God is one in essence and three in person, God is a *covenant God in Himself*.

The one essence of God means that the three persons live in a union of divine being. That God is three in person means that all three persons live in perfect fellowship with each other in the one essence that belongs equally to all three.

In the covenant life that God lives in Himself, each person enjoys the fellowship He has with the other persons. All three share one mind and one will. All three share in the infinite perfections that belong to God. All three live in perfect happiness, perfect blessedness and perfect love.

The doctrine of the trinity is not a cold and abstract doctrine that has no meaning for us. The God of the Scriptures, in direct opposition to the gods of the heathen and Allah of the Mohammedans, is a living, personal, joyful and blessed God who lives a life of infinite blessedness⁹

The Covenant of Grace is a Revelation of God's Covenant Life He Lives in Himself

I cannot emphasize this point strongly enough. I have two reasons for saying this. The first is that Reformed theology is always *God*-centered; that is, Reformed theology begins and ends with God, *not* with man. God is the sovereign Creator and Author of everything in heaven and earth. He

⁹ Cf. *Belgic Confession*, Arts. 8-11.

is the beginning of it all, but He is also the *end* of it all, for He does all things for His glory.

The key word in the heading of this paragraph is the word “revelation.” All that God does in history in heaven and on earth and in hell is *a revelation of some truth about Himself*. Even hell is a revelation of God’s justice in His hatred of sin.¹⁰

The covenant of grace is the revelation of God as a *covenant God*.¹¹

God’s revelation of Himself as a covenant God is *His speech concerning Himself*. He tells us about His covenant. All that speech is in the Holy Scriptures. He tells us how He establishes His covenant with us through Jesus Christ, for the whole Scriptures speak only and always of Christ.

However, God does not reveal to us His own covenant life by merely telling us about it. He reveals it to us by *taking us into His own covenant life*. This is an amazing miracle and a profound wonder of grace. It is like a family of parents and children who come across an abandoned little girl who is dirty and starving and knows nothing of the blessedness of family life. They feel sorry for her because she has no home and family and they want her to know what family life is like. They could simply take the time to tell her what it is like by describing their own family, but this would not mean much for the little waif.

And so they take her home with them, give her a bath, heal her sores, feed her and make her part of the family, by surrounding her with their love, treating her like their own daughter, and giving her an inheritance with the rest of the children. Gradually, although she marvels at the

¹⁰ *Belgic Confession*, Art. 16.

¹¹ Cf. Psalm 25:14, where the Psalm says that God *shows* His people His covenant.

goodness shown to her, she comes to believe that she is truly part of the family.

God is a family God in Himself, because He is Father and Son through the Holy Spirit. He takes us into His own family so that we become sons and daughters of God (II Cor. 6:18); Christ is our Elder Brother; we have a home in heaven (John 14:1-4); and God gives us an inheritance (Rom. 8:17).

I am going to spend a little time on this, for it is a very blessed concept and important for the doctrine of the covenant.

The Covenant in the Old Testament

The covenant in the Old Testament was pictured in the temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem and, prior to that, in the tabernacle (Ps. 68:15-16). The idea of the covenant as pictured in the temple was God dwelling with His people under one roof (Ps. 27:4-5). In the Old Testament, God was already the Bridegroom and Israel was the bride. They lived together in the temple. Two who live together under one roof live in fellowship with each other.

But the temple was only a *picture*. Not all Israel could live in the temple all the time; they had to plow their fields and raise their crops. Only occasionally could they come to the temple. Besides this, God and His people, though in one house, were quite a distance apart. God was in the Most Holy Place and Israel was in the Outer Court. Between them was 1) a veil through which no one could pass; (2) a whole lot of priests and Levites; and (3) the priests' and Levites' altar of burnt offering.

In Psalm 84:2-4, David expresses his jealousy of the sparrows which were able to build their nests closer to God than he was able to come. The

fellowship was something like a bridegroom and his new bride who move into one house, but each was assigned a room in a different part of the house, and they could only send messages to each other. This imperfect dwelling together was necessary, because the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin, and God dwells only with a *holy* people.

The Covenant in the New Testament

In the New Testament, Christ's body is the true temple of God (John 2:13-25).

Through Christ's cross, resurrection and ascension, Christ becomes the true temple of God. In Him, God and His church live together in covenant fellowship. In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9). God is in Christ (II Cor. 5:19), for He was God in our flesh, and we are the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:27). And so, God and His people live together in Christ in covenant fellowship.

So Scripture is full of expressions that teach us that the covenant is a *life of fellowship with God*. God *walked* with Enoch (Gen. 5:22) and with Noah (Gen. 6:9), and walking together is a picture of friendship. Abraham was called "the friend of God" (James 2:23).

God establishes His covenant with the whole creation (Gen. 9:8-17). How can the creation enter into a so-called "agreement" with God? And how can that covenant, a part of the covenant of grace, be conditional?

God established His covenant with Abraham by walking between the pieces of animals (Gen. 15). Did Abraham "enter into an agreement" with God? Abraham was sound asleep and God walked alone between the pieces of the animal.

The covenant formula is, "I will be their God and they shall be my

people.” You will find this expression in one form or another throughout Scripture and it is used to define the perfection of the covenant in heaven when “the tabernacle of God shall be with men” (Rev. 21:1-4).

Compare the two ideas. The Liberated say the covenant is an “agreement” in history into which God and man enter, each making promises and assuming obligations; a sort of an arrangement that is made at a peace table to prevent war; a “deal”—the success of which depends on both parties keeping their promises. The PRC hold the covenant to be a union of friendship and love between God and His people that can only be compared with a marriage or with the life of a family and that lasts forever, in which the infinite God of infinite perfection lives in happiness with His people as husband and wife, friends, Father and children in the joy of the triune God and Christ.

I’ll take the latter any time. It alone is warm, living, full of hope and vitality, a miracle of sovereign grace.

Questions for discussion

1. With the help of a good concordance, find the places in Scripture where the covenant formula is used to express the idea that God is the God of His people, and His people are the people of God.
2. Is the idea expressed in II Peter 1:9 that we are “partakers of the divine nature” a covenant idea? If so, how?
3. Why is the covenant described as a bond of love a richer and more blessed concept than the covenant as an agreement?

V.

The Roots of a Conditional Covenant

WE ARE DISCUSSING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN the Liberated view of the covenant and the biblical view that is held by the PRC. In previous chapter, I talked about the definition of the covenant, and I said that the Liberated teach that the covenant is a *treaty*, an *agreement*, or a *pact* between God and man. The biblical definition of the covenant, however, is that it is a *bond of fellowship and love between God and His people in Christ*. It is like a marriage and the fellowship of marriage.¹²

The Promise

The Liberated consider the *promise* of God to bless those who enter into an agreement with God to be *the covenant itself*. The covenant is never

¹² Cf. Ezek. 16, Hos. 1:10—note the covenant formula used here—cf. also Hos. 2:4-20; Eph. 5:22-33.

anything more than God's *promise*. The trouble is that God's promise is for time only and ends when it is fully given in heaven. Thus, the covenant is never "an everlasting covenant" as God told Abraham (Gen. 17:7).

But the Bible makes a distinction between the *covenant* itself and the *promise* of the covenant. The covenant itself is, as I said, a bond of fellowship and love similar to a marriage in which husband and wife become "one flesh." The promise of the covenant is described, from a formal point of view, in Hebrews 6:13-20, in which passage the absolute certainty of the promise is described.

For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even

Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.

The covenant promise as far as its *contents* are concerned are all the blessings of salvation in Christ in this life and in the life to come. This truth is the reason why heaven is described as being the full realization of the covenant and the bestowal of the promise.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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 (Rev. 21:1-3).

Notice how the church in heaven is described as a “bride adorned for her husband” for the blessedness of heaven is a marriage between Christ and His church. And notice, too, how the same covenant formula is used throughout Scripture: “They shall be my people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”

With Whom the Covenant is Established

The Liberated insist, and this is a crucial part of their view of the covenant,

that God establishes His covenant with *every baptized child*. Thus, the *promise* of salvation is given to every baptized child. And so, every baptized child is *in the covenant*. And because the Liberated say that “the covenant is the promise,” so every baptized child is given the promise. God promises every baptized child salvation.

Then every baptized child can say, “God has promised me salvation. This proves that God loves me and wants me to be saved. After all, I possess God’s promise.” That kind of teaching is the same idea as the well-meant gospel offer in which God expresses His desire to save all men. And indeed, the Liberated have no objections to the well-meant gospel offer.

The Bible teaches, however, that God makes His promise of the covenant *only to the elect*. And when the sacrament of baptism is performed, only the *elect* children of believing parents are given the promise of the covenant.

This is the clear teaching of Romans 9:8-15. Ishmael, the son of Abraham was circumcised, which is the same as being baptized in the new dispensation. But Ishmael was not given the promise, for “In *Isaac* shall thy seed be called.” And the reason behind this discrimination of God is the decree of election and reprobation (Romans 9:12-13).

Why, if All Baptized Children Receive the Promise, are not All Saved?

The Liberated teach that not all are saved because the promise is *conditional*. Every child has the promise, but he may lose it. He may be in the covenant, but he has no guarantee that he will *stay* in it, for his staying in the covenant is *dependent on his faithfulness*. The only way to *keep* the promise given to a child at baptism is to *fulfill the conditions of the covenant*.

These conditions are faith in Christ and obedience. And, while the Liberated dodge this inevitable conclusion, the fact is that the Liberated teach that the condition is fulfilled *by the choice of one's own free will*. This is Arminian theology, and certainly not Reformed.

The Liberated insist that *God* fulfills the condition; but, as I have shown earlier on, one cannot have it both ways. If God fulfills the condition, it is no longer a “condition,” but a *gift of God*. But if it is truly a condition—as it necessarily must be if the promise is made to all children who are baptized—then man fulfills the condition *by the choice of his own free will*.

But the PRC defend the Scriptures and insist that the promise of the covenant is *never conditional*. God establishes the covenant *Himself* and without man's agreement (cf. Gen. 15, where Abraham was sound asleep). And *He* maintains the covenant *so that anyone with whom the covenant is established will never lose it*. Ezekiel 16 is a vivid and moving picture of God's establishment of His covenant with a dead baby lying in its blood on the side of the road.

When that baby grew into an adult, that woman, made queen by the king, committed the most terrible and ugly sins a woman can commit. Did God abandon that adulterous wife? No! “Nevertheless, I will remember my covenant with thee in the days of thy youth ...” (Ezek. 16:60-63).

Psalm 89 describes God's covenant with David (Ps. 89:19-32). It happened that those with whom God established His covenant forsook God's law (v. 30) and broke His statutes and His commandments (v. 31). God said He would chastise them and visit their transgression with the rod and their iniquity with stripes (v. 32), and then He said this: “Nevertheless *my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to*

fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips" (vv. 33-34).

So God's covenant endures "forever" (vv. 36-37).

That is biblical and that is the teaching of the PRC. And remember: that truth is the *only* truth that can bring us comfort, for we always break God's covenant, but God is faithful.

Questions for discussion

1. Why is a general promise to all baptized babies like the well-meant gospel offer?
2. What is the difference between the promise of the covenant and the covenant itself?
3. To whom is the promise of the covenant given? Prove this from Scripture.
4. When is the promise of the covenant given?
5. Why does a general promise made to all baptized infants necessarily have to be a conditional promise?
6. Why does such a conditional promise mean that man has to do something for his salvation?
7. Discuss why the biblical view is the only view that can give comfort.

VI.

Implications for Other Doctrines

VARIOUS OTHER POINTS OF DOCTRINE are involved in holding to a conditional covenant.

Two Aspects of the Covenant

A difference in the Liberated view of the covenant and the PRC is also in the question whether there are “two aspects” to the covenant. The Liberated say that there are two aspects: when the promise of the covenant is given at baptism, that child baptized is *truly in the covenant of grace and has, as his own possession, the promises of the covenant ...* but that this is true only *objectively*. Only *when that child grows up and accepts and fulfills the conditions of the covenant* does he enter the covenant *subjectively*; that is, only when a covenant child fulfills the conditions of the covenant does he *receive the blessings of the covenant in full measure*. To be in the covenant *objectively* is true of a person *as long as he lives*. To possess the covenant *subjectively* is a

dubious matter, for a baptized person may never fulfill the conditions of the covenant.

The PRC deny this distinction, for it is not found in Scripture. However, the PRC *do* speak of the elect as being “in” the covenant and possessing all its blessings, while there are Esau and the wicked who come “under the administration of” the covenant. They, too, are baptized, hear the preaching, are taught the truth in catechism classes and live with covenant people. But though they come “under the administration of the covenant,” they are never actually “in” the covenant, nor receive its blessings.

Election and the Covenant

The Liberated reject the idea of the eternal decree of election determining who belong in the covenant and who do not. They reject vehemently any suggestion that election has anything to do with the covenant. They must take this position, because many are actually taken into the covenant who are *never saved*; and election is the fountain and cause of all salvation.

The PRC hold firmly to the idea that those who are members of God’s covenant are *the elect and the elect only*. Election determines who shall be God’s covenant people. This is the clear teaching of Romans 9:1-21.

And, because election is the determining factor for membership in the covenant, reprobation also applies to the covenant and determines those who *do not* belong in the covenant. This too, the Liberated deny.

Christ the Head of the Covenant

The Liberated deny that Christ is the Head of the covenant, that is, that the covenant is *established first with Christ and, in Christ, with those who*

belong to Christ. The Liberated rule Christ out of the realization of the covenant

This necessarily follows from the Liberated view of the covenant, for the Liberated rule election out as the determining factor in who belongs to the covenant and who does not. And election is always *in Christ* (Eph. 1:4).

Galatians 3:15 teaches that the seed of Abraham is *Christ* and that the promises were made to *Him*. And, in Him, the promises of the covenant are made to *all who belong to Christ* (Gal. 3:29).

Grace in the Covenant

The Liberated teach, as I observed earlier, that all the children who are baptized receive “a certain general, covenantal grace.” This grace is not only the testimony that God loves the baptized children without exception, but that He gives them grace *so that they have the power to fulfill or to reject the conditions of the covenant.* In other words, this common grace of the covenant gives those baptized a sort of free will to choose for or against the conditions laid down by God.

This is very similar to the common grace that God gives all who hear the gospel as an offer of salvation. That grace also makes it possible for everyone who hears the offer of the gospel to accept it or reject it. The Liberated teach a common grace *of the covenant.*

The PRC reject this unbiblical view. Scripture teaches that God’s grace is *always and only for the elect,* and that the *curse* of God rests on the wicked and unbelieving. The PRC reject any sort of common grace, whether it be in baptism or in the well-meant and gracious gospel offer.

Infants in the Covenant.

The Liberated agree with the Baptists that children born from believing parents *remain unconverted until they come to years of discretion and come to faith in Christ*. The Liberated make faith a *condition to membership in the covenant in the full sense of salvation*; while Baptists believe children must come to faith before they can be baptized. Both agree that children are the objects of evangelism just as the heathen, and must be led to accept Christ as their personal Savior. They, as Jonathan Edwards did, consider the children to be a “nest of vipers.”

The Bible teaches however, that infants are to be understood as being *in the covenant* and as *the heirs, even in their infancy, of the blessings of the covenant*. God saves the infants of believers and gives them His salvation, binding them also to Christ. This is the clear teaching of our Form for the Administration of Baptism. Consider the following statements: “That as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ.” “Do you acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin ... yet that they are sanctified in Christ ...?” We pray at baptism, “... we thank and praise thee, that thou has forgiven us *and our children*, all our sins ...”

This is also the teaching of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: “Are infants also to be baptized? Yes, for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God; and since redemption from sin by the blood of Christ ... is promised to them no less than to the adult ...” (Q. & A. 74)

This is taught in Scripture. Jeremiah was sanctified in his mother’s womb (Jer. 1:5; Luke 1:44). And Jesus warned the disciples not to prevent infants from being brought to him, for they too must be and are received by Christ, “for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:13-14).

This truth is especially of great blessedness to covenant parents, for they do not hope that, *someday in the future*, their children will be converted; they teach them the ways of God *because these children have the Holy Spirit in their hearts*. We do not need to look at our children as unconverted, nor ought we; they are elect of God, washed in Christ's blood and have in them the work of the Spirit.

However, we know from Scripture and experience that all our children are not saved. God's decree of election and reprobation runs also through covenant lines, as is evident from the history of Jacob and Esau and the history of the nation of Israel. Because we cannot tell who are elect and who are reprobate, we are to exercise what Calvin called, "the judgment of charity." That is, we are to treat our children as children of God, warn them of sin, point them to the cross of Christ as the only hope of their salvation and give them covenant instruction. When they refuse to walk in the ways of God's covenant they must be cut off from the church.

Some claim this is Dr. Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of "presupposed regeneration." It is not that and the charge is not valid. The trouble is that the Liberated teach presupposed *unregeneration*. That is not biblical.

Questions for discussion.

1. Prove from Scripture that election determines those who belong to the covenant.
2. How are the views of the Baptists and the Liberated similar?
3. Do Baptists hold to the same position as the Liberated on the points of difference that are mentioned in this and the preceding chapters? Spell out in more detail how considering our children as already regenerated and saved affects our instruction of them.
4. Look up *Canons* 1.17 and explain what this article has to do with the question of the salvation of infants.

VII.

Examining Other Denominational Views

WE ARE NEARING THE END OF OUR DISCUSSION of the differences between the covenant views of the Liberated and the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). I hope that by this time you have seen that the Liberated Churches hold to a covenant view that has many defects similar to Baptist views.

For one thing, it is very close to the Baptists in their view of children; for both the Baptists and the Liberated look at their children as *unconverted*.

Contrary to the Confessions

Another point to consider is the fact that the Liberated view, though few Liberated will admit this, is contrary to our confessions and our Form for the Administration of Holy Baptism. This fact alone puts the Liberated *outside the tradition of Reformed theology*.

Denial of Election

It is also true that the Reformed churches, from Calvin on, firmly believed that the sovereign and eternal decree of election determines who belong to the covenant. The Liberated idea was introduced into the stream of Reformed thought in the middle of the nineteenth century and, even then, was never widely held.

Arminian

Most importantly, the Liberated view of the covenant leads to outright Arminianism. Their view that God makes a conditional promise to all baptized children, compels them to explain why some of the children in the covenant who possess the promises are, nevertheless, lost. The only answer can be that they “do not fulfill the conditions.” But that leaves the decisive choice up to the individual baptized child, and God is dependent on man’s decision.

Election and reprobation, in Liberated theology, do not determine this final state of the baptized child, for both truths have been dismissed from any consideration of the covenant. Only man’s choice is left.

This all means that the cross of Christ is also for *all men*. In my private correspondence with a Liberated minister, he refused to limit the efficacy of the cross to the elect. It was clear that he wanted Christ’s death to be for all men. But if Christ’s death is for all men, then Christ died in vain for those who go lost.

Warm and Heart-Warming *versus* Cold and Mechanical

The Liberated view of the covenant as an agreement in which God and man bargain together and accept mutual conditions and obligations is cold

and without anything appealing. The view of the covenant as a *living bond of friendship and fellowship in love between God and His people* is warm, exciting, lively, full of sweet thoughts, and altogether in keeping with the great wonder of our salvation.

The Federal Vision

Many theologians have taken up this idea that the covenant is conditional and have carried the error of a conditional covenant into the whole of salvation.

Their arguments are sound. They have argued that the covenant is the fundamental blessing of salvation, of which all the other blessings are only parts. Justification, sanctification, forgiveness of sins, eternal life in heaven, etc., are simply individual blessings of the covenant.

If the covenant is *conditional*, they argue, then *all* the blessings of the covenant are also conditional.

The theologians who hold to the doctrine of a conditional covenant say that, because the *covenant* is conditional, *justification* is also conditional; that is, justification is by faith and works, and not as Luther thundered, “justification by faith alone!” All of salvation is conditional and every blessing depends on our doing our part before God can save us.

There are some more radical theologians who simply say, Martin Luther and the other reformers were wrong. There are others who say that *election itself* is conditional—a view of the Arminians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, against which the whole of the *Canons of Dordt* was written. All men are elect, or at least all born in the covenant, but that election can be lost if these in the covenant do not fulfill the conditions of the covenant. And so it is with *every* blessing of salvation. Although all who

are baptized have all these blessings given by God *objectively*, they will not receive them *subjectively* unless they *fulfill conditions of faith and obedience*.

Roman Catholicism

Justification by faith and works was (and is) the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Against that deadly error, all the reformers fought fearlessly and furiously. Now many in the church want to go back to that error and repudiate all that the Reformation has given us.

Because the position of the Federal Vision is the same as Rome on justification, many Reformed and Presbyterian people are streaming back to Rome and joining that false church. Why not? They believe the same thing about the very doctrine which Luther defined as the standing or falling of the church.

This terrible heresy of the Federal Vision is born in the womb of conditional theology.

What a dreadful development.

It is our calling to hold fast to the truth. God has graciously given us a very rich and beautiful doctrine of the covenant. We must never exchange the pure gold of the truth of the covenant for the ten cent trinkets which conditional theology offers us.

May God grant it.

Questions for discussion

1. Summarize in your discussions all the main difference between the Liberated view of the covenant and the view of the PRC. What view is closest to Scripture and our confessions?
2. Why is the Federal Vision theology a direct child of Liberated covenant theology?
3. While some churches have condemned the Federal Vision heresy, they have not disciplined those who teach it. Why do you suppose this is common?
4. Why do many who hold to the Federal Vision heresy go back to Rome? Is this the right thing to do?
5. Why is Arminianism in any form so appealing to people?

APPENDIX:

A Comparison of Views of God's Covenant

QUESTIONS	KUYPER	HEYNS	SCHILDER	HOEKSEMA (PRC)
What is the covenant?	An alliance between two parties against a third.	A conditional promise.	An agreement between two parties.	A relation of friendship between God and His people, wherein they are His friend-servants.
With whom does God establish this covenant?	The elect.	With Abraham and his seed, including his natural seed.	With those born in the church.	With Christ as the Head of His people (the elect), and all who are in Christ.
Is the covenant conditional?	No.	Yes.	Yes.	No.
Is the covenant unilateral (one-sided) or bi-lateral (two-sided)?	Unilateral.	Unilateral in the establishment, bi-lateral in the realization.	Unilateral in the establishment, bi-lateral in the realization.	Unilateral.
What is the basis for the baptism of infants?	Presupposed regeneration.	The promise, plus baptismal grace.	A general, conditional promise.	The organic ingathering of the church in the line of generations of believers.
How is the covenant realized?	God regenerates His people at birth. As they come to maturity, the presumption that all are regenerated falls away.	At baptism, each receive grace to accept or reject the promise, depending on the exercise of their will.	Those baptized accept the promise by their own will.	God gathers His elect unto Himself and into His life. The rest are hardened unto greater condemnation.
Can the covenant be broken?	In the old dispensation, yes; in the new, no.	Yes.	Yes.	No, not in its true, spiritual essence.
Is there an external and an internal covenant?	No. Presupposing all are included in the covenant.	Yes.	No, all baptized children are in the covenant.	The real covenant is a spiritual-ethical bond. But it does have a historical manifestation.
Are there conditions in the covenant?	No.	Yes, the promise is contingent upon man's acceptance.	Yes, a conditional promise, depending on our obedience.	No, God establishes and realizes His own covenant in His elect.

Useful Websites:

www.cprc.co.uk

reformedwitnesshour.org/

www.prca.org

standardbearer.rfpa.org/

www.prcts.org/journal

www.rfpa.org

www.britishreformed.org/

www.prcaphilippinesaudio.wordpress.com

www.cerc.org.sg

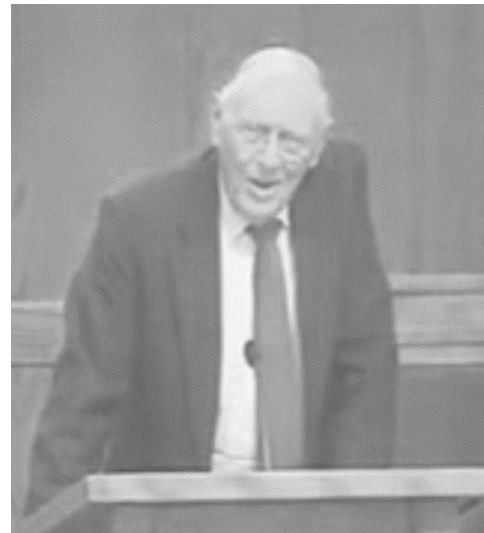
www.epc.org.au/

commongracedebate.blogspot.co.uk

The purpose of this pamphlet is to provide an in-depth examination and comparison of the covenant views of the Liberated Churches and the Protestant Reformed Churches.

If Christians are ignorant of the assaults made on this doctrine, how are they to defend this precious truth? How are we to praise and thank God for the unconditional covenant He has established with us? We can only be comforted and continue to fight the good fight of faith, if we understand that God's Covenant is established and maintained by God Himself and is therefore unbreakable!

Professor Herman Hanko, the author of this response, was ordained into the ministry of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1955. After pastoring congregations in Michigan and Iowa, in 1965 he was appointed professor of New Testament and Church History in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches in Grandville, Michigan. He served in this capacity till his retirement in 2001. In his retirement he remains busy teaching several seminary courses, leading Bible classes, preaching in different



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