

The Standard Bearer

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This Shall Be a Sign Unto You

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Luke 2:11-12

A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. This taxation brought Joseph to the little town of Bethlehem. It was the custom for taxes to be paid in the city from which one's family originated. Since Joseph was of the house of David, he went to Bethlehem, the city of David, to perform his civic duty.

Mary accompanied him. Mary was Joseph's espoused wife. This means that she was legally married to Joseph. However, as was the custom, she and Joseph did not know each other as husband and wife. They were in the period of waiting until the wedding feast. But Mary was great with child. Joseph was not the father of this child. This child had been conceived by the

Holy Spirit. The child she carried was the long-awaited Christ.

While in Bethlehem Mary gave birth to her son. This was the most unusual and wonderful birth in all history. It was most unusual in that Mary gave birth as a virgin. But more amazing yet was that through this birth the Son of God came into human flesh.

All that is mentioned of this miraculous birth is that "she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (v. 7).

The birth of such a wonderful child must be announced. And so an angel from heaven was sent to make known His birth. Interestingly, the angel came with these glad tidings not to the princes of the land or to the teachers of the people but to lowly shepherds outside of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flock by night.

The heart of this message we consider for this meditation.

Rev. Slopsema is pastor of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

A sharp contrast!

From the angel the shepherds learned of the birth of

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a great person. “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

A Savior had been born! A Savior is a deliverer, one that delivers from woe and brings happiness.

The people under Roman rule had come to call their emperor, Caesar Augustus, savior. But Caesar was no savior at all. At best he relieved the physical poverty and oppression of some. More likely he added to the distress of the lands he conquered. He was probably hailed as savior because he demanded such from the people.

The angel announced the birth of a true Savior—one that would truly deliver the people from their woe and misery and bring them a happiness that no Caesar ever could.

This babe was a true Savior because He is Christ, the Lord.

He is Christ, the Anointed One. This means that He is the One ordained by God to be His prophet, priest, and king. Jehovah had long ago promised to send such a Christ. All the Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings were shadows and types of the great Anointed One to come. As the Anointed One this babe born in Bethlehem would bring the salvation of God to mankind.

Emphasis falls, here, on the kingly office of the babe. He is Christ, *the Lord*. A lord is one who owns and thus rules another. So it is with Christ. He is the Lord King, as his forefather David was addressed by Bathsheba, “Let my lord king David live forever” (1 Kings 1:31). In addition, He was born in the city of David. This calls attention to the fact that He is the promised son of David, whose kingdom God will establish forever. Under His rule and in His kingdom the people of God will find their salvation. His salvation, therefore, far exceeds anything that Caesar could bring.

In sharp contrast to this was the lowliness of His birth. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. That is mentioned twice—once as Luke describes the birth of Christ in verse 7 and again by the angel that announces Jesus’ birth to the shepherds in verse 12. The meaning is clear. He was wrapped in a blanket that was secured with a band. He was laid in a feeding bunk. How the latter came about is explained earlier in this chapter. There was no room

in the inn. Mary and Joseph therefore had to resort to a stable, probably one of the caves on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

How unusual that one destined to such greatness was born in such humble circumstances!

An important sign!

According to the angel, the swaddling clothes and the manger were to serve as a sign to the shepherds.

The Bible speaks a great deal of signs. A sign was something unusual that served to prove the truth of what was either spoken or promised. The sign also depicted in some way that which it was designed to prove. All of Jesus’ miracles were signs that verified and depicted Jesus as the Savior. According to Isaiah 7:14 the virgin birth of Christ itself was a sign: “Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” Sometimes people would ask for a sign because what they were told stretched their faith. Zechariah, for example, asked for a sign because he struggled to believe the angel’s promise that he and his wife would have a son in their old age who would be the forerunner of the Christ. And he was given a sign. He was made deaf and dumb as a sign of his unbelief.

The angel also gave a sign to the shepherds. He had just announced the birth of the most unusual, important person in all history. Now God verified this fact to the shepherds and to the church of all ages by a sign.

We read not of *a* sign but of *the* sign. The sign that the angel gave is *the* sign of God that the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, has been born.

The sign is that he was to be found wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

This serves as a sign exactly because it clearly points to the very way in which this baby would establish His glorious kingdom and bring salvation to the people of God.

This sign makes no sense for those who look for an earthly kingdom and salvation. Most of the Jews in Jesus’ day looked for an earthly kingdom and salvation. They sought a restoration of the glory days of David and Solomon that would bring earthly wealth and power to Israel. Many in the church today look for an earthly kingdom of God. They envision a heaven here

on earth in which all the ills that have plagued mankind through history are finally overcome.

The lowly manger birth of Jesus does not point to such a kingdom. Were the work of Jesus the establishing of an earthly kingdom with an earthly salvation and glory, we would expect a baby born in a royal palace, attended by some unusual circumstance that would have impressed even the royalty of the world.

The lowly birth of Jesus can serve as the sign of a Savior who is Christ the Lord only when we understand that the kingdom Jesus came to establish and the salvation He provides in it are heavenly and spiritual.

The kingdom of God is heavenly and spiritual.

It is a spiritual realm in which Christ rules the hearts and lives of men in such a way that they willingly bow before Him and serve Him as King. It is a kingdom of righteousness in which only the righteous are citizens and in which they serve God in righteousness, according to His law. It is a kingdom in which the righteous live with God in intimate friendship and fellowship to enjoy Him forever. It is a kingdom that has its beginnings in this age but finds completion in eternity in a new creation. It is a kingdom in which, when it is complete, there will be no pain, no sorrow, no night, and no tears. It is a kingdom in which we find our salvation. And that salvation is a wonderful deliverance from sin and death.

Jesus' lowly birth serves as a sign of how Jesus will establish such a kingdom.

Jesus establishes His kingdom and brings salvation to God's people only on the basis of atonement. He must take the sins of the people upon Himself and bear all their punishment. He must also walk in perfect obedience and righteousness for them.

This work of atonement would consume His entire life, culminating at the cross.

Jesus' lowly birth serves as a sign of this great work

of atonement necessary to establish the great kingdom of God. It pointed to the greater poverty of our sin into which Christ came. It ultimately pointed ahead to the cross.

A proper recipient.

It is interesting that this sign was given to lowly shepherds and not to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

The shepherds were part of the elect remnant present in Israel that looked in faith to the coming of the Savior. Their faith is seen from the fact that they

sought out the Christ child and then spread abroad what they had seen and heard. This stands in sharp contrast to the unbelief of the leaders of the church who neither sought out the Christ nor spoke about Him.

The babe of Bethlehem had been born for the salvation and welfare of these shepherds. That is the force of the angel's message: "unto you is born this day...a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

And so the sign was also given to these shepherds. What astounding things were said of this child! They needed a sign to confirm their faith. They would find the


child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

These lowly, uneducated shepherds perceived the meaning of the sign. That is because they saw it in faith.

And with a faith reassured by this sign the shepherds joyfully spread abroad all that they had seen and heard.

We too must look upon this sign with the eye of faith. When we do so, we will see the great Lord King sent to establish the everlasting kingdom of God in which we and the church of all ages find the salvation of God.

Do you see it?

Then follow the shepherds in joyfully spreading the good news of our Savior's birth and work. 

*The lowly birth of Jesus
can serve as the sign
of a Savior who is
Christ the Lord
only when we understand
that the kingdom Jesus came
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and the salvation
He provides in it
are heavenly and spiritual.*

The Wonder of Bethlehem

“...Who for us men, and for our salvation ... was incarnate ... and was made man.”

Jesus Christ is very God come in the flesh. That is the confession of the church of God, and has been since Peter’s bold reply to the Lord’s question, “But whom say ye that I am?” Peter’s answer, revealed to him from the “Father which is in heaven,” was, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:15-17). The inspired apostle Paul would later write concerning Jesus: “made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:3-4). Thomas recognized that at Jesus’ appearance, and humbly confessed, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

The most profound revelation of who Jesus is flows from the inspired pen of John, in deceptively simple language. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:1, 14a).

Very God, eternally God, is this Jesus, in no wise less than the Father. (I and my Father are one—John 10:30.) Yet very man, with a real and complete human nature. One of the most frequently used

names Jesus applied to Himself was “the son of man,” and so much is He like us that Jesus calls us His brethren (Heb. 2:11).

Accordingly, the early church obeyed Christ’s command to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Clearly, the church maintained that Jesus is very God.

But how is that to be explained? Jehovah is not three, but one God. “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD” (Deut. 6:4). And if Jesus is very God, how can He be also very man?

We stand before the wonder of the incarnation!

For some in the early church, the solution was to ascribe to Jesus a human nature that was not real, but one that had only the *appearance* of a physical human nature (the error called Docetism). John may have that error in mind when he emphasized the real, physical human nature that Jesus had (John 1:14; I John 1:1; 4:2, 3). The church dismissed that notion but offered no clear description of the relation of the Son to the Father, or how the Son could be both very God and very man.

And thus it would have remained, had God not determined to clarify and develop the doctrine of the Son, the Mediator. To that end, God raised up a man who taught certain

deadly errors concerning the Son. Those errors forced the ancient church to face important questions about the Son and His place in the Godhead.

The man that God raised up for this purpose was Arius, an elder in the church in Alexandria. What was it that Arius taught?

To begin with, Arius taught that the Father existed first, as the only Unbegotten One. Although the Father begat the Son in eternity, yet one can say, insisted Arius, that there was a “time” in eternity when the Son was not. The Father always was, and “then” He begat the Son. The Father begat the Son so that the Son might create the universe, for the Bible teaches that all things were made by the Son (John 1; Col. 1).

What exactly is the Son then, according to Arius? The Son is a creature whom the Father formed (begat) in eternity as an act of His will. The Son is the greatest of all creatures, but a creature for all that.

In response to these teachings of Arius, Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, called a provincial synod early in 325. The synod condemned the teachings of Arius. When Arius refused to recant, he was deposed.

Thus the matter would have remained—an elder in a local con-

gregation was deposed for teaching error. But in the providence of God, it was not so to remain. For Arius had friends in high places in other regions of the church. He appealed to these friends, gave them *some* of his teachings, and convinced some churchmen that he had been unjustly condemned. When certain of these men took up his cause, the local controversy became international. It threatened to tear the church apart. For some sixty years, the church struggled to resolve the differences. No easy task, for they were dealing with the wonder of the incarnation.

This long and bitter controversy was part of God's perfect plan. He determined that the truth of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the wonder, be set forth as clearly as possible in an adopted confession.

God's sovereign plan included the emperor Constantine. Constantine had granted the church relief from persecution in 313 and granted Christianity favored status. Politically, this was a shrewd move, because Christianity was spreading all through his empire. If the empire had one religion, it would be stronger and more unified.

However, the Arian conflict threatened to divide the church, and thus the empire. Constantine was furious! He wrote an angry letter to Alexander and Arius ordering them to stop debating these matters, which were, he said, of no point or profit. Resolve your differences, he commanded.

But it was too late, even if Arius and Alexander would have been

reconciled. The controversy was not a small matter, and it could not be contained. Thus Constantine, whose heart, as with all kings, was in the hand of the Lord, who turns it whithersoever He wills, summoned the bishops to Nicea in 325 for the first ecumenical council to settle the raging conflict. There the church condemned Arius and his teaching, and adopted the Nicene Creed.

The controversy would continue for another sixty years. Athanasius would stand up as the uncompromising defender of the orthodox faith for about fifty years. The Council of Constantinople (381) would affirm and clarify Nicea's statement. This became the official, accepted creed of the church, even until today.

But the focus of this editorial is not on such details. Our interest is in the wonder of the incarnation that the creed of Nicea/Constantinople strove to set forth. Recall the thrilling language of faith that describes the Son.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God; Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, being of one essence with the Father; by whom all things were made....

The one phrase that expresses the ancient church's interest and intent (as well as it did that of Athanasius) follows: "who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man...."

That shows the seriousness of the matter. Contrary to Constantine, this is a matter of the greatest significance—the issue of who and what the Savior is. It was not wrangling over some abstract doctrine. It was not power or personal justification that Alexander, and later Athanasius, pursued. It was rather the truth about salvation. The Christ of Arius cannot save. The Savior must be very God, truly one with the Father, eternally God, the same essence.

Only as very God could the Son give an accurate knowledge of the Father. A mere creature could never comprehend God, and thus could never give an accurate, saving knowledge of God.

In addition, only as very God could Christ save us—the redemption, the salvation from death, imparting eternal life, sanctification—none of that could be accomplished by a mere creature.

At the same time, the ancient church, led by Athanasius, understood that Christ was, had to be, also man—body, soul, mind, and will. For only what was assumed by Christ could be redeemed by Him, and saved.

God gave Athanasius to the churches at that crucial time. I see in Athanasius a stalwart lover of God, who courageously stood for the truth, no matter the personal cost. He was willing to suffer being put out of office five times.

But I also see in Athanasius a pastor who loved his sheep. And he understood that the gospel was at stake. His congregation, and the church universal, needed a Savior,

and that could only be one who was very God and very man.

The church of the fourth century agreed with Athanasius. And the church of the twenty-first century

still gratefully maintains the creed, confessing her faith in the Savior who is very God, of the same essence as the Father, and “who, for us men and for our salvation, came down

from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” That is, confesses the wonder of Bethlehem.



ALL AROUND US

REV. CLAY SPRONK

■ Determining Right and Wrong

Penn State’s head football coach, Joe Paterno, lost his job last week. He was fired. At the age of 84 Joe Paterno was still a capable football coach, as is indicated by his team’s 8-1 record at the time he was fired. Paterno’s firing was occasioned by the alleged horrific crimes of his former assistant, Jerry Sandusky. Sandusky is accused of raping at least eight boys. Joe Paterno knew for nine years about one instance of Sandusky’s sodomizing of a ten-year old boy, but he failed to do anything with that knowledge other than tell his boss at Penn State University about the incident.

Understandably, almost universal outrage has been expressed in the media over Sandusky’s crimes, as well as Paterno’s failure to make sure he was punished for them or at least that he was prevented from committing more crimes. Many articles condemning Sandusky and Paterno can be found by doing a simple search on the Internet. It seems our society still views the sexual exploitation of children as a monstrous crime.

But why? Why have so many concluded that Sandusky’s actions were monstrously wicked? Why have so many concluded that Joe Paterno’s failure to act more decisively is so reprehensible that he deserved to be fired and have his reputation tarnished for good? How do we determine what is right and, in this case, what is wrong?

Asking this question brings out the hypocrisy of many in the media who are condemning Sandusky, Paterno, and Penn State University. Many of the people who express outrage over the sexual exploitation of children promote the murder of unborn children, homosexuality, and all kinds of other monstrously wicked acts. One example, is Maureen Dowd, a columnist for

the New York Times. Dowd approves of abortion and homosexuality but strongly condemns Sandusky, Paterno, and others at Penn State who failed to act more decisively. (Cf: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/09/opinion/dowd-personal-foul-at-penn.html>.) Dowd gives a clue to how she and so many like her determine what is right and wrong when she writes,

Like the Roman Catholic Church, Penn State is an arrogant institution hiding behind its mystique. And sports, as my former fellow sports columnist at *The Washington Star*, David Israel [I could not find the article by Israel—CS], says, is “an insular world that protects its own, and operates outside of *societal norms* as long as victories and cash continue to flow bountifully.” Penn State rakes in \$70 million a year from its football program [emphasis added].

Societal norms, what is normal in society, apparently determines right and wrong for Dowd and probably for many others in the media and in society generally. The reaction to what Sandusky did and Penn State’s cover-up likely has been so strong because the vast majority of people in society believe pedophilia is wrong.

The trouble with determining right and wrong on the basis of what society decides is normal is that what society defines as normal may change, and therefore right and wrong may change. One day, and perhaps this day may come soon, what Sandusky did may be viewed as perfectly legitimate by our society. And in that day outrage will be directed not towards those who abuse children but to those who condemn it, as is the case with abortion and homosexuality.

In order to determine right and wrong, we need a consistent standard. That is what the Bible is. The Bible is consistent because it is God’s Word. God, who cannot lie or contradict Himself, who is also perfectly just in His judgments, reveals what is right and wrong in

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the Bible. The Bible is the *only* reliable moral compass there is, and without it man cannot determine what is right or wrong.

What Jerry Sandusky did is monstrously wicked because God says so. He broke the laws of the state of Pennsylvania, but, more seriously, he broke the law of God. Joe Paterno apparently does not see it that way. Nor do those in the media who are condemning Sandusky and Paterno. They are all wrong.

■ All the Way Back...to Rome

*The Washington Post*¹ reported on October 9 that St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Maryland converted to Roman Catholicism. The report states, "In doing so, St. Luke's became the first Episcopal church in the United States to convert under new Vatican rules meant to attract disaffected Protestants." The "new Vatican rules" were made in 2009 to allow Anglican congregations, parishes, or dioceses to convert to the Roman Catholic Church en masse. The Roman Catholic Church's new rules seem surprisingly tolerant. Converted Anglicans will be allowed to keep some of their own worship practices, and married clergymen are allowed to remain married and become priests in the Roman Catholic Church, although they will not be allowed to become bishops.

The Roman Catholic Church targeted the Anglican Church because of the deep division in the Anglican Church over issues such as women and homosexuals holding church offices. Many Anglicans who oppose the ordination of women and homosexuals are unhappy with the division in their denomination and in turn are attracted to the Roman Catholic Church because of its unified stance against their ordination. The Roman Catholic Church is happy to do what it can to attract these Anglicans back to its fold. And St. Luke's was happy to go back to Rome.

The main reason St. Luke's was happy to go back to Rome is that in Rome there is "one clear religious authority." The members "said they didn't like the range of views that Anglican clerics expressed on issues such as same-sex relationships and Christianity's sole claim to

God." The former pastor of St. Luke's, who now hopes to join Rome's clergy, also explained that the church already "aligned...more closely with [Roman] Catholic theology than Protestant theology." The road of St. Luke's back to Rome included a church atmosphere in which chaos reigned because there was no clear authority and there was indifference to the doctrinal chasm between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

If the road of St. Luke's to Rome is a blueprint for how others will return to Rome, we must conclude that there are also Presbyterian and Reformed churches on the road to Rome. In Reformed and Presbyterian churches the one clear authority is Scripture rather than the Pope. But in many Presbyterian and Reformed denominations the authority of Scripture is no longer recognized. Either Scripture's authority is explicitly denied or it is practically ignored, so that the result is chaos in the church. People with radically different interpretations of Scripture on important issues are allowed to remain in the same denomination. That situation becomes wearying. How long will it be before people in these Reformed and Presbyterian churches are attracted to the apparent peace of Rome, where there is the clear authority of the pope?


Doctrinal indifference is also found in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Many do not want to condemn Roman Catholic doctrines anymore, as is done by the great Reformation creeds. Roman Catholic doctrines are even taught in some Reformed and Presbyterian denominations. The entire Federal Vision movement that is plaguing Reformed and Presbyterian denominations essentially espouses Roman Catholic doctrine. It could almost be said of some Reformed and Presbyterian churches that they "align...more with Roman Catholic theology than with Protestant theology." Would it really be so surprising if these churches go all the way back to Rome? Today it might sound unthinkable. But 20-30 years from now we will probably be as unsurprised to hear of this as we are to hear of an Episcopal Church going back to Rome.

What do they find in Rome? Authority. But not God's authority. The pope, a man, rules Rome. He does so tyrannically. There is no freedom in Rome. There is bondage to man's rules, to man's false doctrines and evil worship practices. There is no joy, no bless-

¹ http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/episcopal-parish-in-bladensburg-converts-to-roman-catholic-church/2011/10/09/gIQCMAfYL_story.html viewed on November 14, 2011.

edness in Rome. The road to Rome ends in spiritual destruction.

Let's stay off the road to Rome. We have liberty, truth, and spiritual joy. We have the authority of

Scripture. May we ever bow to it. And we have our Reformed creeds. May we ever love and confess their truths. 

FEATURE ARTICLE

PROF. DAVID ENGELSMAN

The 60th Anniversary of the “Declaration of Principles”: A Commemoration* (cont.)

An Analysis of Its Contents(2)

Specific Contents

As to its format, the Declaration is set out in outline form. It consists of a preamble (which was added to the Declaration after its provisional adoption in 1950, at the synod of 1951) and of four distinct sections.

Between the preamble and the first main section there is what might be called a brief introduction. This introduction establishes that the PRC stand on the basis of Scripture, described as the “infallible Word of God,” and on the basis of the Three Forms of Unity. In addition, the PRC “accept” the liturgical forms, which are then listed and among which the baptism form has great importance in the body of the Declaration.

The special importance of this introduction is that it affirms the creeds as the basis of the PRC, inasmuch as the creeds are binding summaries of the Bible. Therefore, the Declaration may appeal to the creeds as authoritative for answering the covenant question that was troubling the churches.

Section I

Section I is a repudiation of the three points of com-

mon grace adopted by the CRC in 1924, especially the teaching of the first point concerning the well-meant offer. Section I also affirms that the grace of God in the preaching is particular and that the promise, which the preaching proclaims, is particular, concerning the elect only.

Rejection of the doctrine that the preaching is a well-meant offer to all hearers and affirmation that the grace of God in the preaching is particular bear on the controversy over the covenant. Section I, D, 2 indicates the connection: “The preaching of the gospel is not a gracious offer of salvation on the part of God to all men, *nor a conditional offer to all that are born in the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, to all that are baptized*” (emphasis added).

The doctrine of a conditional covenant simply applies the teaching of a well-meant offer to the covenant. According to the doctrine of a conditional covenant, God on His part is gracious to all the baptized children of believers, those who perish as well as those who are saved. In this common (covenant) grace, He promises salvation to all of them alike and establishes His covenant with all of them alike.

Then, in Section I, follow quotations from various creeds.

Section II

Section II of the Declaration is the longest section. It is the heart of the Declaration. This section gets into the covenant controversy and draws from the creeds

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basic truths of the gospel that expose and condemn the conditional covenant as the heresy of Arminius and Pelagius *applied to the covenant and its salvation*.

Section II begins with two propositions that lay the foundation for the defense of an unconditional covenant. One is the proposition that election is the fountain of all salvation and of all the gifts of grace, including faith. The other is the proposition that Christ died for the elect, and for the elect only.

On the basis of these two fundamental, creedal doctrines, the Declaration affirms that the covenant promise, the covenant, and all the covenant blessings are for the elect children of believers only.

Section II also states that faith is a gift, not a condition.

Such is the importance of this section of the Declaration that in it occurs virtually the only argumentation that is found in the document. Significantly, this argumentation concerns Question 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Question 74 is the Catechism's explanation and defense of infant baptism.

Are infants also to be baptized?

Yes; for since they, as well as their parents, belong to the covenant and people of God, and both redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost, who works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to their parents, they are also by Baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be ingrafted into the Christian Church, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the Old Testament by Circumcision, in place of which in the New Testament Baptism is appointed.¹

The covenant controversy in the PRC centered on the baptized children of believers. The question was whether God makes the gracious promise of the covenant to all the baptized children, conditionally, or only to the elect children, unconditionally. The argument of the Declaration at this point is that Question 74 of the Catechism cannot be understood any other way than as referring to the elect children of believers. According to Question 74 the covenant promise is made to *infants*, in their infancy, prior to their baptism. But infants are obviously unable to perform any condition.

¹ Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 74, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1966), 331.

In addition, the covenant promise, which is the basis of infant baptism, *includes the promise of faith*: "the Holy Ghost, who works faith, [is] promised to them." The covenant promise does not depend upon the child's act of faith as a *condition* for its realization. Rather, God solemnly vows to *give* faith to the children who are the object of the promise, as one of the promised blessings of salvation.

In light of Question 74 of the Catechism, not only is it false doctrine to teach that faith is a condition of the covenant, but it is also absurdity: "I [God] promise to give you [infant child] faith, on the condition that you produce faith."

A fatal weakness, and obvious error, of the doctrine of a conditional covenant is that, contrary to Question 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism, it does not include faith in the covenant promise.

Since election is the fountain of all the blessings of salvation (including faith), since Christ died for the elect (to purchase faith for them), and for them only, and since the covenant promise includes God's vow to give the objects of the promise faith, the children who are the objects of the covenant promise in Question 74 of the Catechism are the elect children. And the covenant promise to them is unconditional.

For these principles, Section II appeals to the creeds, which it quotes.

Section III

Section III draws conclusions from the preceding sections, especially from Section II. It does so in good, antithetical, Reformed fashion, that is, both negatively and positively. We *repudiate*, and we *affirm*.

The main negative conclusion deserves to be quoted in full: "We repudiate the teaching that the promise of the covenant is conditional and for all that are baptized." This settled the covenant controversy in the PRC.

The chief positive affirmation is that "God surely and infallibly fulfills His promise to the elect." God makes the promise of the covenant only to the elect children, and the promise includes *its fulfillment*. When God promises, He does not merely express what He would like to do—what He is willing to do—but what He certainly will do in and for the one to whom He makes the promise.

Section III also contains affirmations of the responsibility before God of both the elect and the reprobate. The foes of the Declaration charged against it that it did not do justice to human responsibility. On the advice of Herman Hoeksema, the synod of 1951 added an important passage to the edition of the Declaration that had been adopted provisionally in 1950. This passage warded off the charge that the Declaration did not do justice to responsibility, and serves to guard the PRC against the evil of antinomianism. Antinomianism rejects law, or demand, as an aspect of covenant life. The Declaration affirms that God's covenant promise "confronts us with the *obligation* of love, to walk in a new and holy life, and constantly to watch unto prayer" (emphasis added).

Another element of this affirmation of responsibility, specified in Section III, is that the preaching comes to all who hear with the serious command to all to believe and repent. The preaching also (promiscuously) announces to all hearers the (particular) promise that everyone who does believe and repent will be saved. This makes plain to the Christian world that the PRC are not hyper-Calvinists, and helps to guard the PRC against this error.

Like the other sections, Section III quotes the creeds extensively in support of both the repudiation and the affirmations.

Section IV

Section IV is anomalous. It has nothing to do with the great covenant controversy that is the concern of the Declaration. It has to do, rather, with church polity. Section IV affirms the commitment of the PRC to the autonomy of the local congregation.

No doubt, at the time this affirmation was a last-ditch, feeble attempt to maintain contact with the RCNlib, in spite of the Declaration's condemnation of those churches' doctrine of the covenant. The RCNlib were known as fierce enemies of synodical hierarchy, as indeed are the PRC.

If this was the purpose of Section IV, the attempt failed, and was doomed to fail. Within weeks of the adoption of the Declaration, Schilder wrote *finis* to all relations between the RCNlib and the PRC, in an article titled, "*De Kous is Af*" [ET: "The Stocking Is Finished"].

Section IV, too, quotes the creeds to demonstrate that the autonomy of the local congregation is Reformed and biblical.

Covenant Principles

What now are the "principles" of the covenant that the Declaration declares on the basis of the Reformed creeds?

Ophoff wrote that the two main teachings of the Declaration are the truth of the unconditional promise and the truth that the promise is to the elect only. Hoeksema agreed.

We may be more detailed.

First, God graciously establishes His covenant with the elect, particularly, the elect children of believers, and with them only.

Second, God establishes His covenant with these children by gracious promise to them, and to them only. The covenant promise, "I will be your God, and you will be my people," is not to and for all the baptized children, but for the elect children only.

Third, this promise God certainly fulfills, in every case. The promise includes the certainty of its realization with every child to whom God makes the promise. In contrast, the doctrine of a conditional covenant has God's promise failing in multitudes of instances.

Fourth, the covenant promise is unconditional. It depends only upon the gracious, promising God, not upon the baptized infant.

Fifth, the promise includes faith, that is, when God promises to be the God of a child He promises to give that child faith. Faith is a covenant *gift*, not a covenant *condition*.

Last (but so far from being least, this, to my mind, is the main principle), election governs the covenant. This truth was at the heart of the covenant controversy in the PRC in 1951. It is at the heart of the controversy of Reformed orthodoxy with the federal vision today. Although it is never explicitly stated, this fundamental truth certainly is implied in the contents of the Declaration.

The issue, once again, as always down the ages, is God's eternal, sovereign, unconditional predestination.

Now in relation to the covenant of grace.

(to be concluded) 

Raising the Sons of the Covenant (2)

I concluded my last article with a discussion of the urgency of raising our sons to be strong in the Lord. This strength begins with a living knowledge of the Lord and strong faith in Him. It is urgent that we teach our sons to be spiritually strong in a desire to be holy before the Lord and to resist the temptation to immorality in their lives. The world encourages sexual adventure and excitement. This is considered by the world to be a sign of manliness. The world cares not a whit about morality.

Our covenant young men must be taught to respect and honor young women as fellow image bearers of God and not to use and abuse them for the gratification of ugly, sinful passion. Even our hearts and minds must be kept pure and holy. We must do nothing in life that stirs up unclean thoughts and desires. If young men are not taught by their parents, they are in danger of learning the evil philosophy and practice that the world is quite eager to teach them. The modern-day world has more and more powerful instruments for influencing our covenant young men, already very early in their youth. Some of the electronic wizardry of our time can easily be used without the knowledge and understanding of parents. Especially in our modern times, great diligence is required by parents to guard and protect their young teenagers.

Dating practices ought to be supervised by parents, and there should be discussion in the home about the importance of moral purity and holiness in this area. Careful rules and guidelines must be established in our covenant homes. Parents must not be deterred by the common worldly opinion that adamantly maintains that dating is so private and personal a matter that par-

ents have no right to pry into it in any way. Scripture is quite specific about teaching morality. See for example I Thessalonians 4:1-9. It is urgent that we keep our body as the temple of the Lord and not defile it with fornication. Otherwise the service of God will be made impossible. See also II Corinthians 6:15-20. We cannot glorify God with our bodies if we give them over to the grievous sins of immorality and fornication.

Spiritual self-control is required for all sorts of sinful passions that may arise from the sinful nature with which children are born. Unholy and uncontrolled anger is a powerful sinful passion. Sinful anger is displeasing to God. It wreaks havoc in one's personal life and brings the judgment of God upon one. In marriage and the home, in the church and in society, sinful anger can do great damage. The urgency of control over sinful anger must be taught in the home to the sons of the covenant. Scripture speaks of this in many places. Paul exhorts Christians, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you with all malice" (Eph. 4:31). There is a parallel passage in Colossians 3. And the wise writer of Proverbs has much to say about this subject. "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Prov. 16:32).

Spiritual lessons in this area will do much to prepare a young man for a happy, stable, and peaceful Christian marriage. Many marriages are destroyed by uncontrolled anger of men who as husbands and fathers take out their sinful anger on their poor undeserving wives and helpless children. Paul exhorts fathers in the Christian home not to provoke their children to anger, lest they be discouraged (Col. 3:21). It is for good reason that this exhortation is given specifically to fathers. The blessed peace of Jesus Christ will keep our homes only in the way of our controlling sinful anger.

God created both man and woman with a moral, ra-

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tional nature. Though this is a point militantly debated in our day, we believe that it is true that God has made the mind of a man different from the mind of a woman in certain respects. This has nothing to do with making men inherently superior to women. God's Word commands that we live according to His knowledge and wisdom in every part of our life. Our life as Christians must be a life of principled obedience and not merely of formal, cold legalism. Youth is the time when this knowledge and wisdom must be firmly implanted in the minds and hearts of our sons and daughters. Spiritual principles must be followed in our lives, strong principles of the fear of God and love for Him, principles of righteousness and truth. Then there will be no need for law upon law and precept upon precept. Then our sons will by the grace of God be prepared for genuine Christian living.

Our young men must be trained in the covenant home to be able to endure hardness. Our ungodly society promotes laziness and softness and ease. Young men are often taught to expect that everything will come to them with little or no effort on their part. They are taught the false idea that the world owes them a living, and parents are obligated to give them virtually everything they might want. If they do not get what they want, they have the right to complain. This kind of thinking leads to a life of irresponsibility and sin.

Covenant sons must learn restraint and rigorous discipline in the days of their youth. They must be taught that we all have a calling and responsibility in life. They must be taught the virtues of steadfastness, patience, faithfulness, and endurance. They must be taught never to compromise Christian principles in their lives, even when this means suffering for Christ's sake.

Our covenant sons must be trained to be faithful providers and protectors in a covenant family and responsible leaders in the church. Much diligent preparation is necessary for this. The days of youth are the God-ordained time and opportunity for this. Laziness is a moral and spiritual issue. So is the refusal to take up one's God-given responsibility. One of the most frequent warnings of wise Solomon in the book of Proverbs is against the sins of slothfulness and total lack of concern and preparation for the future.

Discipline and great effort is required by young men of the covenant in the matter of preparing themselves for a good occupation later in life so that they might support their family, the church, and the causes of the kingdom. God gives to young people different natural abilities. Not all are cut out for occupations that require a great deal of rigorous academic preparation. Young men in their homes need to be taught to work hard, working with their hands the things that are good. Our sons need to be taught to use their God-given talents in the fear of the Lord and for the cause of His church and kingdom. A highly educated, very gifted, and well-trained young man who uses all this only for his own glory and advancement and success in the world is worthy of no praise in the sight of God. His whole life will be nothing but vanity. The young man who whiles away the days of his youth and does not think of the need for having a good occupation to be able to provide for himself and for his family is also to be condemned. Paul writes to pastor Timothy that he must instruct young men to be sober and to be diligent in the fear of God. He characterizes those who do not provide for their own household as worse than an infidel. See I Timothy 5:8.


Life is difficult, for some much more so than for others. The years ahead for many will in the providence of God involve sorrows and trials. In the providence of God, these trials and hardships will sanctify us and strengthen us in the service of the Lord.

Our young men need to learn to be able to endure hardships and to be ready to make personal sacrifices for causes greater than their own satisfaction and glory in the world. They that will live godly must be ready to suffer persecution for the Lord's sake. A life of godliness must be prepared for by great spiritual exercise and discipline. Remember the famous statement of the apostle Paul in writing to young Timothy: "Exercise thyself rather unto godliness. Bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things" (I Tim. 4:7, 8).

Our young men need to learn, in the days of their youth, to endure hardship. They ought not to be coddled and pampered by their parents, so that they grow up to be soft and weak, spiritually lazy, and yielding to every opportunity to escape the hardship that

God sends. They must be taught not to become bitter and to complain about hardships in life but to face them with spiritual courage and strength. The God-ordained position of covenant fathers requires that they be able to lead their wives and families in the midst of and through great hardships by prayer, through faith in

God, with spiritual endurance, courage and patience, and trust in God. Our covenant sons must learn this in the days of their youth.

Our next article will address the unique aspects of raising our covenant daughters. 

SPECIAL ARTICLE

REV. DOUGLAS KUIPER

“Grieve Not the Spirit”: Sins Against the Holy Spirit (3)

Grieving and Quenching the Holy Spirit

In our last article we examined the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, more commonly known as the “unforgivable sin.” They commit this sin who, being in the sphere of the covenant and knowing the gospel of grace, harden their hearts against this gospel, and manifest their hardened hearts by their blasphemous contempt of the Holy Spirit.

No elect child of God will ever commit this sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. God will graciously preserve His own from doing so.

This assurance that God’s elect will never blaspheme the Holy Spirit must not lead us to suppose that God’s children will never, in any way, sin against the Holy Spirit. Scripture speaks of other sins against the Holy Spirit as well, and warns us against them. *Israel*, God’s covenant nation, *vexed* His Holy Spirit (Is. 63:10). Not unbelievers, but *believers* in the church of Christ are warned not to “grieve” or “quench” the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30, I Thess. 5:19).

To inform us regarding these sins, and encourage us to guard ourselves against them, is our goal in these articles.

Vexing and Grieving the Spirit: Isaiah 63:10 and Ephesians 4:30

Isaiah 63:10 mentions the sinful response of wilderness-wandering Israel to Jehovah’s loving-kindness: “But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore was he turned to be their enemy, and fought against them.” And the inspired apostle, exhorting the saints to put off the old man and put on the new man, wrote: “And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30).

To vex the Spirit and to grieve the Spirit are essentially the same thing. The Hebrew word translated “vex” in Isaiah 63:10 means to afflict with pain or grief. The Greek word translated “grieve” in Ephesians 4:30 means to make one sorrow or grieve.

As God’s children, we grieve the Holy Spirit when we do not live a sanctified life—that is, whenever we violate God’s law. Especially our gross, willful sins grieve the Spirit; but any transgression of God’s law, any hatred shown toward God and the neighbor, grieves the Spirit. Four points demonstrate this.

First, consider the confessional teaching of Reformed churches, in the Canons of Dordt, Head 5, Article 5. Article 4 referred to the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints. Article 5 then says (*italics mine*):

By such enormous sins, however, they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, *grieve the Holy Spirit*, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound

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their consciences, and sometimes lose the sense of God's favor for a time, until, on their returning into the right way of serious repentance, the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them.¹

Clearly, the Spirit is grieved by our gross, deliberate sins.

Second, the context of Ephesians 4:30 indicates that we grieve the Spirit not only by gross transgressions of God's law, but also by sins of the heart, and by sins that arise against our will in us. Living out of the power of the new man (Jesus Christ in us), and mortifying the old man (our depraved nature that we received from Adam), we are to put aside lying and to speak truth (25); to put aside stealing and to labor (28); to put aside corrupt communications and to speak what is good to the use of edifying (29); and to put away "all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking... with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (31-32). Notice—not only must we put aside the obvious sins of lying and stealing, but also the heart sins of bitterness and malice. All this is found in the context of the admonition not to grieve the Spirit, for the Spirit is grieved by our failures to live according to God's law, and manifests His grief by taking from us the conscious enjoyment of fellowship with God, until we repent.

Third, Israel's wilderness wanderings, to which Isaiah refers, illustrate this point. Time and time again, Israel (not each and every member, but the nation acting collectively) sinned against God's law. Within forty days of receiving that law, she had Aaron make golden calves to worship. She committed fornication and adultery. She murmured and complained—failures to trust in the one true God, and so a violation of the first commandment. She believed the report of the ten evil spies, and so refused to enter Canaan, being guided by "the angel of his presence" (Is. 63:9), the preincarnate Christ, who guided Israel by His Word and Spirit. All this vexed and grieved the Spirit. Israel's judgment was that she must wander forty years in the wilderness—her

deeper enjoyment of covenant fellowship with God in the promised land was delayed.

Fourth, that we grieve the Spirit by sinning against God's law is evident from considering the distinctive person and the particular work of the Holy Spirit Himself. As the *Holy Spirit* of God, proceeding from the Father and the Son, He unites Father and Son together in holy love and fellowship. As the *Holy Spirit* of Christ, poured out on the church on Pentecost, He brings the church and Christ into deeper and closer union, applying the blessings of salvation that Christ earned for us. As the *Holy Spirit*, His is particularly the work of *sanctifying* us, as Answer 24 of our Heidelberg Catechism indicates. When we do not strive to live out of His sanctifying power, but rather out of the power of our old man of sin, the Spirit is vexed (pained) and grieved (made to sorrow).

What Israel *did* do, and what saints are *prone* to do, God's church and saints in every age must *not* do: we must not vex or grieve the Spirit. We guard against doing so by striving to live out of faith and the sanctified power of the Spirit, by obeying God's law in love for God and His law, and by delighting in fellowship with Him.

In what sins does the world delight? To what sins are we susceptible? Let us hate and fight them, as those delivered from sin's corruption! We have the power of Christ, by His Spirit, to do so! And we have incentive—God brought us into covenant with Him!

How to guard against grieving the Spirit, the Spirit Himself indicates in Ephesians 5:1-4:

Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savor. But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks.

"As becometh saints"—sanctified by the Spirit Himself!

Resisting and Quenching the Spirit: Acts 7:51 and 1 Thessalonians 5:19

Stephen accused the Jews of resisting the Holy Spirit—

¹ This and the following reference from the Canons are taken from *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005).

it: “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as did your fathers, so do ye.” And the apostle admonished the saints in Thessalonica, “Quench not the Spirit” (I Thess. 5:19).

To understand these passages rightly, we must see that they do not refer to the Spirit’s subjective work in the heart of God’s children (the work of regenerating, bestowing faith, and sanctifying), but they refer to the Spirit’s objective testimony to Jesus Christ in the preaching of the gospel to all who hear.

That these passages refer to the Spirit’s testimony in the preaching of the gospel is clear from the context of both passages. In Acts 7:52, explaining his accusation that the Jews resisted the Holy Spirit, Stephen said: “Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One: of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers.” Likewise Paul, explaining his admonition not to quench the Spirit, says in verse 20: “Despise not prophesyings.”

That both passages refer to the Spirit’s testimony in the preaching of the gospel indicates that resisting the Spirit and quenching the Spirit are related. The relationship is this: the first leads to the second; to persist in resisting the Spirit is to quench the Spirit. Yet they are distinct sins.



To resist the Spirit is to refuse to believe the gospel that is preached by God’s messengers. The Jews of old resisted the Holy Spirit by refusing to believe the word of the prophets. The Jews of Stephen’s day resisted the Holy Spirit by refusing to believe the gospel of Christ. In both instances the Jews manifested their sin of resisting the Holy Spirit by hating and killing Christ and the prophets.

Today also, he resists the Spirit who rejects the gospel. Even nominal churches resist the Spirit by rejecting the teachings of Scripture and refusing to heed the call to repentance and faith.

God’s true children must guard against this sin.

Some of God’s children are guilty of this sin *before* they become confessing Christians, by hating the gospel and persecuting true believers. But even *after* one professes Christianity, he is still prone to commit this sin. When the preached Word steps on our toes, and we blame the preacher for our pain; when we Pharisaistically think to ourselves that God is pleased with us for certain things we have done, in addition to Christ’s work for us; or when we despise the call to repent from a sin that we love—these are forms of resisting the Spirit.

The opposite of resisting the Spirit is loving the Word of God as it comes through the proclamation of the gospel—readily listening to it, eagerly submitting to it, changing one’s life in accordance with it. To this we are called; and this God’s people will do, by His grace.

It should be clear, then, that by resisting the Spirit man does not frustrate God’s purpose. God never intended to save those who resist the Spirit to their dying day. His will to condemn and destroy them is carried out exactly in the way of their resisting the Spirit. On the other hand, by His Spirit God always turns those of His children who commit this sin, showing that His Spirit is stronger than they are.

Referring to the Spirit’s objective testimony to Christ in the preaching of the gospel, and not to the Spirit’s subjective and gracious work in the hearts of God’s people, these passages themselves oppose the interpretation that Arminians give them. These passages do not teach that God’s grace in the hearts of His people is resistible, or that His will to save His own can be resisted. Arminians put these passages to a wrong use when they explain Acts 7:51 as indicating that one can resist the saving power and work of the Holy Spirit, so that the Spirit cannot save that person, and when they teach that I Thessalonians 5:19 implies that man is able to extinguish the Spirit’s power in him, thus losing the grace that the Spirit gave.

Reformed churches and believers reject this idea of the Arminians. Our rejection is stated confessionally in Canons of Dordt, Head 3 and 4, Rejection of Errors, Article 8:

*It should be clear,
then, that by
resisting the Spirit
man does not frustrate
God’s purpose.*

Who teach that God in the regeneration of man does not use such powers of His omnipotence as potently and infallibly bend man's will to faith and conversion; but that all the works of grace having been accomplished, which God employs to convert man, man may yet so resist God and the Holy Spirit when God intends man's regeneration and wills to regenerate him, and indeed that man often does so resist, that he prevents entirely his regeneration, and that it therefore remains in man's power to be regenerated or not. For this is nothing less than the denial of all the efficiency of God's grace in our conversion, and the subjecting of the working of Almighty God to the will of man, which is contrary to the apostles.... (The article then quotes Ephesians 1:19, II Thessalonians 1:11, and II Peter 1:3, DJK.)

God be praised and thanked, that He is sovereign over man, and more powerful than man, and that man cannot prevent God from carrying out His will of salvation!

But may God graciously keep us from resisting His Spirit.



To persist in resisting the Spirit is, we have said, to quench the Spirit. Quenching, or extinguishing, is a process that ends when the thing being quenched is completely gone. Firemen begin quenching a house fire as soon as they arrive on the scene, but only when flames are entirely absent is the fire said to be "out," and do the firemen leave.

It is possible to quench the Spirit—progressively to extinguish the Spirit's sanctifying power, so that at some point the Spirit no longer works in a church.

I do *not* mean that an individual in whom the Spirit works grace can finally manage to make the Spirit stop working grace in him. Just as was true of resisting the Spirit, so quenching the Spirit refers to the Spirit's objective testimony to Christ in the preaching.

Churches quench the Spirit. The members of the church contribute to this quenching, of course, so that the warning applies to the members of the church. But the admonition not to quench the Spirit came to the entire church at Thessalonica.

The process of quenching the Spirit involves a church's rejection of the Scriptures as the inspired and

infallible Word of God; a church's departure from right doctrine, worship, and practice; and a church's intolerance of faithful preaching (despising prophesyings, I Thess. 5:20). In other words, the process of quenching the Spirit is the process of apostasy. Less and less brightly works the Spirit in such churches; the truth is snuffed out, and the godly living that flows from it wanes.

When a church reaches the end of this process, it has become thoroughly apostate. This is to say that when the Spirit is quenched, He ceases working in a particular instituted church. Christ alludes to this when He threatens to remove the candlestick of the church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:5), and to spew the church of Laodicea out of His mouth (Rev. 3:16). Once faithful in doctrine and life, these churches enjoyed the presence of the ascended and exalted Christ in His Spirit. But Christ threatens, except they repent, to remove Himself from their midst. He would remove His Spirit from them.

Because a congregation is the sum total of her members, individuals contribute to this quenching of the Spirit by showing that they despise the preaching of the gospel and true fellowship with Christ, and by joining in the clamor of those whose ears itch to hear a false gospel.

True churches, with their truly believing members, must take the warning to heart. God does not tell false churches not to quench the Spirit; for them such an admonition is too late. But let faithful churches and believers not quench the Spirit, and not despise prophesyings!

Guarding against this sin, we strive to maintain our first love—to love the gospel, the proclamation of this gospel, the right worship of God that this gospel demands, and the heartfelt obedience to God to which this gospel motivates us. Guarding against this sin, a church insists that right doctrine be preached, and that God's law be preached "strictly" (Heidelberg Catechism, Question 115). Guarding against this sin, the members of such a church then receive the gospel with joy, and respond in a godly way to the hearing of the law.

As evidence that the Spirit of Christ burns brightly in such churches! 

Upon This Rock (3)

The End of Israel

During the reign of Jeroboam II, the majority of the Israelites were not thinking at all of evil days. But those days were not long in coming.

Jeroboam was succeeded by his son Zachariah. Zachariah was the fourth of the line of Jehu to sit on the throne. And he was the last—in keeping with the word of God to Jehu that his sons would reign to the fourth generation (II Kings 10:30). Zachariah reigned for a brief period of six months, when he was assassinated “before the people” by a man named Shallum. Shallum, in turn, kept the throne for just one month. Menahem, thought to be the general of Zachariah’s army, came to Samaria, slew the usurper, and reigned in his stead.

The decline of the northern kingdom, after the glory days of Jeroboam II, was rapid. On the surface it may have appeared that Israel was but the victim of adverse socioeconomic and political circumstances, aggravated by the imperialism of the world powers of the day. But the underlying cause was deeper. Israel was being cast off by her calf. The resurgence of Assyria on the international scene, and the disastrously destabilizing effect of assassinations and strife within Israel itself, were judgments of God on an apostate people.

The story can be quickly told.

Assyria, with the accession of Pul, or Tiglath-pileser (his official name), engaged again in military expeditions against the nations of the Fertile Crescent. The Assyrian army, under the leadership of this Tiglath-pileser (the III), had become a powerful force. “The

states of the west,” writes F. F. Bruce, “had never seen anything like the efficiency and speed of this army.” Rulers of the Syrian states quickly submitted and were put under tribute. Tiglath-pileser evidently invaded the northern kingdom (II Kings 15:19, 20). He “turned back” only after Menahem bought him off with a bribe of “a thousand talents of silver.” A tidy sum that was, and Menahem was able to gain by it the support of the Assyrians for his own rather tenuous claim to power in Israel. But he had become a virtual vassal of Tiglath-pileser. He raised the money for the bribe by imposing a tax of 50 shekels each on “all the mighty men of wealth” in his kingdom. The price of peace was therefore steep, and it did little to endear Menahem to his subjects.

Menahem continued to pay tribute to Assyria, as did also his son and successor, Pekahiah. Submission to Assyrian domination, however, was becoming increasingly unpopular, both in Israel and in neighboring countries. Taking advantage of the anti-Assyrian sentiment in Israel, Pekah conspired against Pekahiah, smote him in his palace, and reigned in his stead (II Kings 15:25).

Pekah at once joined a confederacy of anti-Assyrian states, and it seems that he urged Ahaz king of Judah to do the same. When Ahaz refused, Pekah king of Israel and Rezin king of Syria invaded Judah. It may be that what is recorded in II Chronicles 28:5ff. was the first part of this invasion. Judah was put to the worse.

Evidently Pekah and Rezin later returned to war against Jerusalem (Is. 7:1), with the intention of removing Ahaz and installing as king in Judah “the son of Tabeal” (Is. 7:5, 6), who would do their bidding. Thus would the king of Israel, if he had his way, make an end to the house of David. Such contempt there was in Israel for what had always been considered a promise of God that had Messianic implications! So diabolical a plot must have been inspired by Satan, who would

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Previous article in this series: December 1, 2011, p. 114.

have liked nothing better than to take Judah down with Israel. More particularly— the royal line. The word of God to wicked king Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah was this: “Thus saith the Lord God, It shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass” (Is. 7:7). Why not? The answer is clear from the sign that Ahaz did not want to hear: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (Is. 7:14). God will be true to His promise to the house of David. The ultimate goal of salvation in the son of David, Immanuel, the virgin-born, will be realized.

Ahaz, however, preferred to put his confidence in men. With a pledge of submission to Tiglath-pileser (II Kings 16:7) and a present of the treasures of the house of the Lord and the king’s house (ch. 16:8), Ahaz appealed to Assyria for aid. “Come up and save me out of the hand of the king of Syria, and out of the hand of the king of Israel.”

Tiglath-pileser responded by doing what he would have done even without any appeal or money from the king of Judah. He marched forthwith against the countries that formed the anti-Assyrian alliance. Very likely it was at this time that those who lived in the northern part of the country of Israel and in the territory east of the Jordan were carried into “captivity to Assyria” (15:29).

Pekah’s policy of opposition to Assyria had therefore met with disastrous results. All that remained of the northern kingdom was the central part of the country, the land around Samaria. The Israelites who remained knew that they were doomed unless action were taken immediately to come to terms with Assyria. They were ready therefore to support the conspiracy of Hoshea, who assassinated Pekah (II Kings 15:30), had himself made king, and immediately offered his submission to the king of Assyria.

After faithfully paying tribute for several years, however, Hoshea determined to make a bid for freedom. He discontinued his yearly tribute and attempted, apparently unsuccessfully, to form an alliance between himself and So, king of Egypt (17:4). When Shalmanezzer, the new king of Assyria, learned of the conspiracy, he marched on Samaria. For three years Samaria held out against the siege (17:5). During the course of those three years, according to surviving As-

syrian records, Shalmanezzer died and was succeeded by Sargon, who took Samaria and led away captive 27,290 Israelites, in order to relocate them in various parts of his empire—a policy by which the Assyrians hoped to minimize the threat of revolt by a conquered people.

Thus did the northern part of the ‘promised land’ become an Assyrian province. It took the name of what had before been the capital city of Israel, Samaria; and the people of the province were called Samaritans. A mixed race they became, for the remnant of Israel that had been allowed to remain soon intermarried with the settlers from other parts of the Assyrian Empire.

So ended the kingdom of the ten tribes. They had, some 200 years earlier, rejected the house of David, and therefore God Himself. In His anger God had given them nineteen kings, who were, without exception, wicked. During that time God sent prophets to warn them of the consequences of their evil ways. “Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks...and they rejected his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers ... and they left all the commandments of the Lord their God” (17:14-16). When at last their measure of iniquity was filled, God “removed them out of his sight” (17:18).

The inspired writer of II Kings records the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom and the deportation of its people in a few short verses: chapter 15, verse 29, and chapter 17, verses 3-6. He then pauses, as it were, to reflect on Israel’s history, in order to provide what is a full and clear vindication of God’s dealing with the ten tribes (17:7-23).

“So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day” (II Kings 17:23). “Untamable perverseness” Calvin calls the wickedness of the ten tribes that called for such vengeance of God upon them. In spite of great and innumerable blessings, Israel “had feared other gods, and walked in the statutes of the heathen, whom the Lord cast out from before the children of Israel” (17:7, 8).

“Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off” (Hosea 8:5). Perhaps the people of Israel did not, during the prosperous days of Jeroboam II, feel threatened by the prophetic warnings of Hosea. But captivity was imminent for the ten tribes—not because of failure of international diplomacy or any other apparent secondary

cause, but, says Hosea, because their calf had expelled them from the land of their inheritance.

At the very beginning of Israel's history as a separate nation, God had declared that He would "smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water, and he shall root up Israel out of this good land, which he gave to their fathers, and shall scatter them beyond the river.... And he shall give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, who did sin, and who made Israel to sin" (I Kings 14:15, 16). Nevertheless, for 200 years "the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them" (II Kings 17:22, 23).

"They have set up kings," the Lord said through Hosea, "but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not: of their silver and gold have they made them idols, that they may be cut off" (Hosea 8:4). That was the Lord's judgment of Israel's defection from the house of David. The ten tribes had abandoned the kingdom that God had instituted for their salvation, and then perverted and corrupted the whole worship of God. Though the people of Israel could not have fully understood how Christ Himself shone forth in David and in the priesthood and in the temple, they could not have misunderstood God's marking out the

posterity of David to hold the scepter till the coming of the promised Messiah. And they knew very well that God had instituted the priesthood and prescribed the form of worship that was pleasing to Him. In rejecting the house of David, in setting up a new priesthood, and in establishing a form of worship that was of their own invention, they were willfully undermining the appointment of God and declaring themselves to be unwilling to be ruled by His hand.

And in rejecting the *type*, they were in effect rejecting what was *typified*. To shake off the yoke of *David* was to reject *Christ* as King. To make priests of those who were not of the house of Aaron, and to sacrifice, not at the altar of burnt offering in the temple, but before golden calves in Dan and Bethel, was to reject *Christ* as Mediator.

The Assyrians, therefore, were but the "rod of God's anger" against a "hypocritical nation" (Is. 10:5, 6). By the time the process of deporting Israelites and importing conquered peoples from other lands was completed, the ethnic identity of the northern kingdom was obliterated. Such was the final fruit of Israel's defection from David. Their calves had cast them off.

Next time: An elect remnant. 

BRING THE BOOKS...

MR. CHARLES TERPSTRA

Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition, by David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2011 (www.rfpa.org); cloth, 288 pages; \$28.95; ISBN: 978-1-936054-02-2. Reviewed by Charles J. Terpstra, a member of Faith Protestant Reformed Church in Jenison, Michigan.

Covenant theology is a "hot topic" in Reformed and Calvinistic circles at present. Partly due to a renewed interest in the doctrines of grace and in the full (deep and wide) teaching of the Reformed faith (especially by the so-called "new Calvinists"), and partly due to impetus from the federal vision heresy, the doctrine of the covenant is increasingly being studied, developed, and defended in the Reformed camp. I can't remember a time (in my lifetime) when so much is being written and published on covenant theology. And with that

focus on the doctrine of the covenant, of course, goes the Reformed and biblical doctrine of election. If God's covenant is the heart of the Scriptures (and it is!), and election is the heart of the church (and it is!), then it stands to reason that those who are serious about these doctrines and serious about the Reformed faith will link them together.

But not all want covenant and election joined together—even in the Reformed camp. Because some would maintain and defend a *conditional* covenant (and justification/salvation), and that just doesn't fit well with the Reformed doctrine of *unconditional* election. That's why this new book by David J. Engelsma, professor emeritus at the Protestant Reformed Theological School, is so significant. Through his own years of diligent study as a pastor and seminary professor, Engelsma has distinguished himself as a noted covenant

theologian and an ardent defender of the indispensable link between God's covenant of grace and His election of His people in Christ. He has written of this before in several places, but now in full-book form he lays out his mature statement on "covenant and election in the Reformed tradition." Engelsma's latest work is a vital and valuable—even unique—contribution to Reformed covenant theology, at a key time in the history of Reformed and Presbyterian churches and her doctrine.


Engelsma begins his book by tracing the history of the "crisis" in covenant theology over its relation to the doctrine of election in Reformed churches culminating in the present federal vision heresy. He then launches into a staunch defense of covenant theology governed by the doctrine of God's sovereign, gracious, unconditional election, enlisting these witnesses: the (Dutch) Reformed Baptism Form; the Canons of Dordt (which responded specifically to the Arminian view of conditional election and salvation); the Reformation gospel of salvation by sovereign grace (applied specially to the covenant); Calvin's doctrine of the covenant (with focus on his view of "union with Christ," "covenant and election," and "elect infants in the covenant"); Dutch theologian C. Graafland (whose major work showed that Calvin taught that the covenant was governed by election); and Herman Bavinck (who himself clearly and concisely joined covenant and election together in his *Reformed Dogmatics*).

In connection with Calvin's teaching on the covenant, Engelsma spends an important chapter countering Peter A. Lillback's "preposterous proposal" that Calvin separated (divorced!) the doctrine of the covenant from that of election—cf. Lillback's book *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001). This is also an important section of the book, in no small part because Lillback's book carries much weight among contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and students of the covenant. Engelsma's voice deserves to be heard over the shouts of others in the field of Calvin studies.

The closing chapters of the book are likewise important for the linking of covenant and election. Relating the covenant concretely to Christ, Engelsma in these chapters "offer(s) a fresh, comprehensive, exegetical

explanation of the covenant of God with men in all its administrations" (Abraham, David, Adam, Noah, Old and New). This is outstanding material in defense of a truly Reformed and biblical view of God's covenant of grace with His people.

Finally, also of significance and value is an Appendix to the book, which presents the "Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches" adopted by the Synod of 1951 in the midst of her own ecclesiastical crisis over the doctrine of the covenant. The document defends the truth of the unconditional covenant on the basis of the Reformed creeds, especially the Canons of Dordt. Engelsma includes a brief introduction to the document explaining its historical significance then and now.

Covenant and Election is not "light" material to read; it is "heavy" with high doctrine and sound arguments. But neither is it a book just for theologians and scholars of the covenant. This is a book for all of God's people, for your own personal knowledge and defense of the doctrines of sovereign grace applied to the covenant. If you believe the covenant is central to your own faith and life as a saved child of God, then you will want to read this book, cover to cover. You will be the better (spiritually stronger) for it. May God be pleased to use this title greatly for the further development and defense of the truth of His covenant of grace with His elect people in Christ. 

Custom and Command, by Stan Firth. London: self-published, 1996, 88pp., \$3.05. Reviewed by Julian Kennedy, member of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church in Ballymena, Northern Ireland.

This review is about a booklet expressing a false ecclesiology—or view of the church. This little booklet has had its influence, and its thesis is accepted by many in the "house church movement" in the UK and farther afield. But it is spiritually anarchic. Firth's thesis undermines the necessity of regular corporate worship and the preaching and offices in the church.

Firth believes that there is need of a "new breed of Christians," functioning in an unstructured church lifestyle. He believes that Scripture supports his view and

particularly that in the end times such unstructured groups will be the only 'church' able to function.

He may have a point, particularly as mainstream denominations depart from the truth, and as the coming of various antichrists and the ultimate Antichrist put pressure on or prohibit established churches. In China the unregistered house churches doubtless are among true churches, though they have never been a part of the registered, state-controlled "Three Self" church. Yet even these house churches do federate and have structures and recognised leaders and pastor-teachers.


Firth rightly states that, in the Old Testament, corporate worship was demanded only at the three annual pilgrimage feasts at the temple in Jerusalem and that only in the last few centuries BC did local synagogues meet every Sabbath. In Acts, however, we see that the Jerusalem Jews had set times of prayer in the temple daily, and the disciples took part in these and indeed met in the temple courts daily. So Firth is mistaken when he says the New Testament church had few set times and places of worship. Paul and his entourage regularly attended the synagogue services, and we know that in Troas they met on the first day of the week to break bread.

He rightly calls churches houses of living stones, and he believes that Christians need to meet together regularly in obedience to Hebrews 13:34, 35. He believes that I Corinthians 14:23 means that the whole local body did not meet together regularly for corporate worship. He ignores such clear passages of Scripture as Colossians 4:15, 16 and Acts 14:27, where churches evidently met to hear read to them Paul's whole epistle or his missionary report. When, if not on a set day, and that day being the first day of the week, would believers meet as in Acts 20:7 and I Corinthians 16:2?

He is correct in saying that worship is an attitude and lifestyle, not just something "done on Sundays." Nevertheless, God is a God of order, and His people need to be spiritually fed, to hear the voice of the Chief Shepherd through the preaching, and to participate in the sacraments at set times (Rom. 10:14; I Cor. 12). Since one day in seven, the Sabbath, is to be kept holy, and since after the resurrection this one day is the first day of the week, we are to rest from our labour and use the day for public and private worship and duties

of mercy or necessity. The centrality of preaching in the fellowship and worship of the church is totally set aside by Firth, in spite of the fact that it is God's express method of instructing, admonishing, and feeding His people. He believes that the New Testament emphasis is on informal ad hoc teaching in small groups and house to house. As Reformed believers we know that these have their place alongside the regular weekly meetings for worship, with the preaching, but we would never say they can replace them.

His view of church leadership is very weak. He speaks of people "subconsciously" recognizing elders unofficially, whereas Paul in his epistles speaks of the office of elder and the public ordination thereto (Acts 14:28; Tit. 1:5) these men being publicly recognized, as in the election of the first deacons in Acts 6. The apostle clearly states that these men have authority vested in them by the Holy Ghost Himself (Acts 20:8, Heb. 13:17). They are undershepherds and overseers, watching over the flock. To them have been given the keys of the kingdom, which in practical terms means they decide who are admitted to membership, who are baptized, and who take the Lord's Supper. He also neglects to mention the office of pastor-teacher or teaching elder—someone who is trained, called and sent out to preach. Would you not expect to be treated in a hospital by a properly trained doctor, who had been licensed to practice and approved for the post?

Firth overemphasizes the leading of the Spirit in individuals apart from the means by which He works through the preaching, sacraments, church oversight and the creeds (the great basis of church unity). Never does he mention the local church as a flock with undershepherds under the Chief Shepherd. If we followed Firth's ideas, the sheep of God's flock, in their disparate groups, with no creedal cohesion and no called officebearers who preach and pastor, trying to fend for themselves, would, in their rank individualism, inevitably stray into dangerous byways and become fodder for wolves. In contrast to this, I would draw your attention to the Belgic Confession, Articles 28-35, which outline the marks, government, and sacraments of true, instituted churches and the necessity of being a member of one. 

Denomination Activities

On Tuesday, November 15, and Wednesday, November 16, Revs. G. Eriks and K. Koole were in Atlanta, GA on behalf of our denomination's Contact Committee to represent our churches as observers to the annual meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council, as authorized by this year's synod. For what this gathering of conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches is all about, please confer Acts 2010, Arts. 22 and 27 (pp. 18, 21), and Acts 2011, Art. 34 (pp. 26-28). If you don't have these Acts handy, we add here that this makes the second year these two men have gone as observers, each time going with the mandate from Synod to (1) express thanks to the NAPARC for the invitation to attend; (2) explain the reasons we as churches have accepted the invitation; and (3) give a brief introduction to the PRCA.

Minister Activities

The congregation of the First PRC of Holland, MI rejoiced with their pastor and his wife, Rev. and Mrs. Daniel and Leah Holstege, who were given the gift of a son, Gabriel James, born November 4.

Rev. A. Lanning declined the call extended to him to serve as pastor of the Edgerton, MN PRC.

Mr. Wigger is a member of the Protestant Reformed Church of Hudsonville, Michigan.

Evangelism Activities

On Friday evening, October 28, the Lynden, WA congregation invited their neighbors in Lynden to gather with them for a lecture given by their pastor, Rev. R. Hanko, entitled, "Excellencies of the King James Version." This lecture was a commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the KJV.

As part of their Reformation commemoration, the Immanuel PRC in Lacombe, AB, Canada sponsored a lecture on October 28. Their pastor, Rev. T. Miersma, spoke on the subject, "The Battle for Sovereign Grace and the Covenant in the Reformed Church World: PRCA, A History of Reformation."

Prof. R. Dykstra had the opportunity to speak at a Reformation Day Lecture at the Crete, IL PRC on October 28. He spoke on the theme, "False Prophets and the Certain End of the World: What the Reformation Can Teach Us."

Mission Activities

The members of the Pittsburgh Mission sponsored a Reformation Day Lecture on October 28. Missionary Pastor W. Bruinsma spoke on the subject, "John Knox and the Reformation of Worship."

Rev. M. McGeown, pastor of the Limerick Reformed Fellowship, in Limerick, Republic of Ireland, a mission field of our sister church in Northern Ireland, the Covenant PRC in Ballymena, gave a Reformation Day Lecture in Limerick on October 29 on the subject, "Freewill and Predestination."

Sister-Church Activities

Rev. A. Stewart, pastor of our sister church in Northern Ireland, the Covenant PRC in Ballymena, recently wrote in his bi-monthly newsletter to our churches that their church websites are doing very well. Their main website (www.cprc.co.uk) averages about 12,500 users per day and about 5,000 pages per day. The CPRC You Tube site is also proving to be a very helpful witness (www.youtube.com/cprc-ni). Covenant has now had over 50,000 videos watched and a good number of people have subscribed to it, especially recently.

Congregation Activities

Rev. Jonathan Mahtani, newly installed pastor of the Cornerstone PRC in Dyer, IN, preached his first sermon as pastor on Sunday, November 6. Rev. Mahtani chose to preach from I Corinthians 2:1-2 under the theme, "What the Pastor Came to Do."

The Building Committee of the Providence PRC in Hudsonville, MI planned a work bee for the last Saturday of October, with weeding, clean-up, and some general maintenance around their church property planned. Providence members were also invited to feel free to drop off any leaves they needed to get rid of at the designated leaf drop-off area on their property. It was also the intent of Providence to have a public leaf-drop that same day, and continuing through the month of November.

Both young and old members of our churches in west Michigan were

invited to the Faith PRC in Jenison, MI and the Reformed Doctrines Class held there on November 9, to hear Prof. D. Engelsma expose and refute, from Scripture, the confessions, and John Calvin, the deadly errors concerning church membership as evidenced by attacks on the RFPA book *Bound to Join*.

During the month of November both our Georgetown and Hudsonville, MI congregations were given the opportunity to share what the Lord had given them, in a food-drive for others in their church family. Members were encouraged to bring canned and non-perishable food-

items or gift certificates, for distribution by the Deacons in December.

Young-Adult/ Young-People Activities

The Young Adult Society of the Lynden, WA PRC planned a Thanksgiving Singspiration on November 20 after their evening worship service. A collection was taken, with proceeds going towards the Young Adult Retreat they are planning to hold, the Lord willing, at Warm Beach Camp on July 2-5, 2012.

The first-ever Trinity Trot 5K/1 Mile Race was hosted by the Young

People of the Trinity PRC in Hudsonville, MI on Saturday morning, November 12 at nearby Millennium Park in Grand Rapids. Those who registered for the event could choose either to walk or to run the course. All proceeds from the race will be used for the 2012 convention.

The Jr. and Sr. Young People of the Faith PRC in Jenison, MI met for a special meeting after their evening worship service on Sunday, November 20, to hear Rev. J. Korterling talk about issues that young converts face and how they are to deal with them properly and biblically. ☞

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Wedding Anniversary

■ We thank and praise God for His care of our parents and grandparents,

HARVEY and MARILYN HOLSTEGE,

as they celebrated 45 years of marriage on November 11. We are thankful for the many years of a faithful marriage our covenant God has given them and pray that He will continue to bless them in their marriage. We thank our parents for the God-fearing example and the love that they have shown to us throughout their lives.

Genesis 17:7: "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."

* Greg and Rhonda Holstege

Michelle, Marissa, Stephanie, Jodi, Travis, Maci

* Mark and Brenda Zandstra

Christina, Ryan, Chad, Nicole, Eric

* Jay and Heidi Van Baren

Zachary, Connor, Kaylee, Reid, Breilyn

* Mike and Nikki Holstege

Zoe, Logan, Danika, Ayla, Piper, Nash

* Jeff Holstege

* Joel and Lanae Holstege

Lindsey, Jori, Spencer, Brady,

Symone

Hudsonville, Michigan

Classis East

■ Classis East will meet in regular session on Wednesday, January 11, 2012, at the Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church, Hudsonville, MI.

Jon J. Huiskens, Stated Clerk

Wedding Anniversary

■ We rejoice with our parents and grandparents,

**HOWARD and LaJEAN
BONESTROO,**

as they celebrate their 45th wedding anniversary on December 16, 2011, Lord willing. We as children and grandchildren thank our heavenly Father for the many blessings God has given to them and to us through them. God has been faithful to His covenant promise to continue His covenant in succeeding generations. "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" (Genesis 17:7).

* From their children
and 22 grandchildren

Doon, Iowa