Editor's Notes

This issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* is a special issue. It is devoted to the life and theology of Dr. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921). Bavinck was a towering figure among the Dutch Reformed in the Netherlands during the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He taught first at the Theological School at Kampen (1883-1902); the rest of his career he spent as Abraham Kuyper's successor at the Free University of Amsterdam, from 1902 until his death in 1921. Of great significance for our understanding of Bavinck is the publication of Bavinck's *magnum opus*, the four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* (2003-2008), in English by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. Although a few of Bavinck's works had found their way into English, in the *Reformed Dogmatics* the English-speaking world has access to the breadth of Bavinck's teaching on all the main topics of Reformed theology.

On March 6, 2012 Classis West of the Protestant Reformed Churches held an Officebearers' Conference in Redlands, California. We are grateful that Prof. David Engelsma and Rev. James Laning graciously complied with our request and submitted their speeches at the conference for publication in PRTJ. Their articles will give the broad sweep of Bavinck's theology, as well as point out weaknesses and even errors in Bavinck's teaching.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have a special interest in Herman Bavinck. That interest is due to the fact that there can be no doubt that our founding fathers were influenced by Bavinck. In their seminary training and in their studies they read Bavinck. What was true of the men generally, was true of Herman Hoeksema in particular. His *Reformed Dogmatics*, not just in name, but also in content, reflects a definite similarity to Bavinck in certain fundamental ways. Particularly did Hoeksema build on Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant. And yet, Hoeksema also corrected Bavinck in places where correction was needed.

Included in this issue is a review article, "Another Defender of Shepherd (and the Federal Vision)," by Prof. Engelsma. This article is an analysis of *Not of Works: Norman Shepherd and His Critics*, by

the Canadian Reformed minister and theologian Ralph F. Boersema. The review exposes the faulty doctrine of justification by faith and works, on the basis of a conditional covenant of grace and works, embraced by Boersema, Shepherd, and the proponents of the Federal Vision. Boersema openly acknowledges that Shepherd and the Federal Vision embrace the Liberated doctrine of a conditional covenant, a covenant that does not originate in and is not governed by election. A most revealing book!

Besides the articles on Bavinck that are the meat of this issue and the review article, be sure to read Prof. Dykstra's review of Ron Gleason's biography of Bavinck, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian*. And while you are at it, read the other book reviews that are included in this issue.

At the end of this issue is an advertisement for the upcoming conference, which is being planned by the seminary faculty. The conference will mark the 450th anniversary of the publication of the Heidelberg Catechism—precious creed of the Reformed churches. The conference theme is: "Our Only Comfort: Celebrating the 450th Anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism." This promises to be a very worthwhile conference and we encourage as many of our readers as possible to make plans to attend the conference, which will be held the evenings of October 18 and 19, 2013, and Saturday morning, October 20, 2013. We look forward to seeing many of you at the conference.

We hope you enjoy reading the articles and reviews in this issue of PRTJ, and that what you read you find informative, intellectually stimulating, and edifying.

Soli Deo Gloria!

—RLC ●

Herman Bavinck: The Man and His Theology[1]

by David J. Engelsma

With the publication of Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* in English for the first time, by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society (the fourth and last volume appeared in 2008), there has occurred a kind of Bavinck-renaissance in North America. This would be a good thing, if the Reformed churches and theologians would pay attention to the sound and solid Reformed doctrines in Bavinck's dogmatics, allowing these doctrines to critique, correct, and inform the teachings of the churches and theologians.

What has happened, however, is that the sound doctrines in the *Reformed Dogmatics* have largely been ignored, or deliberately misrepresented, particularly Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant of grace.

Also, churches, theologians, and educational institutions have seized upon erroneous doctrines in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, and have emphasized these false teachings, especially the doctrine of a common grace of God.

Similarly, the notable Bavinck conferences have largely ignored the Reformed doctrines of Bavinck, as set forth in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, and have devoted themselves instead to Bavinck's views on ecumenicity, psychology, and culture. This was true of the Bavinck conference sponsored by Princeton Seminary soon after the publication in English of the last volume of the *Reformed Dogmatics.*

The same was true of the Bavinck conference sponsored jointly by Calvin Theological Seminary and the Dutch Reformed Translation Society. Very few, indeed almost none, of the speeches concerned a distinctively Reformed doctrine. Most of the speeches were about church union and the "Christianizing" of culture. This was ironic in view of the fact that the Dutch Reformed Translation Society had

1 The expanded text of an address at a conference of Protestant Reformed officebearers in Redlands, CA on March 6, 2012.

just spent more than $100,000 and innumerable hours translating and publishing Bavinck's *dogmatics*.

Bavinck is himself partly responsible for this neglect of his dogmatics. Alongside his dogmatical work was always a powerful cultural urge. During the last ten years of his life and ministry, this concern for culture became virtually his only interest. And he wrote two tracts propounding a common grace of God that is supposed to enable the church to cooperate with the ungodly in transforming culture.[2]

But the main explanation of the widespread ignoring of Bavinck's theology in favor of his cultural writings by the Presbyterian and Reformed institutions and theologians is that these institutions and theologians have little interest in the sound doctrines of the Reformed tradition as they are confessed and defended in Bavinck's four volumes of dogmatics, whereas these institutions and theologians are obsessed with culture and ecumenicity.

The conference that I am addressing may well be the first Bavinck conference that is devoted, not only chiefly, but also exclusively to the Reformed doctrines of the *Reformed Dogmatics* and, thus, to the

2 Herman Bavinck, "*De Algemeene Genade*" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma, n.d.). This booklet has been translated into English by Raymond C. Van Leeuwen as "Common Grace," *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1989). The other work by Bavinck on common grace is "Calvin and Common Grace," tr. Geerhardus Vos. The booklet contains no publishing data, but does indicate that the occasion of the work was the "celebration of the four hundreth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin." This booklet is part of this writer's library. In this latter work, ominously, Bavinck acknowledges that the theory of common grace qualifies the doctrine of reprobation. Attributing this qualification of reprobation to Calvin, but propounding his own view, Bavinck declares that "reprobation does not mean the withholding of all grace" (117). The effects of this common grace, according to Bavinck, include that unregenerate "men still retain a degree of love for the truth" and retain "the remnants of the divine image" (119, 120). Bavinck does not see in common grace a love of God for all humans that desires the salvation of all without exception, regardless of predestination. That is, Bavinck does not draw from his doctrine of common grace the theory of a "well-meant offer" of salvation to all. For Bavinck, as for Kuyper, common grace is limited to the realm of the earthly and natural.

real significance of the monumental *Reformed Dogmatics,* if not the real significance of Bavinck himself.

At this conference, we are concerned with the theology of Herman Bavinck. Nor is our concern merely academic. We desire to learn and profit from the glorious truths of the Reformed faith as they are confessed, explained, defended, and developed in Bavinck. Where they are present to spoil Reformed theology, the weaknesses and errors must be exposed and rejected. Our purpose is to maintain and develop further the sound doctrines of the *Reformed Dogmatics* for the benefit, especially, of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

In this first address, I am to introduce "the man and his theology." I do not intend simply to tell you the outstanding features of the life and personality of Herman Bavinck and then summarize his theology—the content of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. But I will relate the man and his theology, the life and the dogmatics.

For my knowledge of the man and his life, I rely especially on the three most important biographies, or studies, of Bavinck in Dutch: *Dr. Herman Bavinck*, by V. Hepp;[3] *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, by R. H. Bremmer;[4] and *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten*, by R. H. Bremmer.[5]

I have also read the only full biography of Bavinck in English, *Herman Bavinck*, by Ron Gleason.[6] Although acclaimed by reviewers, Gleason's biography has serious weaknesses. It is noticeably anti-Kuyper. It grinds an ax for the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) and their theology. It contains many typos and, annoyingly, the use of wrong words, which sound like the words the author

3 V. Hepp, *Dr. Herman Bavinck* (Amsterdam: W. Ten Have, 1921). All quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch.

4 R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als Dogmaticus* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1961). All quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch.

5 R. H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966). All quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch.

6 Ron Gleason, *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2010).

has in mind. For example, Bavinck is said to have "petitioned God with the *plaintiff* cry."[7] Also, "true religion…preaches a God who is *imminent*."[8] Yet again, Kuyper "would *broker* no challenges."[9]

The book also contains factual inaccuracies. Although it is virtually impossible for one living in the United States to check the figures in old Dutch records, it seems highly unlikely that the number of delegates from the large Reformed Churches in the Netherlands to the important Groningen 1899 synod was only eight, as Gleason indicates.[10]

A more serious inaccuracy is doctrinal. Gleason proposes that the doctrine of the close relation between covenant and election was the unique teaching of Abraham Kuyper, that this doctrine is exclusively the implication of a supralapsarian view of the decrees, and that this doctrine results in "an almost hyper-Calvinistic view of justification by faith and salvation."[11] Gleason's proposal is mistaken in every respect. Not only Kuyper but also Bavinck taught the close relation of covenant and election, indeed that election governs the covenant.[12] Bavinck taught this doctrine even though he did not share Kuyper's supralapsarian view of the decrees. And the doctrine that declines to sever God's covenant and covenant salvation from God's gracious will of election is not, and does not lead to, hyper-Calvinism. On the contrary, the doctrine of a close connection between election and covenant is pure, sound Calvinism.

In preparing this lecture, the scope of which is vast, for the conference, I kept before my mind the warning of an event in Bavinck's life. Hepp relates that at the public ceremony of Bavinck's installation as professor of theology in the seminary of the Christian Separated

7 Gleason, *Bavinck,* 425.

8 Gleason, *Bavinck,* 494.

9 Gleason, *Bavinck,* 207.

10 Gleason, *Bavinck,* 260.

11 Gleason, *Bavinck,* 339, 340.

12 See Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 3:228-232. Gleason's theological error here is one more instance of his grinding an ax for the theology of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated).

Reformed Churches (the churches of the Secession—"*Afscheiding*"—of 1834) in Kampen, on which occasion the professor would give a fitting address, the man who preceded Bavinck, also a newly appointed professor, spoke for longer than three hours in the severe cold of a January day. Bavinck became so angry at this outrageous behavior that he stormed out of the auditorium during his colleague's speech, creating a scene. Only the pleas of his old father and some friends prevailed upon Bavinck to give his own address ("The Science of Holy Theology"). But he read the speech as fast as possible, without any inflection in his voice.[13]

And Bavinck was notoriously irenic.

Since this is not necessarily true of all in my audience, I am determined to keep this speech under three hours.

Important aspects of Bavinck's life

Herman Bavinck was a son of the Secession, the wonderful reformation of the Reformed church in the Netherlands that began in 1834 in Ulrum, Groningen, with the preaching and then the deposition of the Rev. Hendrik de Cock. On his departure from Kampen for the Free University in Amsterdam in 1903, Bavinck said of himself, "*Ik ben een kind der scheiding en dat hoop ik te blijven*" ("I am a child of the Secession and I hope to remain that").[14]

In the providence of God, that Bavinck was both physically and spiritually a son of the Secession accounts for much that is sound in Bavinck's theology, particularly his doctrine of the covenant of grace, as well as for the godliness and warmth of his *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Herman Bavinck was born in 1854, twenty years after the beginning of the Secession and the year that the churches of the Secession—the Christian Seceded Reformed Churches—opened their seminary in Kampen, where Bavinck would later teach for many years.

His father, Jan, was a pious, humble man, who had been converted in 1840 by a disciple of de Cock. The preacher by whom Jan Bavinck had been converted was imprisoned some thirty times by the Dutch authorities for preaching the gospel recovered by the Secession. In this

13 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 120, 121.

14 Bremmer, *Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten*, 192.

charged theological and ecclesiastical climate was Herman Bavinck reared. Herman Bavinck's father was himself a minister in the Secession churches, the first to receive any kind of a formal seminary training.

When Herman Bavinck was installed as professor in the Secession seminary in Kampen, in January, 1883, the faculty included Helenius de Cock, Anthony Brummelkamp, and Simon Van Velzen. The first was the son of the renowned Hendrik de Cock, the human founder of the Secession churches, and the last two were illustrious "fathers of the Secession."

Bavinck was born and reared at the very heart of the then still vibrant and powerful tradition of the Secession. The theology and spirit of the Secession were the air he breathed. By the "spirit" of the Secession is meant its piety, its wholehearted commitment to the Reformed confessions and the teachings of John Calvin, and its repudiation of the theological modernism that Hendrik de Cock had so sharply condemned.

This son of the Secession, nevertheless, was attracted to the world. The attraction was not moral, as though Bavinck found its godless life pleasing, much less as though he lived immorally himself. Not only was Bavinck's personal life holy, but he also wrote a treatise excoriating the behavior of European society in his time.[15] Bremmer informs us that it was a "thorn in the eye" to Bavinck that some of the members of the Secession churches lived careless, wicked lives in contradiction of their confession.[16]

But Bavinck was attracted to the world's learning: the wisdom of the educated thinkers of his own and past times; the scientific theories, for example the evolutionary theory of his contemporary Charles Darwin; even, in certain respects, the unbelieving theological wisdom of modernist theologians.

15 Herman Bavinck, *Hedendaagsche Moraal* [English: *Present-Day Morality*] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1902).

16 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 378: "Bavinck was offended by a certain hypocrisy in his own circles. 'What troubled him the most was that some indeed cried, "Reformed, Reformed," but their life did not correspond to their confession. That was a thorn in the eye to him.'" Bremmer is quoting J. H. Landwehr.

Bavinck was impressed with this worldly wisdom. He was open to it. He thought that the Reformed faith can, and should be, accommodated to it. He supposed that Reformed theology can, and should, influence the world's wisdom.

This is why some have spoken of "two Bavincks." Hepp denies that this is an accurate description of Bavinck, although he recognizes the tension, or "duality," in Bavinck.

However one describes this "duality" in Bavinck's soul, the conflict between the thinking of the son of the Secession and the thinking that found the wisdom of the world both true and attractive had a harmful effect on Bavinck's theology, as we will see.

That which Bavinck found appealing in the world's thinking, he explained by his (and Kuyper's) theory of common grace.

Bavinck showed this attraction to the world's wisdom, and acted on it, already as a young man. Preparing for the ministry in the Secession churches, after only one year of training in the Secession seminary in Kampen, he decided to complete his seminary training in the thoroughly modernist seminary of the state Reformed church (from which his churches had seceded, as from a false church, some forty years earlier). The professors at Leiden were unbelievers, and all of the Netherlands knew it. They denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus, despised the Calvinistic doctrines of grace dear to the heart of the Secession, and were notorious higher critics of holy Scripture. Among others of the same stripe were Scholten, Kuenen, and Rauwenhoff.

Bavinck's decision to complete his seminary training in Leiden, rather than in Kampen, was as if an aspirant to the ministry in the Protestant Reformed Churches would reject the Protestant Reformed Seminary, not even for Calvin Theological Seminary, but for the University of Chicago Divinity School and the teaching of a Paul Tillich.

Why he chose Leiden, Bavinck himself explained. He judged the theological instruction at the small Secession seminary to be inferior and unsatisfactory (and it did leave much to be desired, especially in the important area of dogmatics) and "cherished a strong desire to

further my study in Leiden and to learn the modern theology at first-hand."[17]

The Christian Reformed translator of Bavinck's *Magnalia Dei*, literally, *The Wonderful Works of God*, but published in English translation as *Our Reasonable Faith*, extols the benefits of Bavinck's theological education at Leiden.

> [The training at Leiden] served him [Bavinck] well. The idea of solid theological scholarship for orthodox Reformed Christianity stood high in his life throughout his career. And his intimate acquaintance with the newer religious thought both deepened his Calvinist convictions and fitted him for a profession of theology realistically addressed to the problems of the time.[18]

Bavinck himself spoke more soberly of the effects upon him of that modernist training for the ministry of the gospel: "Leiden…has often made me very poor, has deprived me of…much that I now, in a later time, have learned to appreciate as indispensable for my own spiritual life, especially when I must make sermons." As the remark that he added makes plain, Bavinck referred to the modernist seminary's casting doubt on the inspiration of Scripture: "[Leiden's effect on its students is that] their childlike trust in the word of the apostles [that is, Holy Scripture] is shaken."[19]

Severe struggle with doubt concerning Scripture was the effect of his Leiden training upon Bavinck. During the brief pastorate in Franeker with which he began his ministerial career, Bavinck confided

17 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 29.

18 Henry Zylstra, "Preface" to Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, tr. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 5, 6. The *Magnalia Dei* is Bavinck's own synopsis in 1909 of his four-volume *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. The sub-title of the *Magnalia Dei* is significant in that it expresses Bavinck's conviction that Reformed dogmatics, and his in particular, must be based on and conform to the Reformed creeds. The sub-title is *"Onderwijzing in de Christelijke Religie naar Gereformeerde Belijdenis"*[English translation: "*Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession*"] (Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei*, Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909).

19 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 84, 86.

to a friend that he struggled with doubt about Scripture. Outwardly, to the congregation, he had to be the confident "dominee"; inwardly, he was wrestling with doubt.

This struggle with doubt concerning Scripture persisted throughout his ministry. To this struggle, Hepp refers when he speaks of a "duality in his [Bavinck's] spiritual existence."[20] In fact, doubt concerning Scripture increased in Bavinck's old age. In the last phase of his ministry, as professor at the Free University in Amsterdam, Bavinck nearly succumbed to sheer skepticism. Hepp, who was a student and friend of Bavinck, records that Bavinck said to him on one occasion toward the end of his life, "Daily, I become more deeply impressed with the awful relativity of all our knowledge."[21]

Therefore, it is "no wonder," as Bremmer puts it, that Bavinck "at the synod of Leeuwarden (1920) pleaded that the Reformed Churches should make the articles of the confession [the reference is to the Belgic Confession, Articles 2-7] concerning Holy Scripture the object of closer study."[22]

This doubt concerning Scripture likely explains the curious fact that in none of his writings during the last ten years of his ministry did Bavinck explain Scripture, or even work with Scripture.

As I will demonstrate later, Bavinck's doubt concerning Scripture found its way into his treatment of Scripture in the *Reformed Dogmatics* and, from there, as well undoubtedly as from his instruction of the seminarians in the Free University, into the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. From the influential Dutch Reformed Churches, this doubt concerning Scripture made its way to Reformed churches throughout the world.

Brummelkamp knew whereof he spoke when he warned Bavinck's father that in permitting the young Bavinck to train for the ministry at Leiden, "you entrust your son to the lions' den."[23]

Bavinck spent six years at Leiden (1874-1880). He obtained the

20 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 89.

21 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 322. The Dutch word that I translate as "awful" is "*ontzaglijke*," which can also mean "enormous."

22 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 381.

23 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 83.

doctorate in 1880, the first of the ministers in the Secession churches to do so. During these years he became especially close to the Old Testament professor, the higher critic Abraham Kuenen. Significantly, Bavinck had a picture of Kuenen hanging in his study throughout his ministry. Also during the Leiden years, Bavinck formed a very close friendship with a fellow student with the odd name Snouck Hurgrondje. Although Snouck was, and remained, a thorough-going modernist, Bavinck maintained intimate friendship with Snouck as long as Bavinck lived.

And it says something, not only about Bavinck's ability, but also about his indecisiveness regarding modernism that some nine years after he left Leiden, the seminary department of the University of Leiden considered appointing Bavinck as successor to the unbelieving Rauwenhoff. At the time, Bavinck and others supposed that Bavinck was on the "short list" of nominees.[24]

No account of Bavinck's training at Leiden would be complete that omits the incident at his examination by the Secession churches before Bavinck could be accepted as a candidate for the ministry in these churches. An old Secession preacher, whose name lives in honor for his deed on that occasion—J. F. Bulens van Varsseveld—required that Bavinck preach a sermon on the first part of Matthew 15:14: "Let them alone: they be blind leaders." Recognizing full well that Bulens had Bavinck's Leiden professors in view with his choice of the text, Bavinck was furious. At first, Bavinck refused the assignment. His father and his friends prevailed on him to change his mind. But Bavinck's opening words—the introduction to the sermon—were: "Why this text has been assigned exactly to me is not difficult to figure out."[25]

The explanation of Bavinck's seeking theological education at Leiden is what the Germans call "*Kulturtrieb*," a strong desire for culture. This was a powerful force in Bavinck all his life. "The *Kul-*

24 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 197, 198.

25 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 83. Bavinck continued by asking why Bulens did not include in the assignment the words that follow in the text, "of the blind." The addition of the phrase, "of the blind," to the assignment, would, of course, have reflected on Bavinck himself.

turtrieb, the urge for further cultural adaptation to his time, permeated him."[26] This cultural urge helps to explain, although it does not justify, Bavinck's enthusiasm for the notion of a common grace of God.

Bavinck's active ministry, first in the Christian Seceded Reformed Churches, until 1892, when these churches united with the Doleantie Churches of Abraham Kuyper, and thereafter in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), until Bavinck's death in 1921, consisted of one brief pastorate and of two long stints in two seminaries, the Theological School of the Secession Churches at Kampen and the Free University of Amsterdam.

Bavinck began his ministry with a very brief pastorate of less than two years in Franeker, in the glorious province of Friesland. Bavinck was installed as pastor early in 1881, not long after graduating from Leiden. By all accounts, Bavinck was a good preacher, although he did not care much for the pastoral side of the ministry, for example teaching catechism to the children.

What is noteworthy about this pastorate, in addition to its brevity and Bavinck's struggle with doubt concerning Scripture, especially when preparing sermons, is that shortly before Bavinck became its pastor the Franeker congregation had had the Rev. K. J. Pieters as minister, from 1851-1875. Pieters was the Secession minister who, with a colleague, J. R. Kreulen, introduced into the churches of the Secession the novel and heretical doctrine of a conditional covenant with all the baptized children alike. Pieters and Kreulen denied that the covenant and its salvation are governed by election. By this teaching, the two ministers caused a storm of controversy both in Pieters' congregation in Franeker and in the denomination. Pieters and Kreulen publicized their covenant doctrine in the book *De Kinderdoop*, which appeared in 1861.[27]

In addition, Pieters was a drunk. Time and again, he was admonished by his consistory, and time and again he fell into public drunken-

26 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 36.

27 On the novel, heretical covenant doctrine of Pieters and Kreulen and the controversy it caused in the churches of the Secession, see David J. Engelsma, "The Covenant Doctrine of the Fathers of the Secession," in *Always Reforming*, ed. David J. Engelsma (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2009), 100-136.

ness. On one occasion he admitted to the elders that he made "*een al te vrij gebruik van spiritus*" (English translation: "an all too free use of alcoholic spirits"). Since Reformed elders in those days got to the very bottom of matters, we even know the brand of spirits of which the Rev. Pieters made too free a use: "*Schiedammer*," a gin.[28] Finally the consistory deposed Pieters, whereupon he split the congregation and continued for a time with an independent ministry.

Significantly, Bavinck criticized his predecessor for not preaching according to the creeds and as being, in fact, in disagreement with the creeds. In a letter to his friend Snouck, Bavinck wrote: "For a number of years, there was here [in Franeker] a preacher, who definitely was an exception in our entire church. Especially sharp of intellect, he did not agree with our confession, ignored it, and preached as he pleased."[29] This was Bavinck's judgment on the covenant doctrine of Pieters and Kreulen and, therefore, on the covenant doctrine of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), which deliberately adopted the doctrine of the covenant of Pieters and Kreulen.

When Bavinck came to write that section of his dogmatics that deals with covenant and election, he was familiar with the doctrine of Pieters and Kreulen. Bavinck rejected that doctrine, teaching, to the contrary, that election governs the covenant, particularly regarding the baptized children of the godly.

In 1882, the synod of the Secession Churches appointed Bavinck to be professor at the Theological School in Kampen. Bavinck was only twenty-eight. He taught mainly dogmatics at the seminary for almost twenty years, until 1902. During his Kampen years, his colleagues on the faculty were Helenius de Cock, Van Velzen, and Brummelkamp. These were the years when he read widely, thought deeply, and wrote his magnum opus, the four volumes of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. The last volume appeared in 1901.

Although at first suspicious of the proposed union of the Secession Churches with Kuyper's *Doleantie* Churches, because of his fear of the "supremacy of Dr. Kuyper,"[30] Bavinck became an enthusiastic promoter

28 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 91.
29 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 104.
30 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 180.

of the union, and was influential in bringing the union to fruition.

Three times while at Kampen, Bavinck received an appointment to teach at the Free University. Kuyper and the other powers at the Free University recognized Bavinck's theological abilities and wanted him on the faculty. Twice, Bavinck declined the appointment, in favor of the seminary of the Secession Churches.

Also during his years at Kampen, Bavinck married Johanna Adriana Schippers, in 1891, when Bavinck was a mature thirty-seven and his wife, a young twenty-three. They had one child, a daughter.

In 1902, Bavinck accepted the appointment to teach dogmatics at the Free University, replacing Abraham Kuyper himself, who had gone on to the lower and lesser position of prime minister of the Netherlands. Bavinck was forty-eight. There, strangely, Bavinck lost his zeal for theology, except for teaching his courses. He sold his extensive theological library, because, as he said, "I will not be needing those books any longer."

After 1911, Bavinck never wrote another theological book, although writing much in other fields, especially psychology and education. Openly, he expressed the wish to be able to give up his professorship in theology in order to devote the rest of his life to "study, in which psychology would be on the foreground."[31]

The last years of Bavinck's life and ministry also marked a distinct, noticeable change in Bavinck's spiritual and psychological attitude. He was gloomy, somber, and seemingly depressed. Hepp, who knew Bavinck personally and well, describes his teacher and friend this way: "He was tormented with problems." The problems, according to Hepp, were three: the future [of European society; Bavinck died soon after the end of WW I]; the problem of Scripture [in the thinking of Bavinck]; and the problem of culture.[32] Concerning the last, the problem of culture, culture must not only torment, but also drive to despair everyone who supposes that worldly culture can be and should be "Christianized."

Bavinck died in 1921, at the age of sixty-seven. Shortly before his death, knowing that death was imminent, he said, "Now my scholar-

31 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 318.

32 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 326.

ship avails me nothing, nor can my dogmatics: it is only my faith can save me."[33]

Before I survey the strengths and weaknesses of Bavinck's theology, I offer the following observations and analyses of various aspects of Bavinck's life.

First, in the providence of God, specifically with regard to the maintenance and development of the truth, Bavinck stood in the main stream of the Protestant and Reformed tradition: the Netherlands of Dordt; the glorious Secession; and the recovery and bold confession of Reformed orthodoxy by Abraham Kuyper.

Second, Bavinck was a diligent, extremely well-read, brilliant Reformed theologian. Especially during his years at Kampen, he read widely, thought deeply, and wrote industriously. Apart from all his other books, and there are a number of other fine works, particularly the little work on faith's certainty,[34] the *Reformed Dogmatics* is a monumental achievement. Bavinck was a theologian's theologian.

Third, Bavinck links the Protestant Reformed Churches with the theology of the Secession in the Netherlands of 1834, especially its covenant doctrine, and with all that is good in the Reformed tradition going back to Calvin. Bavinck does this both with regard to time and with regard to the content of Reformed theology. With regard to time,

33 Cited in the preface to *Our Reasonable Faith*, 7.

34 Herman Bavinck, *The Certainty of Faith*, tr. Harry der Nederlanden (St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada: Paideia, Press, 1980). The original Dutch edition was *De Zekerheid des Geloofs*, 3rd rev. ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1918). In this work, Bavinck exposed the pietism of the *nadere reformatie* and other movements as unreformed. In this corruption of the Reformed faith, "faith was not immediately certain of itself right from the beginning. There was a difference between the essence and the well-being of faith…. Certainty was attained only after a series of experiences spread out over many year. It was not given with faith itself, nor did it issue from it." These pietists in the Reformed churches "continued to stumble forward along life's way in sighing and lamentations. They were a poor, wretched people always preoccupied with their own misery, seldom if ever rejoicing in the redemption that was theirs in Christ Jesus and never coming to a life of joy and gratitude. They preferred to be addressed as Adam's polluted offspring, as sinners under God's judgment" (43, 44).

Bavinck, who died only three years before the Christian Reformed Church expelled Herman Hoeksema, in 1924, was contemporary with most of the "fathers of the Secession." With regard to the content of Reformed theology, in most of the important truths of the faith, the Protestant Reformed Churches confess and preach the Reformed faith as systematized and presented by Herman Bavinck in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. There is no doubt in my mind that Hoeksema was strongly influenced by the dogmatics of Bavinck.

Fourth, although Bavinck is widely viewed as "irenic," that is, a lover of peace (which was not always a virtue, for the irenic Bavinck characteristically refused sharply to criticize and flatly to condemn heresy, always inclined to find some good in even the most egregious of heretics, for example, the pantheist, Schleiermacher, and the "ethical theologian," Daniel Chantipie de la Saussaye), he—Bavinck—was also extremely sensitive to criticism, and prone to bitterness when he was criticized, or when a church decision did not go his way.

According to Hepp, the defeat at the synod of 1889 of Bavinck's proposal concerning the union of the two seminaries, a bone of contention in the denomination formed by the uniting of the Secession Churches and the *Doleantie* Churches, was the cause of a radical change in Bavinck's attitude and demeanor. He left the synod at once, refusing to attend the rest of the sessions. For some time thereafter, he would not sing at church, and showed himself generally as a malcontent.[35]

This response of Bavinck to the bitter pill he had to swallow at synod is by no means the most important aspect of Bavinck's life, but it is a warning especially to ministers. Bavinck's bitterness hindered his work in the churches. The weakness brings home to us the warning of Hebrews 12:15, "Looking diligently lest…any root of bitterness springing up trouble you." Bitterness, for which there are abundant occasions in the ministry, as in the life of all the saints, corrodes the minister's own godliness, spoils the work he does, and prevents a

35 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 262-264. "In 1889 Bavinck underwent the heaviest psychical shock of his entire life…. [For some time thereafter] he gave the impression of a deeply disappointed, although not of a disillusioned, man" (262, 263).

great deal of work that he might otherwise perform for the welfare of the church and the glory of Jesus Christ. The secret, of course, is to forget men and self, and to mind only Jesus Christ.

With this, I turn to the theology of Bavinck, and, first of all, to the strength and worth of his theology.

The Strength and Worth of the Theology of Bavinck

The Reformed dogmatics of Bavinck—the four volumes of the *Reformed Dogmatics*—is a worthy, indeed praise-worthy, work of Reformed theology. It sets forth the doctrines of the Reformed faith in a thorough, comprehensive, systematic, and generally sound way. It is nothing less than monumental.

These are some of the strengths and virtues of the *Reformed Dogmatics*. First, the *Reformed Dogmatics* presents, in the systematic form of a carefully worked out and united body of theology, the wealth of the Reformed faith as this faith was confessed and developed from John Calvin to the beginning of the twentieth century. Special attention is given to the development of the Reformed faith in the Netherlands, which was, especially from the time of the Synod of Dordt, the main stream in which the Reformed tradition flowed.

Second, the *Reformed Dogmatics* is based on, and in harmony with, the Reformed creeds. I am not claiming that Bavinck's dogmatics never deviates from the creeds, as though it is above criticism. It does deviate, and, in certain respects, grievously. But I am saying that Bavinck labored, consciously and with determination, in the conviction that the Reformed creeds embody the truth of Scripture and that they are authoritative for Reformed theology. This accounts for the overall soundness and, therefore, the real and lasting worth of the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Third, the scope and breadth of the *Reformed Dogmatics* are vast, helpfully vast. Here, Bavinck's Spirit-given brilliance as a theologian and Spirit-worked diligence at his dogmatical labors are evident. The *Reformed Dogmatics* gives a virtually complete history of dogma, as well as a sketch of church history. It takes into account, throughout the four volumes, the teachings of the fathers of the early church, as well as the ecumenical creeds. It interacts with all the church denom-

inations—Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and others, as well as with the cults. It surveys the teachings of the reformers, not only Calvin but also Luther, Bucer, Vermigli, and others.

It engages and analyzes the philosophers who have posed a threat to the church throughout the ages, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and others.

It critiques the pagan religions, for example Buddhism.

There is no heretic who escapes scrutiny, from Montanus, Arius, and Pelagius, to Pighius, Arminius, Amyraut, and Schleiermacher. Always, Bavinck exposes the fundamental error and its contradiction of the truth in a few, clear sentences. There is special emphasis on the heretics and heresies threatening the Reformed churches in Bavinck's own time: modernism; the "mediating theology"; the "ethical theology"; and "Methodism" (we would say, "fundamentalism and revivalism").

Fourth, Bavinck wrote the *Reformed Dogmatics* convinced that the truths of Holy Scripture—the content of the *Reformed Dogmatics*—are non-contradictory. And the reason is that there is no contradiction in the mind of God. Bavinck affirms this axiomatic truth in his prolegomena:

> For if the knowledge of God has been revealed by himself in his Word, it cannot contain contradictory elements or be in conflict with what is known of God from nature and history. God's thoughts cannot be opposed to one another and thus necessarily form an organic unity. The imperative task of the dogmatician is to think God's thoughts after him and to trace their unity…. That such a unity exists in the knowledge of God contained in revelation is not open to doubt; to refuse to acknowledge it would be to fall into skepticism, into a denial of the unity of God.[36]

Again, I am not contending that there are no contradictions in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, but that Bavinck was not a paradoxical theologian, a Dutch Karl Barth.

The conviction that the revelation of Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed creeds, is non-contradictory safeguarded Bavinck's

36 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:44, 45.

confession of salvation by sovereign grace in many crucially important places in the *Reformed Dogmatics*. Bavinck did not think himself at liberty to contradict the truth that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is particular and efficacious, having its source as it does in an eternal decree of election, accompanied by a decree of reprobation, with appeal to "paradox," that is, in reality, sheer contradiction.

Whereas the foregoing is more general concerning the strength and worth of Bavinck's dogmatics, what follows is more specific.

First, the *Reformed Dogmatics* is biblical. With appeal to Article 5 of the Belgic Confession, Bavinck asserted that "Scripture is the sole foundation (*principium unicum*) of church and theology."[37] Bavinck defined dogmatics "as the truth of Scripture, absorbed and reproduced by the thinking consciousness of the Christian theologian."[38] Every doctrine, therefore, is derived from Scripture. The *Reformed Dogmatics* is the product of exegesis. This is not to say that there are lengthy sections consisting of the interpretation of texts. Bavinck's method, rather, is usually to state a doctrine in a few sentences, or paragraphs, and then to list the biblical passages from which he has drawn the doctrine.

The strengths and benefits of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, due to its biblical nature, are great. It is orthodox. It is fresh and lively. Bavinck contends for such a dogmatics in the prolegomena: "Dogmatics is not a dull and arid science."[39] Still another strength and benefit of Bavinck's biblical dogmatics is that there is development of dogma.

In close connection with its avowed biblical character, the *Reformed Dogmatics* is God-centered. Bavinck set himself the task of producing a God-centered dogmatics with the whole of the massive *Reformed Dogmatics* from the outset. All of his dogmatics had to be the knowledge of God in systematic form. "The aim of theology, after all, can be no other than that the rational creature know God and, knowing him, glorify God (Prov. 16:4; Rom. 11.36; I Cor. 8:6; Col. 3:7)."[40] The *Reformed Dogmatics* is, according to Bavinck's purpose,

37 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:86, 87.
38 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:89.
39 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:112.
40 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:213.

"a theodicy, a doxology to all God's virtues and perfections, a hymn of adoration and thanksgiving, a 'glory to God in the highest' (Luke 2:14)."[41]

Because the *Reformed Dogmatics* is biblical and God-centered, it is also warm and practical. By design, Bavinck wove ethics into the dogmatics. No doubt his heritage as a child of the Secession contributed to the piety, the godliness, of the presentation of Reformed dogmatics. Bavinck was no pietist. He condemned the theology of doubt of the Puritans and their spiritual descendants, the men and women of the *Nadere Reformatie*, in the Reformed churches.[42] But he was pious, as every genuinely Reformed Christian man, woman, and child is pious. Deliberately Bavinck allowed the godliness of experience and practice that is inherent in the Reformed doctrines to come out in his exposition of the doctrines. Relating dogmatics and ethics thus closely was also born of Bavinck's theological conviction.

> Theological ethics…is totally rooted in dogmatics…. Dogmatics is the system of the knowledge of God; ethics is that of the service of God. The two disciplines, far from facing each other as two independent entities, together form a single system; they are related members of a single organism.[43]

Third, the *Reformed Dogmatics* affirms, explains, and vigorously defends the sovereignty of the grace of God in Jesus Christ from beginning—predestination in the eternal counsel—to end—the preservation of the elect, believing sinner unto eternal life and glory. This is the heart of the gospel. It is also the heart of every truly Reformed dogmatics. Faithfulness to the truth of sovereign grace is the mark of a standing or falling theology.

Bavinck taught God's sovereignty both in election and in reprobation, affirming unconditional predestination against all forms of conditionality. Explicitly, he condemned both Arminius and Amyraut.

41 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:112.

42 See his *The Certainty of Faith*, referred to and quoted from in footnote 33.

43 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:58.

Bavinck exposed the fundamental error of Arminius as the doctrine of resistible grace: "[For Arminius] grace was still always considered resistible." The monstrous effect of Arminius' theology was (and still is) that it makes "human beings the final arbiters of their own destiny." The specific Arminian teachings that necessarily result in this God-dishonoring effect are the "objection to the…certain foreknowledge of God with regard to those who would or would not believe, plus the universal will of God to save all humans, Christ's universal atonement, and the universal offer of the *sufficient* means of grace."[44]

Of Amyraut, Bavinck judges that he and the "school at Saumur in France" supported the Arminian heresy that Dordt had condemned. Bavinck notes that Amyraut taught two decrees of election. The first is a universal, conditional decree, that is, a decree of God to save all humans on condition that they will believe. The second is particular and absolute, that is, a decree of God to give some humans the gift of faith and to save them. Says Bavinck, correctly, "Of course, if the first (universal) decree meant anything at all, it would completely overshadow the second."[45]

Bavinck's judgment of Amyraut applies as well to the theology of the Federal Vision today, as to the doctrine of a conditional covenant whence this theology springs. The conditional will of God to save all baptized members of the visible church (a universal, conditional election, of sorts) completely overshadows any particular decree of election to which the advocates of a conditional covenant of grace with all the baptized may pay lip service.

In a sixty-page treatment of the divine counsel, Bavinck contends for the truth that "all the decrees of God [not only the decree of predestination] are based on his absolute sovereignty."[46]

Charging that the doctrine of universal atonement separates Christ from election and the covenant,[47] Bavinck affirms, in the face of all the arguments raised against it, including the favorite texts of the

44 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:368. The emphasis is Bavinck's.

45 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:369.

46 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:343.

47 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:469.

defenders of universal atonement, definite, limited atonement. "It was God's will and intent that Christ make His sacrifice…only for the sins of those whom the Father had given him."[48] "The acquisition and application of salvation are inseparably connected…. [As] the intercession is particular…so is the sacrifice."[49] Bavinck somewhat weakens this otherwise forceful confession by finding certain non-saving "benefits" of the cross for the reprobate.[50]

The work of salvation by the Holy Spirit, which in Bavinck's theology begins with the internal call, is likewise wholly and exclusively the gift of grace.[51] Grace is not only undeserved and unconditional, but also "efficacious" and "irresistible."[52]

In a beautiful, heartwarming, and God-glorifying section, Bavinck confesses the perseverance of saints, not as "the activity of the human person but a gift from God." Perseverance is rooted in election, founded on the atonement, the sure effect of almighty grace, and due, ultimately, to the faithfulness of God in the covenant of grace."[53]

In defense of perseverance against those who teach the falling away of men and women to whom God has sworn His covenant promise and in whom God has begun the work of salvation, Bavinck declares that the Bible, indeed the Old Testament, "clearly states that the covenant of grace does not depend on the obedience of human beings. It does indeed carry with it the obligation to walk in the way of the covenant but that covenant itself rests solely in God's compassion…. God cannot and may not break his covenant."[54]

For Bavinck, the explanation of the perishing of many Israelites in the Old Testament, as of the perishing of some baptized children of believing parents in the New Testament, is that given by the apostle Paul in Romans 9:6, 7 and by the apostle John in I John 2:19: "not all

48 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:464.

49 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:466.

50 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:470, 471.

51 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:493-499.

52 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:494, 510.

53 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:266-270.

54 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:269.

who are descended from Israel belong to Israel (Rom. 9-11). Similarly, John testifies of those who fell away: they were not of us or else they would have continued with us (I John 2:19)"[55]

Those Reformed churches that make this confession at the beginning of the twenty-first century are castigated, and banished from the Reformed community, as "hyper-Calvinists."

Demonstrating the "balance" of himself as a dogmatician and of his dogmatics, which is characteristic of the Reformed faith, Bavinck admonishes that "certainty" of perseverance by no means rules out "admonitions and threats," which are "the way in which God himself confirms his promise and gift [of perseverance] through believers. They are the means by which perseverance in life is realized." He adds: "After all, perseverance is also not coercive but, as a gift of God, impacts humans in a spiritual manner."[56]

All of this gracious work of salvation, from the call and regeneration to preservation, has its source in God's covenant of grace, and the covenant of grace is grounded in eternal election.

> All the benefits that Christ acquired and distributes to his church are benefits of the covenant of grace. This covenant, though first revealed in the gospel in time, has its foundation in eternity: it is grounded in the good pleasure of God, the counsel of God…. It is of the greatest importance…to hold onto the Reformed idea that all the benefits of the covenant of grace are firmly established in eternity. It is God's electing love, more specifically, it is the Father's good pleasure, out of which all these benefits flow to the church.[57]

With specific reference to perseverance, but with application to all the work of salvation, Bavinck declares that the covenant of grace, from which salvation flows, "does not depend on the obedience of human beings…but solely in God's compassion…. God cannot and may not break his covenant…the covenant of grace is…unbreakable like a marriage."[58]

55 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:269.
56 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:267.
57 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:590, 591.
58 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:269, 270.

In the context of this affirmation of the indissolubility of the covenant on account of the faithfulness of God, Bavinck states that the covenant is established and maintained by God's word and that this word "in its totality is one immensely rich promise to the heirs of the kingdom."[59]

Since I take up the subject of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant in a separate address at this conference, I say no more about this essential aspect of the truth of salvation by sovereign grace in Bavinck at this time.

One other strength of Bavinck's theology is its development of dogma. Development of the understanding of the truth was the result, not only of Bavinck's deep and comprehensive grasp of the whole of the body of the Reformed faith, involving the perception of the relation of all the individual doctrines to each other, but also of Bavinck's biblical method of dogmatizing. Deriving all of the doctrines of the Reformed faith from Scripture, as it were anew in his own thinking, Bavinck was led, by the Spirit of truth, to correct faulty formulations of doctrine in the Reformed tradition, to improve inadequate presentations of certain doctrines, and to bring the understanding of the truth to a higher level—a level more in accord with the whole of biblical revelation than previous understanding.

One such development was Bavinck's insight into the doctrine of predestination, with specific reference to the longstanding, brotherly debate concerning supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. Bavinck pointed out both the virtues and the defects of each theory concerning the order of the decrees of God and proposed a new conception that incorporates the virtues of both, while shedding their defects. This conception makes the election of Jesus Christ first in the counsel of God, as the goal of God triune concerning the revelation of His glory.

Also, this conception avoids the error of both the traditional supralapsarian view and the traditional infralapsarian view of placing "all things that are antecedent to the ultimate goal as means in subordinate relation also to each other."[60] What Bavinck meant by this,

59 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:269.

60 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:390.

he indicated when he added, in explanation, that "both election and reprobation presuppose sin and are acts of mercy and justice," with appeal to Romans 9:15 and Ephesians 1:4.[61]

Nevertheless, amidst the gold of the *Reformed Dogmatics* is dung. Much of the dung consists of the doctrine of a purported common grace of God, a doctrine that reappears throughout the four volumes of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, in a number of doctrinal contexts. Because this error in Bavinck is the subject of one of the addresses at this conference, I can be brief in treating of the weaknesses of the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Weaknesses in Bavinck's Dogmatics

I point out two grievous errors in the theology of Bavinck, both of which have had disastrous consequences, not only for Reformed doctrine but also for Reformed churches that have allowed themselves to be influenced by the errors.

The first, pervasive error is Bavinck's theological conviction that there is something good, something true, in virtually all the philosophies, all the scientific theories, and all the cultural proposals of the ungodly, antichristian, and unbelieving movers and shakers of the world outside of Jesus Christ. Under this conviction, Bavinck invariably accommodated Reformed theology to these philosophies, scientific theories, and cultural works. He could never, sharply and absolutely, condemn the ungodly theories of even the grossest of heretics and fiercest of avowed foes of the Christian religion, whether Schleiermacher or Darwin.

Abraham Kuyper publicly criticized Bavinck for this weakness, on two occasions. The first occasion was Bavinck's inaugural ad-

61 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:391. For Bavinck's complete treatment of the issue of the order of the decrees, see volume 2 of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, pages 382-392. That his biblical method of doing theology was the cause of his development of the doctrine of the counsel of God with specific regard to the order of the decrees, Bavinck himself expressed: "neither the supralapsarian nor the infralapsarian view of predestination is capable of incorporating within its perspective the fullness and riches of the truth of Scripture and of satisfying our theological thinking" (391).

dress when he was installed as professor in the seminary at Kampen. Although critical of the Protestant heretic, Bavinck also spoke well of Friedrich Schleiermacher: "It is to us a pleasant duty, thankfully to recognize all the good that has come to theology by this original thinker."[62] Kuyper praised Bavinck's address—"the Science of Holy Theology"—highly, in his magazine, *De Heraut*.

> Almost never has a piece [of writing] come into our hands that we have read, from beginning to end, with such almost wholehearted agreement as the inaugural address of Dr. Bavinck on the Science of Holy Theology. This is truly Reformed scientific theology…. It was refreshing to read this. Here is fidelity to Dordt, which will not deviate from Dordt, but at the same time the spirit of Dordt, which does not proscribe the development of theology.[63]

But Kuyper objected to Bavinck's praise of Schleiermacher, in print. Bavinck's praise of Schleiermacher, wrote Kuyper to the Reformed community in the Netherlands, betrayed Bavinck's lack of "awareness of the unspeakable evil, that this philosopher has inflicted on the church of Christ."[64]

The second occasion of Kuyper's public criticism of Bavinck for failing to condemn heretics and their heresies was Bavinck's publication of a book on the ethical theologian, Daniel Chantipie de la Saussaye.[65] In this case, Bavinck's fault was not that he praised

62 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 127. Bavinck continued with his encomium.

63 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 126.

64 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 126.

65 The "ethical theology" in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century was a distinct theological movement, of which de la Saussaye was a leading representative. It held that the essence of the Christian religion was not doctrinal, but experiential and moral, that is, ethical (whence the name of the movement). Not what one believes is important, but how one feels and lives. It founded the Christian religion, not on the objective basis of Scripture, as summarized by confessions, but in the Christian's consciousness, or experience. The fundamental principle of the "ethical theology" was "that not Scripture, not the revealed Word of God outside us, but the faith of the congregation is determinative [that is, is the foundation of the

Saussaye, but rather that he failed sharply and vehemently to condemn his heresy. Although Bavinck himself concluded that Saussaye's teaching was "philosophy, rather than Christian truth, in conflict with Scripture, and tinged with pantheism," Bavinck limited his criticism, if criticism it can be called, to the astounding statement that there were "elements" in Saussaye's theology that "restrained [Bavinck] from complete agreement."[66]

Kuyper was obviously indignant.

> This places us before the question: Is this permissible? If you conclude, that someone's theology conflicts with the Holy Scripture; offers philosophy rather than Christian truth; leads to pantheism; and indeed weakens the dividing line between Creator and creature, may you then so favorably judge of such a thoroughly dangerous theology, which has already seduced scores and hundreds of the best [professing Christians in the Netherlands], as you do when you speak [merely] of not completely agreeing? No matter how people may criticize us for it, we emphatically say: No![67]

Kuyper wanted a bold, severe, radical condemnation of these two theologians, as well as of all others who corrupted the gospel, as an urgent warning to the members of the Reformed churches who were tempted by the false teachings. Kuyper was far more antithetical in this important regard than was Bavinck.

These criticisms irritated Bavinck sorely. If Kuyper thought that he could change Bavinck by his public criticism, as Hepp supposes was

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Christian religion]" ("*Ethischen*," in *Christelijke Encyclopaedie voor het Nederlandsche Volk*, vol. 2, 122, 123; the translation of the Dutch is mine). This theology, de-emphasizing as it did the Word of God, the creeds, and orthodox doctrine in favor of experience and conduct, was, as is always the case with theologies that make Christian experience fundamental, rife with heresies, among which were rejection of the inspiration of Scripture and the objective revelation of God, denial of predestination, denial of the divine person of Christ, false teaching concerning the atonement of the cross, error concerning the church, and more (see *Christelijke Encyclopaedie*, 123.)

66 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 163.

67 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 163.

the case, Kuyper "was completely mistaken. Nothing irked Bavinck more than public criticism."[68] From the moment of Kuyper's criticism of Bavinck in the matter of de la Saussaye "dates the less friendly expressions about Kuyper [by Bavinck]."[69]

This hesitation of Bavinck completely to denounce a philosopher or heretic and his false teaching and his readiness to find something true and good in philosophy or in an aberrant theology are by no means due merely to his peace-loving personality as his uncritical supporters contend.

Rather, Bavinck deliberately adopted a "neo-Thomist philosophy" as a philosophical guide for his theology. "Thomist" refers to the outstanding philosopher/theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, Thomas Aquinas. "*Neo*-Thomist" philosophy is a nineteenth century form of the Roman Catholic doctrine that, after the fall, there is still something good, something godly, in the unregenerated, so that Christianity can cooperate with the unbelieving thinkers, and even build on what is true and good in their works, in order to form a good, godly, even Christian culture and society.

According to Roman Catholic theology, the fall stripped man of the "supernatural" gifts with which the Creator endowed man in the beginning—saving knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness—but left man with the "natural" gifts of reason and will, which, although somewhat weakened by the fall, are still capable of good and true thinking and desiring. The grace of the gospel, therefore, does not redeem and renew the totally depraved mind and will of the fallen sinner, but merely completes, or "perfects," the fundamental goodness of the mind and will. Grace builds on, adds to, and brings to completion, "nature." Indeed, in Roman Catholic theology, grace *depends on* nature: the natural will of the sinner performing the conditions required by grace.

Here, Bavinck's (and Kuyper's) theory of common grace comes into play. Common grace, according to its proponents, accounts for much that is true and good in the theories of the world's great thinkers, altogether apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, so that Christian

68 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 164.

69 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 168.

thought may, and must, take the world's thinking about God, man, and creation seriously and even accommodate itself to this worldly thinking. The theory of common grace in Reformed circles is essentially the same as the philosophy that reigns in the Roman Catholic Church. This goes far to explain the actual cooperation of Reformed theologians who are committed to the theory of common grace with Roman Catholic thinkers and organizations.

R. H. Bremmer, a sympathetic biographer of Bavinck, writes that "all Bavinck-commentators are in agreement that the neo-Thomistic philosophy exercised great influence on [Bavinck]."[70] Indeed, Bavinck "saw in the doctrine of the ideas, as Christianized by Thomas, the form in which the Christian faith could enrich and Christianize the culture of his own time."[71]

Basic to Bavinck's commitment to fundamental Roman Catholic thinking and to his readiness to accommodate Reformed theology at crucial points to ungodly but learned theories was Bavinck's deep concern, strong desire, and firm resolution to Christianize European culture. The Christianizing of culture was one of the main purposes of Bavinck's ministry. Hepp writes that Bavinck desired a synthesis of Christendom and culture: "He cherished the hope of another synthesis, namely that between Christendom and culture."[72] This was also the ambition of Bavinck's colleague, Abraham Kuyper. One of the great projects of Kuyper's life was the "re-Christianizing of the Western European world of culture."[73]

When Bremmer sums up Bavinck's life and ministry at the end of his study, the heading is "*Cultuur en Evangelie*" ("Culture and Gospel").[74] Concern for culture, specifically the concern to relate the gospel to the prevailing culture, and thus to "Christianize" the culture, had equal billing with the gospel in the ministry of Herman Bavinck. Nowhere does Jesus Christ charge His church with such a cultural mandate: "Preach and confess the gospel, in order to 'Chris-

70 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 328.
71 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 342.
72 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 334.
73 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 313.
74 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 313.

tianize' the thinking, the arts and science, and the way of the life of the ungodly world."

According to Bavinck's contemporary, the theological modernist Roessingh, "the question of the position of Christendom in this world of culture…was important above all [to Bavinck]."[75] The sympathetic Bremmer regards the fascination of Bavinck with the culture of his time more favorably, but indicates, similarly, the deep, deliberate concern of Bavinck with culture *in the writing of his dogmatics*: "The great worth of his [Bavinck's] dogmatics will undoubtedly remain, that we can read from it, how a reformational [Dutch: "*reformatorisch*"] theologian toward the end of the nineteenth century approximated the culture-issues of his time with the gospel." So much is Bavinck's dogmatics concerned with the culture of the day that Bremmer, thinking to praise it highly, calls it "a cultural monument of the first order."[76]

No wonder, then, that one of the three factors contributing to Bavinck's deep gloom, bordering on depression, at the end of his life was the "culture problem."[77] Europe, during and immediately after WW I, gave no evidence of any likelihood of the Christianizing of culture. It is doubtful that the little country of the Netherlands at that time gave any evidence of being Christianized, despite the efforts, including the prime ministership, of Abraham Kuyper.

And it was this grievous error of both Bavinck and Kuyper that occasioned the charge *by their modernist contemporaries already in their own time*, that "neo-Calvinism" (the common grace, culture-influencing and culture-accommodating theology of Kuyper and Bavinck and their disciples) was in fact a fundamental break with the old Calvinism of Calvin and the Reformed creeds, and nothing but modernism in disguise.[78]

75 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 140. Significantly, Roessingh noted that in this concern Bavinck was one with Chantipie de la Saussaye, Jr.

76 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 372.

77 Hepp, *Bavinck*, 326.

78 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 115-122. Significantly, one of those who charged Kuyper and Bavinck with departure from the old Calvinism of Calvin and the creeds—Hylkema—thought to have proved his charge

When Herman Hoeksema purged Reformed theology of the common grace theory of Kuyper and Bavinck (which theory, despite some occasional, somewhat similar terminology, cannot be found in John Calvin, contrary to the claims of the defenders of the theory), he delivered Reformed theology and the churches from a prominent, indeed major aspect of what Kuyper and Bavinck had made of this theology, from an alien element in that theology, from a corrupting leaven in that theology, and from the impossible and completely unbiblical burden that the theory of common grace lays on the Reformed church of Christ: "Christianize the world!" Altogether apart from the even more important condemnation of the "well-meant offer"—the corruption of the gospel by the affirmation of a universal, resistible, saving grace of God, a saving grace of God that neither has its source in election nor effectually achieves the salvation of the objects of this grace, Hoeksema's repudiation of the common grace theory of Kuyper, Bavinck, and their neo-Calvinistic disciples was a significant development of Reformed theology, with huge implications for the Reformed faith and life both of church and of individual Christian, and a genuine reformation.

Because of Bavinck's deliberate adoption of the Roman Catholic philosophy of the nature/grace scheme as basic to his theology and because of his related adoption of the theory of common grace, there is reason to question the phrase that runs through Bavinck's dogmatics like a refrain and that is widely recognized as expressing something essential to Bavinck's theological thought: "Grace perfects nature."[79] One appearance of the phrase is at the juncture of Bavinck's treatment of "general revelation" and "special revelation": "Nature precedes grace; grace perfects nature. Reason is perfected by faith, faith pre-

by contrasting Calvin's *Institutes* with Kuyper's brief for common grace, the *Lectures on Calvinism*—the "Stone lectures" (Bremmer, 121).

79 "[The phrase], grace does not abolish nature, but affirms and restores it,"…is the central theme [in Bavinck] that recurs in numberless variations, the refrain that is unceasingly repeated, the *leitmotif* which we hear everywhere" (J. Veenhof, "The Relationship between Nature and Grace according to H. Bavinck," Potchefstroomse Universiteit: Institute for Reformational Studies, 1994, 15).

supposes nature."[80] The Latin original, "*Gratia perficit naturam*," can be translated, "Grace completes nature." Commonly, Reformed theologians understand the phrase in an orthodox sense, as expressing the biblical and Reformed idea that in the work of salvation, whether with regard to the individual human or with regard to the creation itself, God does not abandon His work of creation, does not create new humans or a new universe, but redeems, renews, and ultimately raises from the dead the man, woman, or child to whom He gave physical existence and the heaven and the earth that He created in the beginning. There can be no doubt that Bavinck's theology intends to emphasize this meaning of the phrase.

But it may be questioned whether Bavinck did not read more into the phrase than this orthodox meaning, so that his theology becomes guilty of the error of accepting ungodly thinking as an aspect of (human) "nature" that remains unspoiled by the fall, containing that which is good and true, so that the "grace" of sound Reformed theology, accommodating itself to this ungodly thinking, merely completes and renders perfect this naturally good and true "nature." Faith merely supplements the truth already present in the natural human mind, whether of Plato, or of Kant, or of Schleiermacher, or of Darwin. And this view of the relation of theology and the wisdom of the learned ungodly inevitably results in accommodating the teaching of the Bible to the alleged wisdom of this world, whether in the philosophy of Plato, Aristotle, or Kant, or in the heretical theology of Schleiermacher, or in the scientific theories of Charles Darwin. It is significant that Bavinck himself preferred to translate the Latin verb as "restores": Grace only *restores* nature.[81]

Regardless how Bavinck understood and applied the phrase "Grace perfects nature," there is abundant evidence in his dogmatics that, in his

80 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:322. The original is in Latin: "*Natura praecedit gratiam, gratia perficit naturam. Ratio perficitur a fide, fides supponit naturam*" (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd revised and expanded ed., Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1906, vol. 1, 336).

81 "When Bavinck renders *perficit* as 'restores,' it is plain that this involves a certain modification of the original meaning" (Veenhof, "The Relationship between Nature and Grace according to H. Bavinck," 15.

fascination with culture and its issues, by virtue of his neo-Thomistic philosophical presupposition, and with the help of his theory of common grace, Bavinck accommodated Reformed theology to ungodly, anti-biblical thought, and thus seriously compromised the Reformed faith.

Bavinck thinks that we must "recognize all the elements of truth that are present also in pagan religions," appealing for support to "Thomas [Aquinas]." "The doctrine of common grace" enables Reformed people to "recognize all the truth, beauty, and goodness that is present also in the pagan world." Indeed, "an operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace is discernible not only in science and art, morality and law, but also in the [pagan] religions." And then this dreadful assertion: "Hence Christianity is not only positioned antithetically toward paganism; it is also paganism's fulfillment."[82] Grace completes (depraved, devilish, sinful, human) nature! There is a "natural theology," and "natural theology…[is] a 'preamble of faith.'"[83]

Bavinck is critical of Martin Luther for the Reformer's denying "to Aristotle, to reason, and to philosophy all right to speak in theological matters" and for calling "reason stoneblind in religious matters." Aristotle, of course, was the philosopher who influenced Thomas and, therefore, Roman Catholic theology. Recognizing the pervasive influence of the philosopher upon Rome's corruption of the gospel of grace, Luther exclaimed, on one occasion, "Away with that damned, rascally heathen, Aristotle." But Bavinck charges that this exclusion of Aristotle from theology is "excess."[84]

"The founders of [non-Christian] religions, like Mohammed" may not be considered as "simply impostors, enemies of God, accomplices of the devil," according to the accommodating Bavinck.[85]

In pagan and non-Christian religions is "a point of contact" for the gospel, a "firm foundation on which [Christians] can meet all

82 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:318-320.
83 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:322.
84 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:305.
85 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:318.

non-Christians."[86] Faith supplements (the darkened, unenlightened, religious) mind of unbelievers!

How Bavinck put his neo-Thomistic and common grace theories to work concretely in his dogmatics comes out in the following instances. In defense of his doctrine of a covenant of works in Paradise, by which Adam might have merited eternal life by obeying God's command, Bavinck declares, "It combines Schleiermacher [dependence] and Kant [freedom]."[87] Evident in the declaration is that Schleiermacher and Kant have a certain authoritative, determining role in Bavinck's theological thinking. That Bavinck's construction of the covenant with Adam satisfies the theology of the one and the philosophy of the other is a commendation, if not a proof, of the covenant of works. What ought to have been determinative in Bavinck's theology of the covenant with Adam is the primacy of Jesus Christ in the counsel of God, as taught in Colossians 1:13ff.

More substantial is Bavinck's concession to the evolutionary theories of Darwin and other scientists. Bremmer notes Bavinck's "strong sympathy for the newer scientific thinking that powerfully came to the fore in the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly the work of Darwin."[88] Concerning the opening chapters of the Bible, particularly Genesis 1 and 2 and the seven days of the week of creation, Bavinck does declare that Scripture "does not present saga or myth or poetic fantasy but offers…history, the history that deserves credence and trust."[89]

Nevertheless, Bavinck yields to the pressure to accommodate Genesis 1 and 2 to the apparent testimony of science, specifically "geology and paleontology," of a very old earth—an earth much older than the six days of the week of creation taught by Genesis 1 allows for. Bavinck does this, first, by locating the creation of the heaven and the earth of Genesis 1:1 prior to the first day of the week of creation. Genesis 1:3 records an act of God some time after the event recorded in verses 1 and 2. Evidently, this provides some of

86 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.
87 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:572.
88 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 371.
89 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:495.

the millions of years demanded by unbelieving scientists.[90]

The second element of Bavinck's accommodation of the Bible to the theories of unbelieving scientists is more serious. Bavinck denies that the six days of Genesis 1 were actual, historical days. Thus, in fact, he denies the historicity of Genesis 1. Consciously dismissing the testimony of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1 that the days were limited by one evening and one morning, Bavinck concedes that "the days of Genesis 1…have an extraordinary character." They were "extraordinary cosmic days."[91] That is, they were, in reality, not days at all, but long periods of time—hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years.

Having conceded an old earth to unbelieving scientists and, thus, the historicity of Genesis 1, with all the implications this concession has for the historicity of Genesis 2-11 and for the inspiration of Scripture, Bavinck goes yet a step further. He allows for the process of evolutionary development during these long periods of time, which is, of course, the reason why unbelieving science must have an old earth in the first place. "Much more took place on each day of creation than the sober words of Genesis would lead us to suspect…. Each day's work of creation must certainly have been much grander and more richly textured than Genesis summarily reports."[92]

In conclusion, Bavinck expresses satisfaction that by virtue of his explanation of Genesis 1, "Scripture offers a time span that can readily accommodate all the facts and phenomena that geology and paleontology have brought to light in this century."[93]

Bavinck's concession to evolutionary scientists contradicts his blunt, strong condemnation of evolutionary scientific theory in general and of Darwinian evolutionary theory in particular, both in his *Reformed Dogmatics*[94] and in a penetrating, powerful booklet

90 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:496, 497. "It is probable…that the creation of heaven and earth in Genesis 1:1 preceded the work of the six days in verses 3ff. by a shorter or longer period" (496).

91 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:498-500.

92 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:500.

93 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:506.

94 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:407-439, 511-520.

titled, *Schepping of Ontwikkeling* (English translation: *Creation or Evolution*).[95]

Already in Bavinck's own time, his students and disciples brought Bavinck's concession to the wisdom of unbelieving scientists to its natural and inevitable conclusion in a bold, total rejection of the historicity, not only of Genesis 1 and 2, but also of Genesis 3. At the same time, they openly questioned the inspiration of Scripture, as was implied in Bavinck's exegetical adaptation of the days of Genesis 1 to the theories of evolutionary scientists. Thus, this development of Bavinck's error of accommodating the gospel to culture also involved the exploiting of the other grievous error in Bavinck's dogmatics: weakness concerning the doctrine of Scripture.

A second, serious weakness of Bavinck as dogmatician was his erroneous doctrine of Scripture. Bavinck struggled with fundamental doubt about the inspiration of Scripture all his life. The doubt increased in his old age. Leiden inflicted a severe spiritual and theological injury upon him. The wound lasted all his life. He never ripped the portrait of Abraham Kuenen, his higher critical Old Testament professor, from his study wall.

The one question that his Secession examiners had had about his theology when Bavinck gave account of it to them on his entrance into the ministry of the Secession Churches in 1880 was his doctrine of Scripture.[96]

95 Bavinck, *Schepping of Ontwikkeling* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1901). In this work, Bavinck contrasts creation and evolution with regard to the origin, the essence, and the goal of all things, demonstrating the wickedness, the folly, and the hopelessness of evolution. Belief of creation as the truth of the origin, essence, and goal of all things is grounded in Scripture: "We Christians have truly, thanks be to God, another hope and a firmly grounded expectation [in contrast to evolution, the hopelessness of which Bavinck has just described, in chilling detail]. We are able to speak of more glorious things, since God has revealed them to us in his Word. The Holy Scripture is a wonder-book; no other book is like it" (54). The translation of the Dutch is mine.

96 Bavinck himself recorded this dissatisfaction with his doctrine of Scripture on the part of his Secession examiners in a diary he kept (see Gleason, *Bavinck*, 65). Gleason attributes this dissatisfaction to mistrust on the

How deeply this doubt concerning Scripture resided in Bavinck's soul is evident from the fact that at the very end of his ministry and life he urged the synod of his churches to study the doctrine of Scripture in Articles 2-7 of the Belgic Confession with a view to a revision of the doctrine. To the synod of Leeuwarden (1920), that is, within a year of Bavinck's death, Bavinck sent a report that, although advising maintenance of the Reformed confessions, against a movement of younger pastors for a wholesale revision of the confessions, urged the synod that "now the time had come for a further formulation and development of specific points of the confession." One of these points was "the divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, Articles 2-8 of the Netherlands [Belgic] Confession of Faith."[97]

It must be recognized that Bavinck struggled with his besetting sin of doubt concerning the inspiration of Scripture. He never simply surrendered to it. Were it not that doubt concerning Scripture's inspiration is such a grievous sin and that Bavinck himself opened himself up to this doubt by his choice of Leiden with its Scripture-denying faculty as the school of his seminary training, as also by his determination to find truth and goodness in unbiblical, indeed anti-biblical theories (which, of course, necessarily involved casting doubt on the Bible), one would say that there was something heroic about Bavinck's struggle with doubt. He knew the issue and its gravity, and never outrightly succumbed to the doubt. Very likely his well-known words toward the end of his life, "I have kept the faith," referred to his life-and-death struggle with doubt concerning Scripture, and expressed his confidence that he had resisted the doubt, which is fatal to the Christian faith. And there are many fine,

part of the examiners because of Bavinck's training at the modernist seminary in Leiden and speaks of "the soundness of Bavinck's view of Scripture that we find in the *Reformed Dogmatics*." Gleason is mistaken.

97 Bremmer, *Bavinck als Dogmaticus*, 383, 384. The other points were the doctrine of the true and false church in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession and the relation of church and state in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. Bremmer's inclusion of Article 8 of the Belgic Confession in the section on Scripture is a mistake. Article 8 confesses the oneness of being and the threeness of persons of the Godhead.

sound explanations and defenses of biblical authority in the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

But none of this hides, or mitigates, the seriousness of Bavinck's erroneous doctrine of Scripture in the *Reformed Dogmatics*, which he also taught his students in the seminary classroom. Bavinck conceded that the Bible is not only a divine book and word, but also a human book and word—*completely* human. Here is Bavinck's description of Scripture at the crucial point: "Scripture is totally the product of the Spirit of God…and at the same time *totally the product of the activity of the authors*. Everything is divine, *and everything is human*."[98] In this connection, Bavinck acknowledges the Holy Spirit to be the "primary author" of Scripture, which implies that the human instruments were also the authors, albeit "secondary."[99]

Here, Bavinck took his eyes off the confessions, indeed off Scripture, and fixed them on the portrait of Kuenen. The confessions never attribute Scripture to humans, but only to the Holy Spirit. They never call the Bible "human," but exclusively "divine." They never refer to Scripture as "the word of man," or even as "the word of God and the word of man," but only as the "word of God."

Scripture itself denies that it is the "product," that is, the word, of the humans by whom the Spirit produced Scripture. For "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation," that is, no part of Scripture originated in the private thoughts about God, humans, and the creation of the human writers. All is the product of the "interpretation" of God the Holy Spirit. The explanation of this wonder is that the holy men wrote, as they originally spoke, "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (II Peter 1:20, 21). Or, as is the literal translation of II Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is *God-breathed*," that is, the "product" of God.

The result of this wonder of the inspiration of the written word of Scripture is that we have "a more sure word of prophecy"—a word more sure than the spoken word of God on the mount of transfiguration (II Peter 1:17-19). This cannot be the case if the Bible is totally the product of the human writers, as well as the product of God the

98 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:435; emphasis added.

99 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:435.

Holy Spirit. Surely, there is no human word that is *as* sure as the spoken word of God, much less *more* sure. Only because Scripture is the word of God written, *exclusively and totally* the *word of God* written, is it more sure than the word God spoke about Christ on the mount of transfiguration.

Bavinck called his doctrine of inspiration "organic inspiration," contrasting it with an erroneous doctrine of inspiration that allegedly has been found in the Reformed tradition. To this erroneous doctrine of inspiration, Bavinck gave the name "mechanical inspiration."[100]

Objection to Bavinck's doctrine of "organic inspiration" does not deny that in inspiration the Spirit used men, with their distinctive training, gifts, and even personalities, to produce the word of God. It does not deny that the human writers labored at their task consciously, pouring themselves into the work. But objection to Bavinck's doctrine of Scripture denies that the "product"—the word that was written—was on this account a human word. The wonder of (organic) inspiration was that the word that resulted from the genuine instrumentality of the human writers was the word of God, and only and totally the word of God.

The effects of Bavinck's weakening of the doctrine of Scripture have been disastrous in many Reformed churches, in which the dogmatics of Bavinck have been influential. Particularly have the effects been disastrous in that fundamental aspect of the Christian faith that Bavinck himself compromised by his weak doctrine of Scripture: the truth of origins as inspired in Genesis 1-11. Bavinck's doctrine of a totally human Scripture, with special application to Genesis 1-11, produced Jan Lever in the Netherlands and Howard Van Till in the United States.[101]

But Bavinck's bad doctrine of Scripture produced disastrous effects, particularly with regard to origins, already in Bavinck's own time. Shortly before Bavinck's death, a young minister in the

100 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:430-448.

101 See Jan Lever, *Creation and Evolution*, tr. Peter G. Berkhout (Grand Rapids: Kregel's, 1958) and *Where are We Headed? A Christian Perspective on Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); see also Howard J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the Rev. J. B. Netelenbos, publicly denied the historicity of the opening chapters of the Bible and criticized Scripture as uninspired. His consistory deposed him in 1919 "on the ground of his deviating opinions concerning Articles 4 and 5 of the Netherlands Confession of Faith," that is, his heretical doctrine of Scripture.[102] Netelenbos appealed to the instruction he had received from his teacher, Prof. Herman Bavinck. Not only was Bavinck not in favor of the support of the discipline of his former student by the synod of Leeuwarden (1920), but he also spoke out in Netelenbos' defense.[103] The synod of Leeuwarden upheld the deposition of Netelenbos on the ground that he "deviated from Articles 4 and 5 of our [Belgic] Confession of Faith with regard to the reliability and the infallibility of Scripture and [with regard to] the ground of faith."[104]

A few years after Bavinck's death, another of his students, the Rev. J. G. Geelkerken, was disciplined by the synod of Assen for denying the historicity of Genesis 3, particularly the reality of the "speaking serpent." The issue raised by Geelkerken and judged by the special synod of Assen (1926), as expressed by the synod both during the trial

102 Cited in Gleason, *Bavinck*, 399.

103 Hepp states that in the matter of the discipline of Netelenbos at the synod of Leeuwarden, Bavinck "belonged to the most longsuffering among the longsuffering" with regard to the young heretic (*Bavinck*, 337).

104 D. Th. Kuiper, *De Voormannen: Een sociaal-wetenschappelijke studie over ideologie, konflikt en kerngroepvorming binnen de Gereformeerde wereld in Nederland tussen 1820 en 1930* [English translation: *The Leading Men: A Social-Scientific Study concerning Ideology, Conflict, and the Forming of Basic Groups within the Reformed World in the Netherlands between 1820 and 1930*] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1972), 265, 266. The translation of the Dutch is mine. Netelenbos' "believing (*sic*) criticism" of Scripture consisted, among other instances, of attributing Isaiah 40-66, not to the "real" Isaiah, but to a "second Isaiah" ("Deutero-Isaiah") "because this section presupposes the Babylonian captivity." Netelenbos also had doubts about the inspiration and canonicity of the Song of Solomon. Netelenbos' defense before the synod was that "the divine and the human factor are interwoven in Scripture" and that this was the accepted teaching of Kuyper and Bavinck (*De Voormannen*, 264, 265).

and afterwards, was that "a serpent, which was perceptible to the senses [Dutch: "*zintuigelijk waarneembaar*"], and which could be grasped, has spoken."[105] Geelkerken denied the historicity of Genesis 3, the biblical account of the fall of the race into sin, but also the biblical account of the mother promise of the gospel, which was spoken by God to the "speaking serpent."[106] In condemning Geelkerken, the synod charged that he violated Articles 4 and 5 of the Belgic Confession concerning Scripture, particularly the phrase, "believing without any doubt all things contained in them."

Also Geelkerken appealed in his defense to the doctrine of Scripture of his professor, Herman Bavinck—the so-called "organic" inspiration of Scripture. Against the interpretation of Genesis 3 by the synod of Assen, he charged that "the organic conception of holy Scripture was withdrawn in favor of the mechanical [conception]…. The accepted organic doctrine of Scripture of the 'illustrious Kuyper and Bavinck' was still not developed far enough."[107]

Very likely it is indicative of the thinking and sympathies of Bavinck in the cases of Netelenbos and Geelkerken that, a few years after his death, his widow and his daughter and her husband separated from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands to become members of the new denomination formed by Geelkerken and others upon Geelkerken's deposition for teaching the mythical nature of Genesis 3 and, as is implied by such a view of Genesis 3, for a heretical doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture.[108]

Both Netelenbos and Geelkerken were members of a loose "movement of the young [ministers]" in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at that time, which clamored for change, for something

105 Kuiper, *De Voormannen,* 286.

106 In addition to the speaking serpent, Geelkerken expressed doubt also concerning the literal reality of the two trees in the garden. For Geelkerken, although he hesitated to use the word, the entire chapter was a "myth."

107 Kuiper, *De Voormannen,* 288.

108 Bremmer, *Bavinck en Zijn Tijdgenoten*, 269. The name of the new denomination was "*Gereformeerde Kerken in hersteld verband*" [English translation: the Reformed Churches in restored connection, or the Restored Reformed Churches].

new in theology, and for revision of the confessions. The movement regarded Bavinck as its spiritual father.

One of the grounds for the charge against Kuyper and Bavinck by the modernists of their day that they had departed radically from John Calvin and the old Calvinism was exactly their doctrine of Scripture (which Kuyper shared with Bavinck). The liberal, or modernist, D. B. Eerdmans, a professor at the University of Leiden, wrote this concerning Kuyper's—and Bavinck's—doctrine of "organic inspiration":

> Contemporary Reformed [theology] employs a two-edged sword in slaying the old [Reformed] doctrine of Scripture. In the first place it teaches that not all of the Scripture is divine and that much of it is merely human so that modern critical scholarship in its investigation can discover much that is true and good. Secondly, it teaches that even that which is divine in Scripture is also fully human, that human organisms, human personalities, on their own brought forth the Scriptures.[109]

Appreciation of the riches and glories of the Reformed faith as confessed, expounded, defended, and developed in Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics,* especially Bavinck's defense of sovereign grace in salvation, including the salvation of the covenant, may not blind the Reformed church or theologian to the dung mixed with the gold. Bavinck's notion that there is much goodness and truth in the thought and theories of the ungodly; his passion to bring about a union of Christianity and ungodly culture by accommodating the gospel to culture; his doctrine of a common grace of God; and his erroneous view of Scripture as a totally human book must be condemned, rejected, and purged by the tradition that follows. ●

109 D. B. Eerdmans, *"Moderne" Orthodoxie*, quoted in John Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 462.

Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of the Covenant[1]

by David J. Engelsma

Introduction

For Herman Bavinck, the doctrine of the covenant was not merely one Reformed doctrine among many. It was not even the most important doctrine of all. But it was the doctrine of which all the other doctrines revealed in Scripture and confessed by the Reformed faith are the outworkings, implications, and aspects.

The analogy in the human body would not be the skeletal framework, or even the heart, but the principle of life itself that takes form in all the members and accounts for all the functions.

The covenant is simply "the essence of true religion."[2]

Bavinck expressed this significance of the covenant negatively in his *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* (English translation: *Calling and Regeneration*). Having spoken of "the deep, glorious covenant conception, which occupies such an important place in Reformed doctrine," Bavinck wrote: "The Reformed confession and theology can be understood in no single point apart from this doctrine of the covenant."[3]

In considering the doctrine of the covenant in Bavinck's dogmatics, therefore, we treat of the essence of that theologian and his theology. Because he was correct in his estimation of the centrality of the truth of the covenant in the biblical revelation, we now consider the essence of the Christian faith.

Implied is that the church that gets the doctrine of the covenant right is well on the way to getting the rest of theology right as well.

1 The expanded text of an address at a conference of Protestant Reformed officebearers in Redlands, CA on March 6, 2012.

2 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 2:569.

3 Herman Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte* (Kampen: Ph. Zalsman, 1903), 92, 93. This and all other quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch.

On the other hand, that church that goes wrong on the doctrine of the covenant is certain to go wrong regarding all of the Christian faith.

Careful consideration of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant is timely today. For one thing, the heresy of the Federal Vision—a theology of the covenant, as their name expresses—has occasioned, indeed demanded, renewed interest in the doctrine of the covenant, especially among Reformed and Presbyterian churches, where the Federal Vision appears.

For another thing, in the providence of God the English speaking and English reading public now has Bavinck's teaching about the covenant available to them in the translation into English of Bavinck's great work—the four volumes of his dogmatics—hitherto, for the most part, accessible only to those who read Dutch.

Although one would not know it from the writings about the Federal Vision and about Bavinck by theologians outside the Protestant Reformed Churches, it is now evident to all, not only that the highly regarded Bavinck rejects and condemns the covenant theology of the Federal Vision, but also that Bavinck repudiates the doctrine of the covenant that has produced the Federal Vision—a doctrine of the covenant that is widely held and loudly heralded as Reformed orthodoxy and as the overwhelming Reformed tradition by most Reformed churches and theologians.

This is a doctrine of the covenant that views the covenant as a contract, or pact, or bargain, between God and all baptized members of the church, particularly all baptized babies. According to the prevailing opinion in Reformed Christendom, this contract is conditional, that is, dependent on the work of faith and on the deeds of obedience to the law on the part of the baptized. The covenant, therefore, is uncertain, is breakable, regarding every human who may be in covenant with God.

With the publication of Bavinck's dogmatics in English, Reformed theologians can no longer get away with passing this doctrine of the covenant off as Bavinck's. Because of Bavinck's towering stature in the Reformed tradition, no longer are Reformed theologians able to glorify the doctrine of a conditional covenant as the prevailing, if not the only, doctrine of the covenant in the Reformed tradition.

What I intend in this article is an overview of the whole of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant, from its root and foundation in the eternal, triune God and His counsel to its full fruition in history in the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. Because I have recently set forth Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant of grace in a book, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*,[4] I will be brief on this important element of the doctrine of the covenant in Bavinck, sketching it and taking the opportunity to treat aspects of it that I do not treat in the book.

Then, I will consider Bavinck's doctrine of what he called "the covenant of works" with Adam and his doctrine of what he regarded as a covenant of common grace with Noah.

The Covenant of Grace in Jesus Christ

Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant of grace, not only conflicts with, but also condemns the prevailing doctrine of the covenant in most Reformed and Presbyterian churches. This prevailing conception of the covenant is the root of the heresy of the Federal Vision.

Bavinck taught that the covenant, which is the essence of the Christian religion, is a relation of fellowship between God the Creator and His creature, man. In the context of his assertion that the covenant is the essence of true religion, Bavinck described the covenant as "the relation of God to his people," adding that the relation is "fellowship."[5] In the section of the dogmatics in which he treats the covenant of grace directly and most fully, Bavinck called the covenant "true fellowship" between God and man: "If religion is to be a true fellowship between God and humanity…this can only come into being by God's coming down to humans and entering into a covenant with them."[6]

Bavinck enlarged on the conception of the covenant as intimate fellowship in his *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*.

4 David J. Engelsma, "Bavinck on Covenant and Election," in *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2011), 163-176.

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

6 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 3:204, 205.

> Religion is…according to its essence nothing less than fellowship [Dutch: *gemeenschap*] with God, the deepest, most intimate, most tender fellowship which after that of the three persons in the divine being and after that of the two natures in Christ is conceivable and can exist. Scripture expresses that in the beautiful doctrine of the covenant. For the covenant is that deed of God by which He places the man in relation to Himself and causes him to live forever in His fellowship. And that fellowship is more intimate and more tender than that of husband and wife, of vine and branches, of foundation and building. Scripture can find no words and images strong and clear enough to enable us to understand that fellowship in some measure.[7]

Immediately, Bavinck added that the biblical covenant is not "a contract, such as between a lord and his servant."[8]

How Bavinck regarded the nature of the covenant is apparent from his locating the first revelation of the covenant of grace in the promise of Genesis 3:15, which, according to Bavinck, "already contains the entire covenant in a nutshell and all the benefits of grace."[9] Bavinck explains the promise of Genesis 3:15 as God's breaking the fellowship of man with Satan and establishing fellowship with Himself.

This view of the covenant stands in radical contrast with the popular conception of the covenant as an agreement, or contract, or bargain, between God and man.

This covenant of grace is established, maintained, and perfected by God, and by God *alone*, according to Bavinck. The covenant is "unilateral."

> [The covenant] is no mutual treaty; it is not like an agreement between two persons, which they know how to bring about, after weighing the pros and cons, with mutual consultation and after mutual approval. But the covenant of grace is an instituting, a gracious disposing of God, a gift in Christ.[10]

7 Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 38.

8 Bavinck, *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*, 38.

9 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:221.

10 Herman Bavinck, *De Offerande des Lofs* [English translation: *The Offering of Praise*], 6th ed. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1911), 6, 7. This and sub-

In light of God's sovereignty, wrote Bavinck, the covenant is "unilateral"; it is not a "compact but a pledge."[11] A little later, Bavinck expressed that, not only the original establishment of the covenant with an elect human, but also the maintenance of the covenant is unilateral, that is, the work of God alone.

> The covenant of grace…is indeed unilateral: it proceeds from God; he has designed and defined it. He maintains and implements it. It is a work of the triune God and is totally completed among the three Persons themselves.[12]

When Bavinck speaks of the covenant's becoming "bilateral," as he does, he does not at all mean that, whereas the original establishment depends on God alone, the maintenance of the covenant depends on God and the sinner who has been brought into fellowship with God. Rather, as Bavinck himself explains, the covenant is bilateral in the sense that the covenant is "destined…to be consciously and voluntarily accepted and kept by humans *in the power of God*.[13] Because God wills the covenant to be real fellowship, the man, woman, or child with whom God unilaterally establishes the covenant on his or her part now loves, seeks, and lives close to God. This is what the Reformed "Form for the Adminstration of Baptism" describes as our "part" in the covenant, namely, that "we cleave to this one God."[14]

But also the conscious and voluntary acceptance and keeping of the covenant by the human friend of God are due to the "power of God."

Also this aspect of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant contradicts the teaching that is popular among Reformed churches and theologians. Most teach that, although the establishment of the covenant is unilat-

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sequent quotations from this work are my translation of the Dutch.

11 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:204.

12 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:230.

13 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:230.

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

eral, that is, the work of God alone, the covenant becomes bilateral *in the sense that the maintenance of the covenant depends, not only upon the promising God, but also upon the sinner with whom God has established the covenant.* This is what is meant by their teaching that the covenant is "conditional."

A third, fundamental element of Bavinck's covenant doctrine was his teaching that God establishes and maintains the covenant by His sure promise. This is what Bavinck meant in the earlier quotation, when he said that the covenant is not a "compact, but a pledge."[15]

Bavinck identified the promise by which the covenant is established and maintained, and described its significance for the covenant, in his *Magnalia Dei*—his own one-volume summary of the four volumes of his dogmatics.

> The one, great, all-embracing promise of the covenant of grace is this: I will be your God and the God of your seed (Gen. 7:8); and in this [promise] everything is included: the entire acquiring and applying of salvation; Christ and all His benefits; the Holy Ghost and all His gifts. From the mother promise in Genesis 3:15 to the apostolic benediction in II Corinthians 13:13, there runs one, straight line: in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, all the salvation of the sinner is included.[16]

The very next sentences are:

> Therefore, we do well to emphasize that this promise is not conditional, but is as certain [Dutch: *beslist*] and firm [Dutch: *stellig*] as possible. God does not say that He will be our God, if we do this or that. But He says that He *will* put enmity, and that He *will* be our God, and that

15 See footnote 10.

16 Herman Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei: Onderwijzing in de Christelijke Religie naar Gereformeerde Belijdenis* [English translation: *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession*] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 305. This and all other quotations from this book are my translation of the Dutch. This book has been translated into English by Henry Zylstra under the title, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

> in Christ He *will* give us all things. The covenant of grace…depends on God alone, and God is the unchangeable and faithful one…. Men may become unfaithful, but God does not forget His promise. He can and may not break His covenant.[17]

How this glorying in the covenant promise and, therefore, this confidence in the unbreakable covenant of God contrast, not only with the unreliable promise and oft-broken covenant of the Federal Vision, but also with the failing promise and flimsy covenant of much of Presbyterian and Reformed Christianity in our day is immediately obvious to anyone who has done any reading in the vehement defense of a covenant promise that often fails and of a covenant that can be broken by Reformed and Presbyterian theologians.

Yet another important element of Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant is that Reformed theologian's teaching that God has established the covenant of grace, by this sure and unfailing promise, not with the church, first of all, nor with each individual elect, directly, and certainly not with all who are members of the visible church by confession of faith, or by baptism as an infant of godly parents. Rather, God has established the covenant with the man, Jesus Christ, who is head of the covenant of grace, as Adam was the head of the covenant of creation in Paradise.

This truth is decisive in the great struggle between two conflicting doctrines of the covenant in the Reformed churches that reaches a climax in our day on account of the heresy of the Federal Vision.

"[God] made it [the covenant of grace, in Bavinck's words, 'an evangelical covenant'], not with one who was solely a human, but with the man Christ Jesus, who was his own only begotten, much-beloved Son."[18]

Again and again, Bavinck calls Jesus Christ the "head" of the covenant of grace. Adam and Christ, he states, are "two covenant heads." The biblical basis for the statement, in Bavinck's thinking, is Romans 5:12-21 and I Corinthians 15:22.[19]

17 Bavinck, *Magnalia Dei,* 305. The emphasis is Bavinck's.

18 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:225.

19 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:564.

The teaching that Jesus Christ is head of the covenant is the deathblow to the doctrine of the covenant that holds that the covenant is a conditional relation with every baptized member of the visible church alike. For if Jesus Christ is the head of the covenant of grace, God has made the covenant with Him as representative of all those humans, but only those humans, who belong to Him. The answer to the question, "With which humans, including the infant children of believing parents, has God established the covenant by His sure promise?" is: With all those, but those only, whom Jesus Christ represents.

An important implication of the teaching that God has established the covenant of grace with Jesus Christ, as head of the new covenant, by solemn promise to Jesus Christ, is that the covenant is certain and steadfast, that is, unbreakable. And this is the implication that Bavinck himself draws from his doctrine of Christ's headship of the covenant. Having stated that God made the covenant, not with one who is only a human, but with the man Jesus Christ, who is the eternal Son of God in human flesh, Bavinck adds:

> In him [Jesus Christ]…this covenant has an unwaveringly firm foundation. It can no longer be broken: it is an everlasting covenant. It rests not in any work of humans but solely in the good pleasure of God, in the work of the Mediator, in the Holy Spirit, who remains forever. It is not dependent on any human condition…. It does not wait for any law keeping on the part of humans. It is of, through, and for grace. God Himself is the sole and eternal being, the faithful and true being, in whom it rests and who establishes, maintains, executes, and completes it. The covenant of grace is the divine work par excellence—his work alone and his work totally. All boasting is excluded here for humans; all glory is due to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[20]

As this quotation indicates, for Bavinck the covenant is unconditional. Elsewhere in his small book *De Offerande des Lofs* [English: *The Offering of Praise*]—a work that explains the connection between baptism and the Lord's Supper for baptized children of the covenant—Bavinck wrote this: "Faith and conversion are no conditions outside

20 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:225, 226.

and unto the covenant of grace, but they are benefits in that covenant, presupposing the communion with Christ and opening the way to the enjoyment of its benefits."[21]

Bavinck acknowledges, to be sure, that the covenant is conditional "in form": "In its administration by Christ, the covenant of grace does assume this demanding conditional form."[22] But this does not mean for Bavinck, as it does for many Reformed theologians today, that the covenant is both unconditional and conditional. Bavinck was not a paradoxical theologian. He was not a theologian of paradox (that is, in reality, a theologian of sheer contradiction), because he believed that God has truly made himself known and, therefore, that we believers can really know the truth, which is impossible if the revelation of God is contradictory, yes and no. Bavinck explains what he means by saying that the unconditional covenant has a "conditional form."

> The purpose is to acknowledge humans in their capacity as rational and moral beings; still, though they are fallen, to treat them as having been created in God's image; and also on this supremely important level, where it concerns their eternal weal and eternal woe, to hold them responsible and inexcusable; and, finally, to cause them to enter consciously and freely into this covenant and to break their covenant with sin.[23]

Bavinck's doctrine of an unconditional and, therefore, unbreakable covenant of grace with Jesus Christ as head of the covenant stands in diametrical opposition to the Federal Vision theology of a conditional, breakable covenant with all the baptized members of the visible church alike and to the doctrine of a conditional covenant with all baptized children, of which theological root the Federal Vision is an outgrowth.

Bavinck spoke of the "indissolubility" of the covenant: "This

21 Bavinck, *Offerande des Lofs*, 12, 13. The sub-title of the book is: *Overdenkingen voor en na de Toelating tot het Heilige Avondmaal* [English: *Considerations before and after Admission to the Holy Lord's Supper*].

22 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:230.

23 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:230.

indissolubility [of the covenant of grace]…was inferred with increasing clarity from the covenant idea by Old Testament prophecy…[and is] also the reason why the word is translated in the Septuagint, not by *suntheekee* (covenant) but by *diatheekee* (testament)."[24]

If the covenant is made with Jesus Christ as head of His people, the covenant is made with Christ's elect church, and with the elect church only. This was yet another vitally important element of Bavinck's covenant theology. Contrary to the popular covenant doctrine that cuts the covenant loose from election, in the conviction that relating covenant and election is a horrible theological and practical error, Bavinck emphasized that the covenant of grace is closely related to election, and that to separate the covenant from election is false doctrine, of enormous proportion, with grievous practical consequences. Hear Bavinck on the relation of covenant and election.

> Election is the basis and guarantee, the heart and core, of the covenant of grace.[25]

> The covenant relation did not depend on…the law as an antecedent condition; it was not a covenant of works, but rested solely in God's electing love.[26]

In his explanation of the covenant as the basis of the Reformed practice of infant baptism, Bavinck reflected on the close relation of covenant and election: "[The covenant is the realization of election] in an organic and historical way."[27]

Bavinck warned against separating covenant from election: "When the covenant of grace is separated from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and becomes again a covenant of works."[28] He added:

24 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:205.

25 Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 273.

26 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:494.

27 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 4:527.

28 Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 272.

> It is so indispensably important to cling to this close relationship [between covenant and election] because the least weakening of it not merely robs one of the true insight into the achieving and application of salvation, but also robs the believers of their only and sure comfort in the practice of their spiritual life.[29]

Of this wickedness, therefore, in Bavinck's judgment, are all those Presbyterian and Reformed theologians and churches guilty that not only separate covenant from election, but also are bold to inveigh against the theology that grounds the covenant in God's eternal election: They make the New Testament covenant of grace in Jesus Christ a Judaistic covenant of works, that is, turn the gospel of grace into a false gospel of salvation by works, and they rob God's believing people of the only comfort in life and death. Bavinck is correct in his judgment, as the theology of the Federal Vision makes abundantly plain.

The truth that, as made with Christ Jesus as head of the covenant, the covenant is established by God only with the elect in Christ decides the issue whether infant baptism means the establishment of the covenant with all the baptized infants alike, as is the popular covenant doctrine in Reformed churches today, or the establishment of the covenant with the elect infants among the physical offspring of believers.

In my *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, I quote Bavinck from the third volume of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, that the elect infants are in the covenant, whereas the reprobate seed are merely in the administration of the covenant, or in the covenant merely "externally." Bavinck's distinction between the two kinds of offspring of believers, in Latin, is "*de foedere*" (English: "of the covenant") and "*in foedere*" (English: "in [the earthly administration of] the covenant").[30]

Here is an even sharper, clearer statement by Bavinck that membership in the covenant is not wider than membership among those

29 Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 273.

30 Engelsma, "Bavinck on Covenant and Election," in *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 172-176.

whom God gave to Jesus Christ in the eternal decree of election: "Election and covenant are, therefore, not distinguished as a narrower and a broader sphere, for they both comprise [Dutch: "*omvatten*"] the same persons."[31]

Bavinck's emphasis on the close relation of covenant and election becomes even stronger in his explanation of the connection between the covenant of grace in history and its foundation in the eternal counsel of God.

Covenant of Redemption

Bavinck affirms that the covenant of grace has its "foundation in eternity."[32]

He is critical, however, of the traditional teaching, that the foundation is an agreement in eternity between Father and Son. This conception of the foundation of the covenant is characterized by "scholastic subtlety."[33] In addition, biblical basis for such an agreement between Father and Son is lacking. The main text adduced for the conception, Zechariah 6:13 ("the counsel of peace shall be between them both"), does not refer to an eternal agreement between the first and second persons of the Trinity, but to the union of the priestly and kingly offices in the Messiah.[34]

For Bavinck, the foundation in eternity of the covenant of grace in history is God's decree of election, but the decree of election as the election of *Jesus Christ as head of the covenant*.

> The covenant of grace does not hang in the air but rests on an eternal, unchanging foundation. It is firmly grounded in the counsel and covenant of the triune God and is the application and execution of it that infallibly follows…. The covenant of grace was ready-made from all eternity in the pact of salvation of the three persons and was realized by Christ from the moment the fall occurred.[35]

31 Bavinck, *Offerande des Lofs*, 15.
32 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:212.
33 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:213.
34 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:213.
35 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:215.

Similarly, Bavinck expressed that "the covenant relation…rested solely in God's electing love."[36] He viewed the covenant as the realization of election "in an organic and historical way."[37]

If the proximate foundation in eternity of the covenant was the eternal counsel of the triune God decreeing Jesus Christ as head of the covenant with all the elect in Him, Bavinck suggests that the ultimate root in eternity of the covenant is the triune being of God Himself.

> The pact of salvation [which, for Bavinck, is the divine decree, or counsel, of the covenant] makes known to us the relationships and life of the three persons in the Divine Being as a covenantal life, a life of consummate self-consciousness and freedom. Here, within the Divine Being, the covenant flourishes to the full.[38]

Bavinck, thus, points to the eternal life of communion in the Godhead as the deepest source of the covenant of grace, which Bavinck views as fellowship between God and the elect, believing church in Christ.

It seems evident to me that Herman Hoeksema was strongly influenced by Bavinck's theology of the covenant of grace, that he built on the foundation Bavinck laid, and that he developed Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant further.

It should be evident to the Reformed community that the Protestant Reformed Churches are maintaining and defending the doctrine of the covenant taught by Herman Bavinck.

It is also evident, undeniably evident, that the prevailing covenant conception in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, as though the covenant is a conditional agreement between God and the sinner, finds no support in Bavinck. Indeed, Bavinck condemns this conception as a "covenant of works." This is a devastating indictment: a "covenant of works" is a false gospel of salvation by works, rather than of salvation by grace.

36 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:494.
37 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:527.
38 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:214.

The Sinaitic Covenant

Before I leave Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant of grace, I should survey his doctrine of the Sinaitic covenant, that is, the Old Testament covenant with Israel.

There are two reasons for doing so. First, the Sinaitic covenant was a form, or administration, of the covenant of grace.

Second, in the current controversy over the covenant occasioned by the Federal Vision, there is an erroneous doctrine of the Sinaitic covenant, or Old Testament covenant with Israel. Following the lead of the Presbyterian theologian Meredith Kline, Presbyterian and Reformed theologians are teaching that, in part, the Sinaitic covenant was a covenant of works, in fact a renewal of the covenant of works supposedly established by God with Adam in Paradise. Kline's teaching was that, although the spiritual aspect of the covenant with Israel—salvation—was a form of the covenant of grace, the earthly aspect, having to do with earthly blessings and with inheriting the land of Canaan, was a covenant of works. That is, in part, the covenant with Israel was a covenant that depended for its fulfillment, not on the grace of God, but on Israel's obedience to the law. In part, therefore, Israel was required to merit the covenant blessings.

In one of his latest works, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon: A Covenantal Tale of Cosmos and Telos*, amidst typologising symbolism run amok; exotic, invented, irritating terminology; and his characteristic patterning of the biblical covenant after near Eastern treaties, replete with "Suzerain" and "vassal" instead of the biblical "LORD" and "servant," "God" and "covenant people," or "Husband" and "wife," Kline proposes a real, important covenant of works "superimposed" on the Sinaitic covenant.

> In the Mosaic economy there was superimposed as a separate second tier on this foundation stratum of gospel grace a works arrangement, the Torah [Law] covenant with its "do this and live" principle (cf. Lev. 18:5), the opposite of the grace-faith principle (Galatians 3 and 4; Rom. 10:5, 6)…. [This] works principle did not appertain to individual, eternal salvation (Gal. 3:17). The works principle of the Law was rather the governing principle in the typological sphere of

> the national election and the possession of the first level kingdom in Canaan.[39]

Kline freely speaks of the "Sinaitic covenant of works."[40]

In this covenant of works part of the overall Sinaitic covenant of grace, Israel must, and evidently could, merit all the earthly blessings of the Old Testament administration of the covenant, as well as the land of Canaan. "A works principle was operative both in the grant of the kingdom to Abraham and in the meting out of typological kingdom blessings to the nation of Israel."[41]

Kline does not hesitate to find this "works principle" already in the covenant with Abraham, or to attribute merit to Abraham in connection with this "works principle":

> Abraham's obedience functioned not only as the authentication of his faith for his personal justification but as a meritorious performance that earned a reward for others (and thus a type of Christ's obedience…. Abraham's obedience was not, of course, the ground for anyone's inheritance of heaven, but it was the ground for Israel's inheritance of Canaan, the prototypal heaven, under the terms of the Mosaic covenant of works.[42]

Kline, who taught at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and in other reputedly conservative Reformed seminaries, has disciples in many Reformed and Presbyterian churches who are promoting this covenant theology.

The error of Kline's covenant theology with regard to the Sinaitic covenant—the "old covenant," of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and of Hebrews 8—is that it introduces, be it in restricted part and stipulated aspect, the notions of salvation by works and of merit into a form, or administration, of the one covenant of grace. This is fatal to the gospel of salvation by grace. Kline's theology also errs by supposing that the

39 Meredith G. Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon: A Covenantal Tale of Cosmos and Telos* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 96, 97.

40 Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon*, 128.

41 Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon*, 128.

42 Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon*, 102, 103.

creation covenant with Adam, which Kline views as a covenant of works, in which Adam could have merited a higher, eternal life by his obedience, could be reinstated after Adam's fall and after God's revelation of the covenant of grace in Christ in Genesis 3:15.

Yet another error of Kline's explanation of the covenant of God with Israel at Sinai is that his explanation fails to recognize that the earthly blessings of the Old Testament were not a distinct element alongside the spiritual blessings, but rather typical of the heavenly and spiritual blessings of salvation. Similarly, the earthly Canaan was not an earthly home, which Israelites could merit by their own obedience, in distinction from heaven, which Christ must earn for elect Israelites by His obedience, but rather the type of heaven. Therefore, to teach that an Israelite must, and could, merit Canaan is, by virtue of this fact, to teach that the Israelite must, and could, merit heaven.

The covenant theology of Merdith Kline and his disciples is a warning to Reformed theology and churches that to introduce a "covenant of works," that is, merit on the part of a mere humans, into covenant theology anywhere in the system is inevitably to produce a covenant theology of works and merit with regard to the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. Kline's doctrine of a meritorious covenant of works with Adam led him to teach a reinstated covenant of works and merit with regard both to the Sinaitic covenant and to the Abrahamic covenant. But the Sinaitic covenant and the covenant with Abraham were the Old Testament administrations of the New Testament covenant of grace with the church in Jesus Christ. If they were, even in part, a covenant of works, so also is the covenant of grace in Christ.

Reformed theologians must take to heart and make their own the exclamation of Martin Luther: "Away with that profane, impious word, 'merit.'" Save, of course, as was also the meaning of the great Reformer, with regard to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Apart from the fact that the covenant with Adam was not a covenant of works, in which Adam could have merited anything, much less eternal life with God, the covenant with Adam was ended with Adam's fall. It could never again be reinstated. Not only did the condition of fallen humanity—total depravity—prohibit this, but also, and conclusively, the purpose of God. God purposed that the

covenant with Adam give way, once and for all, to the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. "All things were created by him [Jesus, God's dear Son, in whom we have redemption through his blood], and for him…. It pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself" (Col. 1:13-22).

Contrary to Kline, the Sinaitic covenant was not twofold: a covenant of grace containing within itself a radically different covenant of works. The Old Testament covenant with Israel was one covenant, and that one covenant was wholly an administration of the covenant of grace.

This was the doctrine of Herman Bavinck. For Bavinck, the Sinaitic covenant was, in its entirety, an administration of the covenant of grace. It was a form of the covenant earlier established with Abraham and that would be fulfilled in the New Testament covenant of grace with the church in Jesus Christ.

According to Bavinck, the covenant with Abraham continued "in another form" at Sinai, with Israel.[43] "The covenant on Mount Sinai is and remains a covenant of grace."[44] For this view of the Sinaitic covenant, Bavinck appealed to Exodus 20:2: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." These words are the introduction to the ten commandments and, therefore, to the Sinaitic covenant. And these words, wrote Bavinck, are "the essence of the covenant of grace."[45] He added the observation that this covenant with Israel at Sinai is "unbreakable."[46]

Bavinck's further explanation of the Sinaitic covenant, and defense of his view of it as a form of the covenant of grace, exposes the error of Kline and his disciples. The difference between the Sinaitic covenant and the New Testament covenant of grace is that in the Old Testament covenant "all the spiritual and eternal benefits are…clothed…in

43 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:220.
44 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:220.
45 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:220.
46 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:221.

sensory forms."[47] Kline viewed the earthly blessings and the earthly Canaan as realities in themselves, rather than as earthly types of the heavenly and spiritual realities of the new covenant.

Importantly, with regard to the law that is so prominent in the Sinaitic covenant, Bavinck explained its significance in light of Galatians 3 and 4. In Galatians, the apostle denies that the law abrogated the gracious promise and covenant earlier made to and with Abraham (Gal. 3:17), and goes on to assert that the law "was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3:19).

In general, Bavinck contended that the law of the Sinaitic covenant was "our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24).

> The entire law, which the covenant of grace at Mount Sinai took into its service, is intended to prompt Israel as a people to "walk" in the way of the covenant. It is but an explication of the one statement to Abraham: "Walk before me, and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1), and therefore no more a cancellation of the covenant of grace and the foundation of a covenant of works than this word spoken to Abraham. The law of Moses, accordingly, is not antithetical to grace but subservient to it and was also thus understood and praised in every age by Israel's pious men and women. But detached from the covenant of grace, it indeed became a letter that kills, a ministry of condemnation. Another reason why in the time of the Old Testament the covenant of grace took the law into its service was that it might arouse the consciousness of sin, increase the felt need for salvation, and reinforce the expectation of an even richer revelation of God's grace. It is from that perspective that Paul views especially the Old Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace…(Gal. 3:23f.; 4:1f.).[48]

Bavinck concluded his treatment of the covenant with Israel in the Old Testament by declaring that "the law was subservient to the covenant of grace; it was not a covenant of works in disguise."[49]

47 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:221.
48 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:222.
49 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:222.

What Bavinck rejected concerning the covenant at Sinai, however, he allowed regarding the covenant in Paradise.

I turn now to Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant with Adam, prior to the fall.

A Covenant of Works with Adam

Bavinck taught that there was a covenant with Adam in Paradise and that that covenant was a "covenant of works." Bavinck called it a covenant of works, and he explained it as a covenant of works.

First, Bavinck insisted that the relation between God and Adam was a covenant, even though the word is not used in Genesis 1-3. Bavinck based this doctrine on what he considered the correct translation of Hosea 6:7. The Authorized Version renders the text as follows: "They [Israel] like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me." The Hebrew word translated "men" is *adam*. The word is used either as the proper name of the first man, Adam, or as the generic term referring to mankind. The translators of the Authorized Version opted here for mankind, or "men." Bavinck contended that the correct translation is "Adam," so that the text teaches that Israel's disobedience was like Adam's in that both were violation of the covenant, thus establishing that there was a covenant relation between God and the first man.

In addition, Bavinck argued that the only relation possible between God and man is a covenant relation.

Second, Bavinck taught that this covenant with Adam was established by the prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "The command given to Adam was, in the essence of the matter, a covenant, because it intended to bestow eternal life to Adam in the way of obedience."[50]

Third, the covenant with Adam was a genuine covenant of works, in Bavinck's thinking, because in it God "promised…the blessedness of heaven, eternal life, and the enjoyment of the beatific vision," on the basis of Adam's obedience to the probationary command.[51] Bav-

50 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed., 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1908), 2:607. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

51 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:225.

inck thought that, by obeying, Adam could have obtained the highest life—the life that Christ has obtained for the new human race by His death and resurrection.

Fourth, Bavinck stressed the necessity of confessing this covenant of works with Adam. Only the Arminians and Socinians deny it, he charged.[52]

Contemporary defenders of the covenant of works appeal to Bavinck against those who reject it, mainly Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches. How do we respond to this appeal to Bavinck?

First, Bavinck flatly denied the possibility of merit *before* the fall, as well as after the fall. "There is no such thing as merit in the existence of a creature before God, nor can there be…. This is true after the fall but no less before the fall." Bavinck appealed, correctly, to Luke 17:10: "When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do."[53] But this true statement nullifies Bavinck's own explanation of the covenant with Adam as a covenant of works, for, if Adam could have obtained a higher and better life by his work of obedience, he would have *merited*, or *earned*, this higher and better life.

All defenders of a covenant of works with Adam are compelled to acknowledge that the implication of their doctrine is that man in Paradise was put in a position by God in which it was possible for mere man to *merit* with God, and to merit nothing less than *eternal life*. Their Reformed conscience may trouble them to the extent that they put the word "merit" in quotation marks, but, in confessing a covenant of works, they necessarily teach merit.[54]

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

53 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:570.

54 One such Reformed theologian is Dr. Cornelis P. Venema of the United Reformed Churches. Defending the doctrine of a covenant of works with Adam, he affirms that Adam could have merited the higher and better life—eternal life—that Jesus Christ, in fact, has earned for the elect church. But, significantly, Venema places the word "merit" in quotation marks. It is hard for a Reformed theologian to commit himself, boldly and openly, to

Second, Bavinck usually is very careful to state that Adam would have acquired eternal life "*in the way of*" obedience, rather than "*on the basis of*" obedience. Bavinck himself shies away from the bold statement of a true covenant of works, namely, that human works are the basis of eternal life, and merit. This indicates Bavinck's own hesitation concerning the doctrine he espoused.

Third, the real concerns of Bavinck regarding Adam's position in the garden are two. The first is that Adam was in a covenant relationship with God and with the entire human race, such that he was representative head of the race before God. The other deep concern of Bavinck is that Adam's state in Paradise, glorious as it was, was not, and was not intended by God to be, the final destiny, either of himself and Eve, or of the human race. The heading of the section of the *Reformed Dogmatics* in which Bavinck treated of Adam, of the image of God, and of the covenant with Adam in the Dutch original is, significantly, "*De Bestemming van den mensch*" (English translation: "The Destiny of Man").[55]

Both of these concerns of Bavinck are met without embracing the notion that Adam by his obedience could have obtained, that is, merited, the higher, better life for himself and the race that Jesus Christ in fact has earned by His obedience to the will of God.

Certainly, there was a covenant between God and Adam. In that covenant, Adam was legal head of the entire race, so that his disobedience plunged the race into guilt and depravity. The confession that Adam was a covenant head in Paradise does not depend solely, or even mainly, on a correct translation of Hosea 6:7. This is the clear teaching of Romans 5:12-21, the comparison of Adam with Christ in the matter of covenant headship, inasmuch as Adam was "the figure [literally: type] of him that was to come" (Rom. 5:14). When the

a doctrine that has the human race meriting eternal life by its own efforts, indeed the puny, quite unheroic, effort of refraining from eating the fruit of one tree. (See Cornelis P. Venema, "Recent Criticisms of the 'Covenant of Works' in the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (1993): 165-198.

55 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2:605. The translation of the Dutch is mine.

adversaries charge that the Protestant Reformed Churches deviate from the Reformed tradition and, particularly, from Herman Bavinck by denying a covenant of works with Adam, the response must be that Bavinck's insistence on the covenant of works had in view the teaching that there was a covenant with Adam, in which Adam was representative head, and this, the Protestant Reformed Churches confess.

We maintain also, in agreement with Bavinck, that the destiny of Adam and the human race from the outset was much higher than Adam's paradisiacal state. However, God never intended that destiny to be attained by the obedience of Adam, nor was such a destiny ever within the potential of Adam the first. Rather, God purposed the destiny of the race to be achieved by the second and last Adam, Jesus Christ, who is heavenly and spiritual, as the eternal Son of God come down to earth in human flesh, as I Corinthians 15 expresses Christ's superiority over the first Adam. "The second man is the Lord from heaven," so that "as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly" (I Cor. 15:47, 49).

We must also take issue with Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant with Noah, although in this case also we do not inflict any real damage on Bavinck's essential covenant doctrine, which consists of the confession of a covenant of grace in Jesus Christ that is rooted in election.

A Covenant of Common Grace with Noah

Bavinck regarded the covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18 and 9:8ff.) as a covenant of common grace, and called it that.[56] According to Bavinck, the covenant with Noah was not the same as the covenant of grace revealed to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 and established with Abraham and his seed in Genesis 17:7.

Bavinck named the covenant with Noah variously: "covenant of common grace"; "covenant of longsuffering"; and "covenant of nature."

Nevertheless, the covenant with Noah was related to the covenant of special, saving grace: It prepared for the coming of Jesus Christ, and educated the human race, so that the race would desire Jesus Christ

56 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:216ff.

and salvation and become "susceptible" to salvation in Christ.[57]

Bavinck's ominous application of the supposed covenant of common grace to a "susceptibility" of fallen humanity to Christ and His salvation indicates that, in Bavinck's thinking, there was more to the covenant of God with Noah, conceived as common grace, far more, than merely keeping the human race physically alive and in good health. For Bavinck, as for Abraham Kuyper, the covenant of common grace supposedly established with Noah, and still in force today, has a *spiritual* aspect, and serves a *spiritual* purpose. The spiritual aspect of the covenant with Noah comes out especially in Bavinck's consideration of "general revelation," which for Bavinck is an important aspect of the covenant of common grace and a grace that is common to all humans without exception.[58]

By virtue of the covenant of common grace, there is yet truth in all pagan religions. "Mohammed, therefore, is not simply an impostor and an enemy of God."[59] There is "an operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace…also in the religions [of unregenerated heathens]."[60]

Such is the spiritual nature of the covenant of common grace that "[Christianity] is also paganism's fulfillment," inasmuch as Jesus Christ has become, by the covenant with Noah, "the desire of all the Gentiles."[61] By "Gentiles," Bavinck has in view, among all others, the Philistines with their worship of Dagon, the Moabites with their worship of Chemosh, the Canaanites with their worship of Baal and Asherah, the Ammonites with their worship of Molech, and all those about whom it is the testimony of Romans 1:18-32 that with the knowledge of God of general revelation they deliberately "changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator." According to this passage, the sole purpose of God with the knowledge of God that is possible, and inescapable, from the

57 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:219.

58 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1:302-322, 355-385.

59 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:318.

60 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:319.

61 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:320.

creation of the world is that the people having only this knowledge be "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

The common grace covenant with Noah, thus, affords a "common basis" of Christians and non-Christians.[62] It is the "point of contact" for Christianity in non-Christians.[63]

General revelation, as the outstanding aspect of the covenant of common grace, "unites all people despite their religious differences."[64]

And then this, as a kind of wretched, if appropriate, climax of the praise of the covenant of common grace purportedly established by God with Noah: "Natural theology was earlier rightly called a 'preamble of faith,' a divine preparation and nurture to Christendom. General revelation is the foundation, upon which the special revelation raises itself."[65]

A "natural theology"!

This "natural theology," which is idolatry—gross violation of the first commandment of the law of God—is the "preamble of faith"!

And the "foundation" of the great, grand temple of special revelation, that is, the gospel of God!

These are the dreadful implications of a doctrine of the Noahic covenant as a covenant of common grace, to which contemporary advocates of this covenant of common grace presumably commit themselves.

Bavinck rather assumes his explanation of the covenant with Noah than proves it. The basis of his explanation, apparently, is the extension of the covenant with Noah to the earth, to every living creature, and to all nations and peoples of the world (Gen. 9:8-17). In contradiction of Bavinck's assumption concerning the universal extent of the covenant with Noah, however, Romans 8:19-21 explains the covenant with Noah in such a way as to teach that that covenant

62 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.

63 Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd rev. and expanded ed., 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Bos, 1906), 1:334. Bavinck's Dutch word translated "point of contact" is "*aanknoopingspunt*."

64 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:321.

65 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:335.

was a revelation of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ as to its fullest extension: not only all nations, in the elect among them, but also the earthly, impersonal creation with its various kinds of creatures, as the home of Christ and the new human race. Creation itself, that is, the heaven and earth that God created in the beginning, groans in hope of the "manifestation of the sons of God," because creation too will share in the redemption that Christ will bring when He returns. Creation has this hope, because God promised it when He established His covenant with Noah in Genesis 9. The covenant with Noah was an administration of the one covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. And before Bavinck and Kuyper, most of the orthodox theologians of the Reformed churches taught this. Bavinck and Kuyper departed from the Reformed tradition in their theory of a common grace covenant. This is where the contemporary theologians who defend Bavinck's and Kuyper's theory seem determined to remain: outside the Reformed tradition.

Bavinck himself corrects his doctrine of the covenant of common grace in his eschatology. There he presents Christ as the savior of creation:

> The Son is not only the mediator of reconciliation on account of sin, but even apart from sin he is the mediator of union between God and his creation…. In the Son the world has its foundation…and therefore it has in him its god as well…. The Son is the head, Lord, and heir of all things.[66]

Bavinck's explanation of the covenant with Noah undermines his emphasis on the unity of the covenant of grace, despite his efforts to relate the covenant with Noah to the covenant of grace. His covenant of common grace is not a form, or administration, of the covenant of grace. The head of this covenant is not Jesus Christ. Bavinck's covenant of common grace is in conflict with the covenant of (special) grace.

66 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:685. Bavinck gives this explanation of the relation of the creation to Jesus Christ in connection with the second coming of the Lord, to renew the creation, as well as to raise the bodies of the elect.

Living and engaging in theology some one hundred years after Bavinck and Kuyper, as we do, we are witnesses of the grave injury that this conception of the covenant with Noah has done, both in the Netherlands and in North America, indeed wherever it has been embraced and applied.

Summary and Analysis

In Bavinck's theology is a sound confession and glorious development of the truth of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ.

Bavinck emphasized the comprehensive significance of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant: it is fundamental to all the truths of the Christian religion, including the ethical truths.

Specific aspects of the covenant that stand out in Bavinck's theology of the covenant include the following: the headship of Jesus Christ of and in the covenant; from this, and in accordance with this basic truth of the covenant, the establishment of the covenant with the elect, and the elect only; the unconditionality of the covenant; and the indissolubility of the covenant, with the implied comfort of the man, woman, or child who is, and knows himself or herself to be, in covenant relation with God by faith.

Bavinck's doctrine of the covenant of grace, which is the Reformed tradition going back to Calvin, exposes, and condemns, the covenant doctrine of the Liberated Reformed and their disciples, the men of the Federal Vision.

The significance of Bavinck's covenant doctrine, now in English for the first time, for theological developments in our day is, first, that it demonstrates that the covenant doctrine of Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches has solid backing in the Dutch Reformed tradition. This backing is Bavinck himself, of course, but also the tradition that preceded Bavinck. Bavinck is recognized as summing up the best of the Dutch Reformed theologians and theology that went before.

Bavinck rejects and condemns, as a "covenant of works," the doctrine of the covenant of the Federal Vision, shared by many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and taught by many churches, that is, the doctrine of a conditional, breakable covenant graciously,

but resistibly and, therefore, often futilely, established by God with all baptized members of the visible church.

Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches have embraced, developed, and purified the covenant conception of Herman Bavinck. The Protestant Reformed Churches confess the covenant of grace essentially as taught by Bavinck: the headship of Christ; a covenant with the elect in Christ; unconditional; indissoluble.

Hoeksema purified Bavinck's covenant doctrine. He did that especially with regard to the covenant with Adam and with regard to the covenant with Noah.

Hoeksema also developed Bavinck's doctrine. Hoeksema clearly distinguished the source of the covenant of grace, proximately, as the counsel of the covenant, Christ being first and preeminent in the counsel as the covenant head, and, ultimately, as the triune being of God as the divine fellowship. Hoeksema also clarified that the covenant promise is for the elect infants of godly parents, and for them only, which is more implied in Bavinck than expressed, although there are passages in Bavinck where this truth is expressed.

The Protestant Reformed Churches can take encouragement from Bavinck, especially in view of the accusation that Reformed theologians have enthusiastically, and utterly mistakenly, made, that these churches stand outside the Reformed tradition with their covenant theology. We ought to call attention to the covenant doctrine of Herman Bavinck, in evidence that the doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches is not a novelty, not a teaching outside, much less contrary to, a main channel of the Reformed tradition.

Then, we ourselves must continue working at the development of the doctrine of the covenant, particularly by relating all Christian and Reformed doctrines to the covenant and by doing justice, in doctrine and in practice, to what Bavinck understood as the "bi-lateral" nature of the covenant, that is, the *experience* of the covenant and the *commanded life and behavior* of believers and their children—our "*part*" in the covenant.

Bavinck himself applied the doctrine of the covenant of grace to eschatology. With specific reference to the blessedness of the saints, particularly the differing degrees of glory as the gracious reward of

good works, Bavinck wrote, on the next to the last page of his dogmatics, of the covenant of grace.

> That is how it…is…in the covenant of grace. For Christ has fulfilled all the requirements; he not only suffered the penalty but also, by fulfilling the law, won eternal life. The eternal blessedness and glory he received was, for him the reward of his perfect obedience. But when he confers this right of his on his own people through faith and unites eternal life with it, then the two, both the right conferred and future blessedness, are the gifts of his grace, a reality that utterly excludes all merit on the part of believers…. God crowns his own work, not only in conferring eternal life on everyone who believes but also in distributing different degrees of glory to those who, motivated by that faith, have produced good works. His purpose in doing this, however, is that, on earth as in heaven, there would be profuse…diversity in the believing community, and that in such diversity the glory of his attributes would be manifest. Indeed, as a result of this diversity, the life of fellowship with God and with the angels, and of the blessed among themselves, gains in depth and intimacy. In that fellowship everyone has a place and task of one's own….[67] ●

67 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:729.

Herman Bavinck's View of Common Grace

by James A. Laning

Abraham Kuyper held to two kinds of grace. One kind he said was received by all human beings, while the other kind was received only by God's elect. He called the first kind of grace *common,* to indicate that everyone in common received it. He called the other kind of grace *particular,* to indicate that only a particular people, namely God's elect, were recipients of it.

Some people wrongly think that Abraham Kuyper first confessed particular grace and then changed and taught common grace. What he taught, however, was that there are these two kinds of grace—one common and the other particular. First he wrote a book on particular grace, and then he wrote a larger work on common grace. When he wrote the latter, however, he did not say that he was retracting what he had said earlier in his book on particular grace. Rather, he said that, having already set forth the truth concerning the saving grace of God, which is particular, he wanted to move on to consider what he referred to as another kind of grace, which was non-saving and received by all in common.

Bavinck's common/special distinction

Herman Bavinck also taught the doctrine of common grace. But he often distinguished it not from *particular* grace, but from what he frequently referred to as *special* grace.

Bavinck's two kinds of grace corresponded to two means by which God makes Himself known—first by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, and second by the preaching of the gospel. Referring to these as two revelations of God, Bavinck writes:

> Grace is the content of both revelations, common in the first, special in the second….[1]

Common grace, then, is the content of the revelation that comes to all human beings in common. Special grace is the content of the revelation that comes to all those who hear the preaching of the gospel:

> The first is directed to all men and, by means of common grace, serves to restrain the eruption of sin; the second comes to all those who live under the Gospel and has as its glory, by special grace, the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life.[2]

That second, *special* revelation, however, was said by Bavinck to have a beneficial effect in this life not only upon the elect believers, but also upon the reprobate. In other words, though this grace is said to come by means of special revelation, it is still an example of the teaching that grace comes to those who are not in Christ.

In this article, I am going to refer to as *common grace* any grace of God that comes to those who are outside of Christ. Thus, the teaching of Bavinck that was just mentioned will be referred to as an example of his positions on common grace, even if my use of this phrase does not correspond precisely with the terminology that he himself used.

Different Types of Common Grace

There are a number of teachings that can all be referred to as common-grace teachings. My desire here is to distinguish some of these from one another, and to demonstrate Bavinck's view on each one.

I intend to divide the subject of common grace into a number of distinct positions, and will refer to them as Common Grace A, Common Grace B, and so on. With each of these I will describe the specific position, demonstrate Bavinck's view on it, and then give a brief refutation of it.

1 Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith,* trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1956), 38.

2 Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith,* 37.

Common Grace A:

If God gives something good to a man that is undeserved, then that is a gift of God's grace.

This is a very frequently encountered common-grace position. Many think that when God gives an unbeliever anything good that he does not deserve, it is to be viewed as a gift of God's grace. For example, God gives to an unbeliever food, clothing, and shelter. These are good things that the unbeliever does not deserve. Therefore many view these to be gracious gifts from God.

Life itself would be another example. The unbeliever does not deserve to continue to live. Therefore many conclude that every additional day that God grants to an unbeliever is a gift of God's common grace.

The preaching of the gospel would be yet another example. Although not all unbelievers hear the true gospel preached, those who do are receiving something good that they do not deserve. Therefore many view this preaching to be a gift of grace to every individual who has the privilege of hearing it.

Bavinck cited all of these as examples of God's grace to those outside of Christ. Let us take a look at each one of them in turn.

Bavinck's position

1. The good things that God gives to unbelievers (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) are blessings that flow to them from God's grace.

According to Bavinck, when God gives good things to the reprobate, He gives these things to them in His grace:

> …the reprobates also receive many blessings, blessings that do not as such arise from the decree of reprobation but from the goodness and grace of God. They receive many natural gifts—life, health, strength, food, drink, good cheer, and so forth (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17; 17:27; Rom. 1:19; James 1:17)….[3]

3 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:398.

Bavinck makes clear here that he is speaking about reprobates. He says that in this life many blessings flow to these reprobates from the grace of God.

An undeserved good thing, in Bavinck's mind, is a blessing. So when an unbeliever receives "health, strength, food, drink, good cheer, and so forth," he is receiving blessings that come to Him from God's grace.

2. Every day of life that God gives an unbeliever is a gift of God's grace.

When God gives an unbeliever more days to live on this earth, this, in Bavinck's view, is a gift of God's grace. Take, for example, what happened to Cain after he killed his brother Abel. Bavinck viewed the extension of Cain's earthly life to be a gift of God's common grace.

> Cain is driven from God's presence because of fratricide (Gen. 4:14, 16). Yet he continues to live; grace is thus given to him in place of strict justice.[4]
> Cain was granted grace over justice; he even became the father of a line of descendants who gave the impetus to culture (Gen. 4).[5]

More days to live is something good that Cain did not deserve. Bavinck looks at this, and says that God gave "grace" to Cain by not putting him to death right there on the spot.

3. If God speaks to an unbeliever, what He makes known is a gift of God's grace.

After the fall, man did not deserve to have God speak to him any longer. Before the fall, Bavinck says, God spoke to Adam "on the basis of agreement or right." Things changed, however, after the fall:

> Revelation continues, but it changes in character and receives a dif-

4 "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, no. 1 (April 1989), 40.

5 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:311.

> ferent content. Now revelation comes to guilty man, who merits death, as a revelation of grace…. Life, work, food, clothing come to him no longer on the basis of an agreement or right granted in the covenant of works but through grace alone. Grace has become the source and fountainhead of all life and every blessing for mankind. It is the overflowing spring of all good (Gen. 3:8-24).[6]

Grace is "the overflowing spring of all good." So if an unbeliever receives from God something good, which he does not deserve, that is to be viewed as flowing to him from the fountain of God's grace. Included in this category of undeserved good, says Bavinck, would be God's act of making something known to the unbeliever.

> Revelation therefore is always an act of grace; in it God condescends to meet His creature, a creature made in His image.[7]

The Belgic Confession states that God makes Himself known to us by two means, first by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, and then secondly by His Word. Both of these Bavinck viewed to be means of grace to everyone who receives them.

> But, however essentially the two are to be distinguished, they are also intimately connected with each other. Both have their origin in God, in His sovereign goodness and favor…. Grace is the content of both revelations, common in the first, special in the second, but in such a way that the one is indispensable for the other.[8]

Though Bavinck calls it *special* grace in the passage just quoted, he elsewhere speaks of this as grace coming in the preaching to more than just the elect.

> Frequently, even for those who harden themselves in their unbelief, it [i.e., the preaching of the gospel—JAL] is a source of various blessings. The enlightenment of the mind, a taste of the heavenly

6 VanLeeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" 40.
7 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 1:310.
8 Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith,* 37–38.

> gift, partaking of the Holy Spirit, enjoyment of the Word of God, the experience of the powers of the age to come—these have sometimes even come to those who later fell away and held the Son of God in contempt (Heb. 6:4–6).[9]

We could say that Bavinck here refers to gospel preaching to the reprobates as a *special* kind of *common* grace. Even though not everyone would receive this grace, we would still refer to it as an example of common grace, since the grace of which he speaks flows to those who are outside of Christ.

Brief refutation

1. Good things given to the reprobate are not given in God's favor. Rather, they are given to them in His wrath that they might be without excuse.

God gives unbelievers many good things that they do not deserve. However, they are not gifts of grace, since God does not give them in His favor. God's grace definitely refers to His favor. So for these to be gifts of grace, they would have to be given by God in His favor toward them. This, however, is not the case.

Scripture tells us that God gives unbelievers these things, not in His love and favor, but rather in His hatred and wrath, with the desire that the unbeliever might be without excuse in the day of judgment. "When the wicked spring as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish; it is that they shall be destroyed for ever" (Ps. 92:7). The phrase "it is that" introduces a purpose clause. God does give the wicked good things, so that they spring up as the grass. But He does this with the purpose that they might fall into destruction more rapidly and be destroyed forever.

2. To receive a gift of grace is to receive it with God's blessing. Cain received many more days of earthly life, but was cursed during all that time. A cursed person is not receiving God's blessing.

The example of Cain illustrates well the wrongness of Bavinck's

9 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 4:38.

view of common grace. It is true that Cain did not deserve to continue to live. But he received these extra days of life on this earth not as a gift of grace, but as something that God gave to him in His wrath.

If God gave these days to Cain in His grace, then He would have given them to him with His blessing. Certainly receiving grace means receiving God's blessing. Yet God explicitly tells us that Cain was cursed during all of this time. A cursed person is one that is receiving, not God's blessing, but His curse; not God's grace, but His wrath.

To understand this it helps to consider whether Cain ended up better or worse after living all those days. The longer he lived, the worse he became spiritually, and the worse his punishment would be on the last day. Clearly, each day that God gave him was not beneficial to him.

Consider Judas Iscariot. Was it better that he did not die in the womb, but rather lived to be an adult? Jesus says it would have been better for that man if he had never been born. "The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matt. 26:24).

When God gives an unbeliever more days of earthly life, He does not give him these days in His favor, with the desire that he might be improved. Rather, He gives it to him in His wrath, that he might be even more without excuse in the day of judgment.

3. God's blessing is efficacious. One who receives God's blessing benefits spiritually. Yet unbelievers are not improved spiritually by the good things they receive from God.

Although this has already been mentioned, it needs to be explained in more detail, since it serves to bring out more clearly the distinction between a good thing and a blessing.

Good things may or may not profit a person who receives them. But such is not the case with God's blessing. The blessing refers to the efficacious word of God's favor. If someone receives God's blessing, he is always benefitted spiritually. "The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it" (Prov. 10:22).

God's blessing makes the recipient spiritually rich. It draws a

person toward God, and causes him more so to shine forth the glory of God. The blessing of the Lord, "it maketh rich." Such is always the case with God's blessing.

In distinction from God's blessing, the good things God gives a person do not always profit the recipient. These good things are distinct from God's blessing, and benefit a person only if they are received *with* God's blessing. This is what we confess in Lord's Day 50 of the Heidelberg Catechism, where the petition "Give us this day our daily bread" is explained.

> Q. 125. Which is the fourth petition?
> A. Give us this day our daily bread; that is, be pleased to provide us with all things necessary for the body, that we may thereby acknowledge Thee to be the only fountain of all good, and that neither our care nor industry, nor even Thy gifts, can profit us without Thy blessing; and therefore that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures and place it alone in Thee.

The distinction is expressed quite clearly: "nor even Thy gifts, can profit us without Thy blessing." With God's blessing, they are always profitable. Without God's blessing, they do not profit the recipient at all.

The Heidelberg Catechism here rightly makes a distinction between the good things that God gives and God's blessing. The teaching of common grace wrongly equates the two.

Common Grace B:

There is a grace of God that restrains sin in the nature of all sinners, so that there is still some good in it. They still bear the good image of God, regardless of whether or not they ever hear the preaching of God's Word.

Common Grace B has to do with the sinful nature of man. Those who hold to it say that there is still some good in the nature of an unbeliever, so that he is able to produce works that at least in some respects are good.

One who holds to this version of common grace will typically argue that all human beings bear the image of God. They will define the image of God in such a way that even unbelievers can be said to

bear this image. Scripture says the image of God consists of a true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness—making it very clear that only believers bear it. Those who hold to Common Grace B, however, alter what is meant by the image of God, defining it in such a way as to make it easy for them to argue that even those outside of Christ bear God's image.

All human beings, for example, have a will and an understanding. They can reason and make choices. So if the image of God is defined to consist in having this, then every human being will be viewed as one who bears God's image. Furthermore, the natural man has a desire to find more ways to use God's creatures for his own pleasure. Many take this fact and argue that when a man does this he is *imaging God* by *exercising dominion* over the creation. Defining the image of God to include this exercising of carnal dominion over the creation, they then proceed to argue that all human beings bear God's image.

But if all human beings bear the image of God, then there must be some sense in which all human beings have good in them. The image of God, after all, is certainly a good thing. So any person who bears God's image has to have within him something good. This good, then, would have to be viewed as a gift of grace. Man certainly does not deserve to have any good left in him. So, they say, God's gracious restraint of sin in an unbeliever's nature, preserving within him some remnants of the good image of God, is an example of the grace of God that flows also to those who are outside of Christ.

Bavinck's position

There is no doubt that Bavinck also held to this view of common grace. He explicitly and repeatedly speaks of good that still remains in fallen man.

> God did not leave sin alone to do its destructive work. He had and, after the fall, continued to have a purpose for his creation; he interposed common grace between sin and the creation—a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless restrains and compels. All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man….

Some good remains in fallen man, says Bavinck—a teaching that is clearly related to his view that "traces of the image of God" are found in unbelieving man.

> Consequently, traces of the image of God continue in mankind. Understanding and reason remain….[10]

So good remains yet in the natural man. To a certain degree, says Bavinck, man still bears the good image of God. This, then, would make it possible for the unbeliever to do good works.

When Bavinck goes on to make a reference to these good works that unbelievers supposedly perform, he does not limit himself to such acts as the giving of one's time, money, and effort to help those who physically are in need of assistance. Bavinck actually found good even in the religious writings of false teachers.

In the following quote, Bavinck is finding fault with those who saw common grace only in what he calls the moral and intellectual acts of unbelievers, and not also in their religious activities. The religious writings of unbelievers, he says, should not be viewed as being void of any good. He writes:

> As a rule this operation of common grace, though perceived in the life of morality and intellect, society and state, was less frequently recognized in the religions of pagans…. The religions were traced to deception or demonic influences. However, an operation of God's Spirit and of his common grace is discernible not only in science and art, morality and law, but also in the religions…. Founders of religions, after all, were not impostors or agents of Satan but men who, being religiously inclined, had to fulfill a mission to their time and people and often exerted a beneficial influence on the life of peoples.[11]

Perhaps one is astonished to read such a statement made by Bavinck. Yet this is precisely where his position on common grace leads him. One who goes down this road might end up justifying his own unbiblical views, arguing that in some way such false

10 Van Leeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" 51.

11 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 1:319.

teachers are "exerting a beneficial influence" on the life of the people of their own day.

Brief refutation

1. One who truly bears God's image has an understanding that is enlightened with a true knowledge of God. An unbeliever, however, has an understanding that is darkened.

A child of God has what is a called a true knowledge of God. That means he knows God personally, and loves Him in his heart. In the Canons of Dordt we confess that Adam, as a child of God, had an understanding that was adorned with this true knowledge of God. "Man was originally formed after the image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator and of spiritual things" (Canons 3/4, 1).

But after man fell into sin, the nature of man was different. Now the understanding of an unbeliever lacks this knowledge of God. An unbeliever's understanding is not enlightened, but darkened. "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Eph. 4:18). An understanding not adorned with the light of a true and saving knowledge of God is a darkened understanding.

Even unbelievers have a mind capable of logical reasoning. Yet that itself does not determine whether a person bears the image of God. The determining factor is whether a person has an understanding that is dark or that is enlightened.

The devil, for example, has a darkened understanding. So a human being with a darkened understanding is like the devil, bearing his image. Only one with an enlightened understanding bears the image of the living God.

2. One who truly bears God's image has a living will that is righteous and holy. An unbeliever, however, has a dead will that is unrighteous and unholy.

Now let us turn to consider man's will. When God regenerates a person, the will of that person is changed. "He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircum-

cised, infuses new qualities into the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens" (Canons 3/4, 11). Before a person is regenerated, his heart is dead. And if his heart is dead, his will is dead. It is dead in sin, which means that it always chooses that which is evil.

So although every human being has a will, some have a will that is alive, righteous, and holy. Others have a will that is dead, unrighteous, and unholy. The devil has a dead, unrighteous will, which always chooses that which is evil. So anyone with a dead, sin-enslaved will bears the image of the devil. Only one who has a will that is alive—a will that chooses that which is righteous and good—can be said to bear the image of God.

In other words, man really did die when he fell into sin. He died and lost the image of God that he once bore. Only those in Christ, who have a living will and an enlightened understanding, bear the image of God today.

3. An unbeliever who has a dead will and a darkened understanding never does anything good. All that flows from him is nothing but evil continually.

One who is genuinely Reformed holds to the truth of total depravity. "Depraved" means corrupt or wicked. So when we say that man by nature is "totally depraved," we mean that his nature is completely wicked. There is nothing good in the nature of unbelieving man, and therefore he is unable to perform any activity that is the least bit good.

Man's problem is his nature, not merely his deeds. His problem is not merely that he sins, but that his very nature itself is sinful—his heart is thoroughly hard, his mind is completely dark, and his will is entirely rebellious.

There are passages in Scripture that speak of what man is, and not merely of what he does. "…the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:7–8). This passage is speaking of more than an unbeliever's thoughts; it is speaking of his mind itself. The mind of an unbeliever is a "carnal mind," which is unable to subject itself to the law of God. The problem is not merely

that it *does not* subject itself to God's law, but that it *cannot* do so. The sinful mind of man is unable to think the thoughts God's law requires. Only evil thoughts arise out of the sinful mind of an unbeliever.

The only thing an unbeliever does is sin, since a person has to have a living spirit to do anything good. Scripture refers to a person with a dead spirit as being "dead in sins." "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1).

A person who is "dead in sins" is in bondage to sin. This means he is sin's slave, so that only sinful activity flows out of his spiritually dead nature. Since his mind and will are completely corrupt, all his thoughts and desires are nothing but sin continually. "And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). "Only evil continually" is the phrase that describes the thoughts of unbelieving man. An unbeliever's thoughts are always evil, because his mind is completely evil. Out of an evil mind and heart arise only evil thoughts.

God points us to a picture in the creation that illustrates for us this relation between a man's nature and his actions: "Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7:17–18). A corrupt tree is a tree that produces fruit that is not good for food. Good fruit does not come from a corrupt fruit tree. Nor does corrupt fruit come from a good fruit tree.

This illustration in creation is pointing us to contemplate the relationship between a person's nature and his actions. Good fruit (i.e., good thoughts, words, and deeds) do not come forth from a corrupt nature. Only corrupt actions proceed from a corrupt nature.

What a man does is rooted in what he is. If God gives him a good heart, then he can begin to do that which is good. Therefore, contrary to Common Grace B, out of an evil heart comes forth only evil activity.

4. An unbeliever's works that appear to be good to man are not good in the sight of God. God looks at the heart of a person, and

considers a work to be good only if it is done by faith out of love for Him.

For a work to be good in God's eyes it must be done out of a true faith in God and out of a genuine love for Him. All other works are sinful in God's eyes, no matter how they may appear outwardly to men.

This truth is set forth concisely in Romans 14:23, the end of which reads: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." When this passage speaks of "whatsoever is not of faith," it is referring to any act that is not performed out of a genuine faith in God. When one is trusting in himself or in other things, the works he performs are always evil. Since an unbeliever does not have faith, it is impossible for him to perform a work out of faith. All he can do is sin.

An unbeliever is sinning even when he is outwardly worshiping God. "The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight" (Prov. 15:8).

Even when an unbeliever is outwardly religious, and appears to be doing something good, God looks at his heart, sees that the unbeliever is hating Him and merely pretending to worship Him, and says that such hypocrisy is an abomination.

To do a good work one must be joined to Christ. Outside of Christ, all that a person does is sin. Such is the depth of the depravity from which God's people have been delivered.

Common Grace C:

There is a special kind of common grace that stems the corruption of those outside of Christ when they come under the preaching of God's Word.

As was mentioned earlier, this third kind of common grace would be a special kind that accompanies what is often called God's special revelation (i.e., the revelation of God by means of His Word). Those who hold to this type of common grace view the preaching of the Word as being beneficial to unbelievers.

The preaching of God's Word is referred to as a means of restraining grace. This grace, so it is thought, restrains sin in the unbeliever, and stems his corruption, so that he is not as corrupt as he otherwise

would be. In this way the preaching of God's Word is said to improve society, even when that society consists primarily of those outside of Christ.

Bavinck's position

Herman Bavinck certainly did hold to this type of common grace. The preaching of the Word, he maintained, has a positive effect upon human society.

> The call, by law and gospel, restrains sin, diminishes guilt, and stems the corruption and misery of humankind.[12]

Bavinck thought that God desires to use the preaching of the Word to reduce the guilt and corruption of those who are outside of Christ, in order that in this way their misery in this life might be reduced, and their life in human society might be improved.

In the same context, Bavinck explains what he means by reducing the guilt and corruption of men. He says the preached Word maintains in each person a religious and moral awareness of his dependence upon God, and causes him to have a sense of awe, respect, duty, and responsibility.

The positive effect of this common grace, says Bavinck, is of utmost importance. Without it, he says, it would not be possible for humanity to continue to exist.

> …it maintains in each person and in the whole human race the religious and moral awareness of dependence, awe, respect, duty and responsibility, without which humanity cannot exist. Religion, morality, law, art, science, family, society, the state—they all have their root and foundation in the call that comes from God to all people. Take it away, and what we get is a war of all against all, each person becoming a wolf against one's neighbor.[13]

Thus we see not only that Bavinck held to this type of common

12 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics***,** 4:38.

13 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics***,** 4:38.

grace, but also how necessary he thought this common grace was for the entire structure of the earthly kingdom he desired to promote.

Brief refutation

1. The preached Word does not have any positive effect upon those who are outside of Christ.

Many think that the preached Word will have a positive effect upon unbelievers when they hear it. But such is not the case. It has a positive effect only upon those who receive that Word. For those who reject it, there is no positive fruit whatsoever.

This is illustrated by our Lord in the parable of the sower. In that parable, the word that comes to both believer and unbeliever is said to bring forth fruit only in those who have good soil (i.e., good hearts). "And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred" (Mark 4:20).

There is never any positive fruit in those whose soil is bad (i.e., whose heart is dead). Unbelievers outwardly hear the Word, but they never "receive" it. They always reject the seed, and thus they never bring forth any positive fruit.

Nor is it the purpose of God that there be positive fruit in all who outwardly hear the Word preached. As Christ Himself said, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8; 14:35). There are many to whom God has determined not to give ears to hear. Those people will never receive the Word of God that is spoken to them.

Jesus taught that only those whom God has determined to save are children of God, and only God's children will hear God's words. Speaking to some unbelievers, He said: "He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God" (John 8:47). Those who are not of God do not hear God's Word. They do not receive the seed, and thus there will be no positive fruit.

2. The preached Word does not stem the corruption of unbelieving man. Rather, unbelievers who hear that Word reject it and develop even further in their corruption.

Contrary to what Bavinck writes, the preaching of the Word does not have a positive effect upon unbelievers. It does not diminish their guilt or stem their corruption. Rather, the opposite is what actually takes place.

When the Word of God is preached to an unbeliever who hates that Word, he hardens his heart against it. In this way he becomes even more guilty, and goes even deeper into corruption.

Already in the life of Cain we see this. God spoke to Cain, rebuking him for his sin and showing him the way of life. That word of God to Cain did not have a beneficial effect upon him. When Cain heard what God said, he hardened his heart against that word, thus becoming even more guilty. Quickly he went deeper into corruption, even to the point of killing his brother Abel.

Such still today is the case when the preached Word comes to those walking in sin. Unbelieving man always hates what God says, rejects it, and goes deeper into corruption.

Lest we think that this would be contrary to God's sovereign will, the Scriptures tell us that God is glorified not only by the positive, but also by the negative effect of gospel preaching. The apostle Paul understood this, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit made the following confession about gospel preachers: "For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?" (II Cor. 2:15-16).

Living believers hear and embrace the Word and go from life into a more abundant life. Dead unbelievers outwardly hear the Word, reject it in their heart, and go from death into a worse death. Either way, what takes place is according to God's sovereign good pleasure. The granting of life to some, and the punishing of others with death, are both acts of Christ. Thus the gospel preacher can rejoice, knowing that he is a sweet savour of Christ, not only in them that are saved, but also in them that perish.

John Calvin understood and confessed this. In his commentary on this passage, he writes the following:

> Here we have a remarkable passage, by which we are taught, that, whatever may be the issue of our preaching, it is, notwithstanding, wellpleasing to God, if the Gospel is preached, and our service will be acceptable to him; and also, that it does not detract in any degree from the dignity of the Gospel, that it does not do good to all; for God is glorified even in this, that the Gospel becomes an occasion of ruin to the wicked, nay, it must turn out so. If, however, this is a sweet odor to God, it ought to be so to us also, or in other words, it does not become us to be offended, if the preaching of the Gospel is not salutary to all; but on the contrary, let us reckon, that it is quite enough, if it advance the glory of God by bringing just condemnation upon the wicked.

Such a confession is in harmony with what our Lord Himself said while He was on this earth. "And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind" (John 9:39). In this concise statement, Christ made known not only that He came to save only some, but also that He came that those who have been proudly rejecting God's Word might be punished, going from bad to worse.

In line with the way Jesus often spoke, those who see not refer to those who by God's grace view themselves to be blind. Christ came that those people might be granted the grace to see. The others who are said to see are those who proudly view themselves to be able to see quite well without God's Word. Christ was sent by God that those people might be made blind.

That this is the correct interpretation, and that even the Pharisees had an intellectual understanding of this, is evident from the next two verses:

> And some of the Pharisees which were with him heard these words, and said unto him, Are we blind also? Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth (John 9:40-41).

It is quite evident that "they which see" refers to the Pharisees, and to those who are like them. Christ came that these people might be made blind.

The point here is that when Christ, the Word of God, comes to impenitent sinners, the word that He speaks does not improve them. The result is not that their guilt is diminished and their corruption stemmed. Rather, the proud who think they see are thrust deeper into darkness.

This, Christ said, is the negative purpose of His coming. It is not something that happens contrary to God's will. Christ came with both a positive and a negative purpose. In both the enlightening of the elect and the darkening of the understanding of the reprobate, God's name is praised, and His Word is magnified.

Common Grace D:

There is a grace of God that produces good spiritual activity in some unregenerate people, and prepares them to receive regeneration.

In this article, common grace is being defined as a grace of God that comes to those who are outside of Christ. As was set forth earlier, this definition is not precisely the same as Bavinck's. He spoke of a grace as "common" when it was received by all human beings in common. Here, however, we are referring to common grace as any kind of grace that flows to those who are not in Christ.

There is a reason why we define it this way. The truth is that God's grace is upon Christ, and flows only to those who are in Him. Thus the error is to teach that there is any grace that flows to those who are outside of Christ. Perhaps we could call this error something other than *common* grace. But because the battle against this error came to the fore when the teaching known as common grace was being promoted first in the Netherlands and then also in this country, we have tended to stick with this term as a name to describe this error.

That being said, we refer to as Common Grace D the teaching that there is a grace of God that produces good spiritual activity in those that God intends to regenerate, and that this grace prepares them to receive this gift of regeneration. Granted this would not be a grace that would be received by all human beings in common. But it would be a grace that would flow to those who at that moment are outside of Christ. Thus we will refer to it as a type of common grace.

Bavinck's position

The previous kind of grace was called "restraining" or "repressive" grace by Bavinck.[14] Now we are turning to consider the kind of grace that he called "preparatory grace." "Finally, this call is not only a repressive but also a preparatory grace."[15]

Bavinck speaks of a grace that produces good activities in those who have not yet been brought into Jesus Christ.

> For that reason we can properly speak of a preparatory grace. God himself, in many different ways, prepares for his gracious work in human hearts. He aroused in Zacchaeus the desire to see Jesus (Lk 19:3), produced distress in the crowd that listened to Peter (Acts 2:37), caused Paul to fall to the ground (9:4), disconcerted the jailor at Philippi (16:27), and so directs the lives of all his children even before and up to the hour of their rebirth.[16]
>
> …the preaching of law and gospel, distress about sin and fear of judgment, development of conscience and the felt need for salvation: all of this is grace preparing people for rebirth by the Holy Spirit and for the role that they as believers will later play in the church.[17]

Of the four things mentioned in that second quote, consider especially two of them: distress about sin, and a felt need for salvation. According to Bavinck, these are produced by the grace of God and are viewed to be positive spiritual activities that arise in some people who have not yet been regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Zacchaeus is said to have been a lost sinner who desired to see Jesus. The Philippian jailor said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Bavinck maintains that these expressions of a desire for salvation came forth from Zacchaeus and the jailor while they still had unregenerated hearts of stone.

14 The term is *gratia reprimens,* which John Vriend translated as "repressive grace," but which could also be translated "restraining grace."

15 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:40.

16 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:40.

17 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 4:40.

Brief refutation

1. An unregenerate person never has a godly sorrow for sin and a desire to be delivered from his sin.

An unregenerate person is dead in sin. He has no sorrow for sin, nor desire to be saved from that sin. When a person manifests a godly sorrow for sin and a desire to be delivered from it, this is evidence that the person has already been regenerated by Christ's Spirit.

Reformed believers hold this to be their official position, as it is set forth in the third and fourth heads of the Canons of Dordt. According to what is listed under error four, we reject the error of those:

> Who teach that the unregenerate man is not really nor utterly dead in sin, nor destitute of all powers unto spiritual good, but that he can yet hunger and thirst after righteousness and life, and offer the sacrifice of a contrite and broken spirit, which is pleasing to God.
>
> Rejection: For these are contrary to the express testimony of Scripture. Ye were dead through trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1, 5); and: Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5; 8:21).
>
> Moreover, to hunger and thirst after deliverance from misery and after life, and to offer unto God the sacrifice of a broken spirit, is peculiar to the regenerate and those that are called blessed (Ps. 51:10, 19; Matt. 5:6).

There is no positive spiritual activity that takes place within an unregenerate person. Rather, "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." Since that is the case, it is not possible for an unregenerate person to seek to be saved from his sin.

So when someone does have a genuine thirst "after deliverance from misery and after life," that is proof that he has already been regenerated.

The Canons cite the following verse from Psalm 51 as proof: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). The inspired king David wrote this as a regenerate man. An unbeliever would never make such a request. He might say the words outwardly, but he would never say it and mean it in his heart.

2. The error that there is "preparatory grace" that comes to those outside of Christ would tend to lead to the false teaching that God graciously offers salvation to all who hear the preaching of the gospel and gives to them all the "preparatory grace" needed to accept that offer.

The danger of this wrong view of grace ought to be clearly evident. It is just a small step to move from preparatory grace for the elect, to preparatory grace for all that hear the preaching.

Thus it is not surprising that many who have held to common grace have gone so far as to say that God desires the salvation of every human being, and gives grace to all who hear that preaching, enabling them to accept God's offer and to be saved. That false teaching is even more deadly.

Common Grace E:

When reprobates hear gospel preaching they receive God's grace. God in that preaching makes known to them that He desires their salvation.

This last form of common grace is arguably the worst.

This error has come to be known as ***the well-meant offer of the gospel***. Those who hold to this error maintain that God sincerely desires the salvation of every individual. He desires that they be saved, and He graciously offers to them this salvation.

Many who hold to the well-meant offer would also say that God works graciously in the unregenerate who hear the preaching, granting them the grace to embrace the offer that God makes to them. Here we consider just the teaching that in gospel preaching God expresses a desire that all human beings be saved.

Bavinck's position

The Reformed position is that God has unconditionally chosen to save only some people. He desires to save only them, and He sent His Son to die only for those elect people.

There are passages in Bavinck's writings that would appear to be in harmony with this Reformed teaching. He makes statements such as this:

> Out of the same lump of clay he [i.e., God—JAL] makes one vessel for beauty and another for menial use (Jer. 18, Rom. 9:20–24), has compassion upon whomever he wills and hardens the heart of whomever he wills (Rom. 9:18). He destined some people to disobedience (I Peter. 2:8), designates some for condemnation (Jude 4), and refrains from recording the names of some in the Book of Life (Rev. 13:8; 17:8).[18]

Yet there are other passages in which something quite different is taught. That being the case, it is somewhat difficult to know how Bavinck would attempt to harmonize the different statements that he makes on this subject. Since this article is specifically about Bavinck's view of common grace, we will limit ourselves to quoting passages in which he spoke of a common grace in the preaching of the gospel.

According to Bavinck, there is a sense in which God takes pleasure in the salvation also of the reprobates.

> …the reprobates also receive many blessings, blessings that do not as such arise from the decree of reprobation but from the goodness and grace of God…. He has the gospel of his grace proclaimed to them and takes no pleasure in their death (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11; Matt. 23:27; Luke 19:41; 24:47; John 3:16; Acts 17:30; Rom. 11:32; I Thess. 5:9; I Tim. 2:4; II Pet. 3:9).[19]

The passages that Bavinck cites here are especially noteworthy. He refers to the passages that Arminians normally quote in an effort to prove that God loves everyone and desires that everyone would be saved. Passages such as these: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). "Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (II Pet. 3:9). "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children

18 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 2:394.

19 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 2:398.

together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matt. 23:37).[20]

Realizing that people will be aware of the fact that he is quoting the passages that Arminians normally quote to support their false teachings, Bavinck makes the following statement:

> Pelagians infer from these verses that God's actual intention is to save all people individually, and therefore that there is no preceding decree of reprobation. But that is not what these verses teach. They do say, however, that it is the will of God that all the means of grace be used for the salvation of the reprobates.[21]

This statement does not set forth very clearly what his position is on the matter. He appears to be taking refuge in a distinction between God's desire and His intent. He says here that God's actual intent is not to save every individual, but right before this he appears to say that God does have a desire that no one perish and that every individual be saved.

This is worthy of note. If someone wanted to teach that God desires the salvation of everyone, and yet also wanted to be able to say that he agreed with the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation, he might go in the direction of such a desire/intention distinction. The distinction would then go like this: God desires to save everyone, but has eternally decided and intends to save only those who embrace His gracious offer. Such a distinction, it is true, would amount to a denial of the Reformed doctrine of election and reprobation. Yet Bavinck does make statements here that appear to lean in this direction.

His struggle to explain the destruction of the ungodly comes out in the following quote:

> Sin and its punishment can never as such, and for their own sake,

20 The English translation of Bavinck as well as the Dutch original appear to have a typo here. Bavinck cites Matthew 23:27, but it appears that he must have meant Matthew 23:37, since it is hard to see how the former would prove his point here, and the latter refers to the same subject that is spoken of in one of the other verses that he cites, namely, Luke 19:41.

21 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 2:398.

> have been willed by God. They are contrary to his nature. He is far removed from wickedness and does not willingly afflict anyone. When he does it, it is not because, deep down, he wants to. They can therefore have been willed by God only as a means to a different, better, and greater good.[22]

It certainly appears that Bavinck is saying here that God "deep down" desires that all human beings be saved. Yet, Bavinck would go on to say, God has willed the destruction of some to serve a greater good.

Brief refutation

1. God always does His pleasure. He never does anything contrary to His will.

It is certainly true that God has willed the destruction of the reprobate to serve a greater good. Their destruction, after all, is obviously not the ultimate goal. The destruction of the ungodly glorifies God and His Christ, and serves to benefit God's chosen people. But to say that it does serve this greater good does not imply that God deep down desired something else.

God does nothing contrary to His will. It is not correct to say that God "does not willingly afflict anyone." Scripture speaks of God as the one "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11).

This is characteristic of the one true God, who makes the following statement about Himself:

> I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure (Is. 46:9b-10).

2. God saves every person He desires to save.

The verses that Bavinck cites in an effort to prove that God "deep down" desires that no one perish are passages that speak of God desiring the salvation of all *His people.* Take, for example, the passage

22 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 2:398.

that says that God is: "longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (II Pet. 3:9). The passage speaks of God's longsuffering "to us-ward." The "us" clearly refers to God's people, since these are the ones who are addressed in the first verse of the epistle. Thus it is quite clear that God is saying here that He is not willing that any *of us* (i.e., His elect people) should perish, but that all *of us* should come to repentance.

Then how about the passages that speak of God desiring to save *the world?* When considering those passages we must remember that the world that God loves will be saved. John the Baptist rightly proclaimed: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29b). The sin of the world that God desires to save *is* taken away. This is not just some powerless wish on God's part. It is stated as a fact that the sin of the world is taken away, and that thus the whole world is saved.

When God saves a remnant from all nations, He saves the nations. When God saves all the nations, along with the entire creation, He saves the world (cosmos). Even though many perish in unbelief, Christ is indeed the Savior of the world.

The following is a summary of five common-grace positions that have been considered in this article:

Type A: If God gives you something good that you do not deserve, then that is a gift of God's grace.
Type B: There is a grace of God that restrains sin in the nature of all sinners, so that there is still some good in unbelievers. They still bear the good image of God, regardless of whether or not they ever hear the preaching of God's Word.
Type C: There is a special kind of common grace that stems the corruption of those outside of Christ when they come under the preaching of God's Word.
Type D: There is a grace of God that produces good spiritual activity in some unregenerate people, and prepares them to receive regeneration.
Type E: When reprobates hear gospel preaching they receive God's

grace. God in that preaching makes known to them that He desires their salvation.

One may wonder why Bavinck fell into the errors that he did on the subject of common grace. Undoubtedly it was related to his desire to keep the church united with this world.

> …general revelation [which Bavinck says has common grace as its content–JAL] maintains the unity of nature and grace, of the world and the kingdom of God….[23]

This gets us more to the root of the common grace error. Christ calls us out of this world. The doctrine of common grace, however, is used to keep the church and the world united.

And there is more. Not only are the church and the world to be united, according to Bavinck, but the church is called *to serve* the world. The following quotes serve to bring this out: "Israel and the church are elect for the benefit of humankind."[24] "But if the kingdom is not *of,* it is certainly *in* this world, and is intended for it."[25] The church is said to be intended *for* this world.

This helps to explain what is meant by many today who speak of "grace restoring nature." Note how Bavinck sets "nature and grace" parallel with "the world and the kingdom of God." Grace restoring nature, then, would be parallel with the church serving this world. That, it appears, is what they mean.

Scripture, however, says that it is the other way around. The church does not serve this world. Rather, this world is used by God for the benefit of the church. Even as God said to Rebekah concerning the twins in her womb, "the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23b). The teaching of common grace is used to keep the church tied to the world as its servant. It serves to keep Israel joined to Egypt, and thus serves as a form of resistance to the Word of God that says, "Let my people go."

23 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 1:322.

24 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 1:320.

25 Van Leeuwen, "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" 62.

A thorough investigation of the relation between the teaching of common grace and this wrong view concerning the relationship between the church and this world would be very worthwhile. It would also serve to bring out even more clearly how serious the error of common grace really is. ●

Another Defender of Shepherd (and the Federal Vision)

David J. Engelsma

Not of Works: Norman Shepherd and His Critics, by Ralph F. Boersema. Minneapolis, MN: NextStep Resources, 2012. Pp. xxxi + 235. $15 (paper).

The heresy of the Federal Vision is not going to disappear anytime soon. Not only do prominent, aggressive proponents of the theology remain in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. But also influential theologians continue to arise for the public defense of the teaching.

In 2011, Presbyterian theologian Ian A. Hewitson published a vigorous, book-length defense of Norman Shepherd and his theology, which is essentially the theology of the Federal Vision. The book is *Trust and Obey: Norman Shepherd & the Justification Controversy at Westminster Theological Seminary*. I critiqued this book in an appendix of my *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root*.

Now, Reformed theologian Ralph F. Boersema comes out with a book defending and promoting the theology of Shepherd and the Federal Vision: *Not of Works: Norman Shepherd and His Critics*.

With the publication of *Not of Works* the truth concerning the Federal Vision becomes even clearer to the conservative Reformed reading public, and more intriguing.

For Boersema is a minister and theologian in the Canadian Reformed Churches, the denomination in North America descended from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated) and disciples of the covenant theologians Schilder, Holwerda, Veenhof, and others.

The Root of Shepherd's Theology

And Boersema locates the source of the theology of Shepherd and the Federal Vision in the covenant doctrine of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), exactly where the source is. The Protestant Reformed Churches have called the attention of the Reformed churches to the root of the Federal Vision in the covenant theology of Schilder and the Liberated Reformed for a long time. But the purported critics of

the Federal Vision have stubbornly refused to recognize this root and to condemn the Federal Vision in terms of it.

Apart from the charge by the Protestant Reformed Churches, apart from the obvious similarity of the doctrine of the Federal Vision to the covenant theology of the Liberated Reformed, and apart from the very name of the heresy ("federal" means 'covenant'), the refusal of the Reformed critics of the Federal Vision to consider the covenant root of the Federal Vision has been inexcusable. As Boersema notes, Canadian Reformed theologian Jelle Faber rose to the defense of Norman Shepherd on the pages of the Canadian Reformed magazine, *Clarion*, already when the Shepherd controversy at Westminster Theological Seminary became public in 1982 (59).

Also, Liberated theologians Cornelis Van Dam and Nelson Kloosterman gave high praise to Hewitson's defense of Shepherd and his theology. Of Hewitson's book, Van Dam exclaimed on the back cover of the book, "highly recommended." On one of the opening pages of the book, Kloosterman, despite his avowed aversion to polemics ("very harmful to the truth"), recommended Hewitson's defense of Shepherd as a "compelling study."

Boersema makes it even harder, if not impossible, for would-be critics of the theology of Shepherd studiously to ignore that the theology of Shepherd and the Federal Vision is the natural, inevitable development of the covenant doctrine of Schilder and the Liberated Reformed.

Taking note of Shepherd's teaching that God makes His gracious covenant with all the baptized children alike, but conditionally, because the covenant is not founded on or governed by election—the very heart of the theology of the Federal Vision—Boersema states that "Shepherd has adopted" the "solution" to the issue of the relation of covenant and election of men "like S. Greijdanus and K. Schilder." This "solution" holds that God's covenant "is not only with the elect. The covenant is not unconditional." By promise to all alike, the covenant is graciously established with all the children alike. But for the continuation of the covenant, issuing in eternal salvation, there are "obligations," that is, conditions. Failure on the part of some children to perform the "obligation"/conditions results in those children's being "cut off" (84, 85).

Although Boersema's book concentrates on Shepherd's doctrine of justification (the sub, sub-heading is "The Justification Controversy Laid to Rest Through Understanding"), Boersema is explicit that the root of Shepherd's and the Federal Vision's theology is his and its doctrine of the covenant: "He [Shepherd] is only seeking to do justice to the dynamic of historical covenant language" (148).

Shepherd himself writes an important foreword to the book. In the foreword, he approves Boersema's analysis and defense of his theology. Shepherd also offers a brief defense of his own. Almost at once, he explains his doctrine of justification as an aspect of his theology of the biblical doctrine of the covenant (xvii-xxiii).

The theology of Shepherd and the Federal Vision is a distinct doctrine of the covenant of grace. If it is not critiqued with regard to its teaching about the covenant, not only will it not be understood, but also, in the end, it will not be condemned by Reformed and Presbyterian churches even regarding its erroneous teaching on justification.

A Conditional Covenant, Cut Loose from Election

What the distinct covenant doctrine of Shepherd and the Federal Vision is, its defender—Liberated theologian Ralph Boersema—and Shepherd himself make plain. It is the doctrine of a (saving) covenant love and grace of God in Jesus Christ for all baptized children alike. (I place "saving" in parentheses, not because the covenant love and grace of Federal Vision theology actually save anyone. They do not. They are impotent. But the covenant love and grace in Federal Vision theology are saving *in nature;* they are not merely a non-saving, common love and grace.) In this (saving) love, God establishes His covenant with all the children alike.

Indeed, the covenant theology of Shepherd is the doctrine of a (saving) covenant love and grace of God in Jesus Christ for all humans alike, baptized or unbaptized. Refusing to identify the "seed" of Abraham in the covenant promise to Abraham as Christ and the elect in Him and, therefore, refusing to identify the "nations" in the covenant promise to Abraham as the elect in every nation, Shepherd explains the covenant promise to Abraham as referring to all humans without exception. If the universal covenant promise does not imply

that God makes His covenant with every human, it does imply that He desires to bless every human with the blessings of the covenant.

> The Lord made a covenant with Abraham, one by which he would bless all the families of the earth. The Good News proclaims the covenant to all nations. This is not just a manner of speaking. God really does desire all men to repent and know Christ. He does not make his covenant with all but he does lovingly offer it to all…. He does pledge to all of them that he will be their God and they his people so long as they keep his covenant (138, 139).

In His covenant love and grace, God sends out the Federal Vision evangelists, including Norman Shepherd, preaching John 3:16, telling every hearer that God loves him, that Christ died for him, and that God desires to save him.

> From the perspective of the covenant…all of the words of John 3:16 mean exactly what they say. The Reformed evangelist can and must preach to everyone on the basis of John 3:16, "Christ died to save you" (87).
> John 3:16 is embedded in the covenant documents of the New Testament…. John 3:16 is covenant truth. Its specific application…in the declaration, "Christ died for you" [to every human—DJE], is a demonstration of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ opening the way to fellowship with God (88).
> God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. This is true love for all persons (138).

Specifically now with regard to all the baptized infants of believers, the covenant grace of God toward them and the covenant bond itself are conditional. That is, they depend for their ability to continue with an infant, and to bring an infant finally to eternal life upon the individual, sinful infant himself. God's (saving) covenant love and grace are contingent upon the child's performing the work of believing and upon his performing the work of lifelong obedience to the law of God.

It is possible, indeed reality in multitudes of instances, that one

who is the object of covenant love and grace and truly in covenant relationship with God fails to perform the conditions, so that he frustrates the love and grace of God, is separated from God, and perishes forever. So much do Shepherd and the men of the Federal Vision emphasize the real possibility of falling away from covenant grace and of breaking the covenant that was truly established with one, that the doctrine of falling away from grace must be regarded as a favorite doctrine of theirs.

Thus, one's covenant election is resisted. Indeed, covenant election becomes reprobation.

Explaining and defending Shepherd's doctrine, Boersema denies that election governs the covenant. In a defense of this denial that staggers a Reformed Christian, Boersema argues that "if the covenant is really only with the elect, there can be no possibility of falling away" (137). To say nothing of the terror that this doctrine casts into the soul of every believer until his last breath, are Boersema and Shepherd ignorant that the Reformed churches have struggled through this issue to the comforting confession of perseverance in the fifth head of the Canons of Dordt? "God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election, does not…suffer them [the elect] to…forfeit the state of justification…and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction" (Canons, V/6).

Boersema correctly relates what it means for Shepherd and the Federal Vision—and for Boersema and the Liberated Reformed—that God makes His covenant with all the baptized babies alike, regardless of eternal predestination.

> This covenant love is that of a Father for his children and is bestowed on all members of the covenant people. It is not addressed only to the elect, nor does it merely bring a people into the pale of the Gospel. Baptism symbolizes union with God in Christ, not just the offer of union (137).

This love that is ineffectual in many children is the implication of an oath to save them all that is never fulfilled with many. God establishes His covenant by oath-bound promise. According to Shepherd

and Boersema, God swears to every baptized child that He will be the child's God and that the child will be God's covenant friend. This is an oath-bound promise to save every child. "Election should…not be allowed to mute the fact that the Lord has established a legally binding bond with his people in the form of a covenant in which he really swears an oath to be a God and Father to his people." That the oath-bound, covenant promise is addressed to every baptized child, Boersema makes plain by stating that the truth of a covenant bond formed by the promise "does not only apply to the elect" (138).

The Well-Meant Offer

Bravely (for a theologian who confesses the Canons of Dordt) picking up on a teaching of Shepherd that most of Shepherd's purported critics deliberately ignore (lest their dear doctrine of the well-meant offer be exposed), Boersema recognizes, and defends, Shepherd's doctrine that God has promised His covenant to all humans without exception, so that He loves them all, desires the salvation of them all, and graciously offers Christ to them all in the "well-meant offer."

> Salvation through Christ is sincerely offered to all people. If we look at history only from the perspective of predestination, it is illogical to think that God truly calls the reprobate to partake of Christ's love or that his love is revealed to them in Christ. However, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. This is true love for all persons…. God really does desire all men to repent and know Christ. He does not make his covenant with all, but he does lovingly offer it to all (138).

Accurately expressing Shepherd's and the Federal Vision theology, Boersema establishes the connection between the well-meant offer and the conditional covenant: "The well-meant Gospel offer is spoken to all men in the same kind of language as the covenant, language that expresses God's sincere commitment and heart's desire, without predicting the outcome" (139). The outcome cannot be predicted, of course, because the grace both of the well-meant offer and of the covenant efforts of God is conditional.

Despite some misgivings, Boersema cannot condemn Shepherd's

explanation of John 3:16: "The Reformed evangelist can and must preach to everyone on the basis of John 3:16, 'Christ died to save you'" (87). This is the doctrine of universal atonement, in flagrant contradiction of Canons, II/8, which is binding on both Shepherd and Boersema. But Boersema cannot condemn universal atonement in the theology of Shepherd and the Federal Vision because Shepherd's doctrine of universal atonement is based on Shepherd's and Boersema's covenant theology. Cut loose, like the covenant, from election, the proclamation of the gospel is "a genuine offer of grace to the whole world, not just to the elect. God's grace is good news for everyone" (88).

Boersema has enough Reformed sensibility at this point to be stricken by the awareness of the contradiction of the Reformed doctrine of reprobation. "God loves the world even as he hates Esau before he was born" (88).

Boersema's defense of the contradiction? "There is mystery here" (88).

Boersema's "mystery" is not the "mystery" of Scripture: a deep truth that had been hidden but is now revealed by divine inspiration. Boersema's "mystery" is a semantical cover-up of sheer, diametrical, irreconcilable contradiction regarding a fundamental truth of the gospel of grace. It is, therefore, also the obscuring, indeed the corruption, of the gospel of grace. If God loves Esau as well as Jacob and graciously swears His covenant of grace into existence with them both alike, the reason why Jacob is saved in distinction from his brother is not the grace of God. Rather, the reason for Jacob's salvation is that Jacob performed the conditions and made himself to differ. The glory of his covenant salvation is Jacob's, not God's.

Contrary to Boersema's insistence that Shepherd "treasures the five points of Calvinism [as confessed in the Canons]" (xxviii; 83), Shepherd denies the five points and rejects the Canons of Dordt as openly as any avowed Arminian *with regard to the gracious covenant, covenant grace and love, and covenant salvation*. Defending Shepherd and the theology of the Federal Vision as he does, the Liberated theologian makes, or shows, himself guilty of the same evil.

Another instance of this open opposition to the Canons is Shep-

herd's teaching that there are "various decrees of election," one (covenant) decree of election unto grace and the way of salvation, and another (eternal) decree unto salvation and glory. Canons, I/8 flatly condemns this teaching.

> There are not various decrees of election, but one and the same decree respecting all those who shall be saved both under the Old and New Testament; since the Scripture declares the good pleasure, purpose, and counsel of the divine will to be one, according to which he hath chosen us from eternity, both to grace and glory, to salvation and the way of salvation, which he hath ordained that we should walk therein.

The root of the heresy of Shepherd and the Federal Vision is the doctrine of a conditional covenant, which is cut loose from election.

Salvation "Contingent on What We Do"

And what this heretical root amounts to, both Shepherd and Boersema freely acknowledge.

In his foreword, Norman Shepherd describes his theology in these words: "The New Testament as well as the Old makes our eternal welfare contingent in some way and to some extent on what we do" (ix).

Having read Shepherd's description of the essence of his theology, Boersema both approves it and uses it to describe his—Boersema's—own: "Many Scripture passages…condition our eternal well-being on what we do" (187). What these passages of Scripture are, neither Shepherd nor Boersema informs the reader. Among them is not Romans 9:16: [Salvation] is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." Neither is Ephesians 2:8, 9 on the list of the two defenders of a conditional covenant: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

According to Shepherd and Boersema, our eternal salvation depends on what we do.

I doubt that Jacob Arminius, indeed a Jesuit, would be so bald and bold in confessing their theologies of man saving himself.

This is the message of the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

And this is why most purported critics leave strictly alone the covenant root of the theology of Shepherd and the Federal Vision. Most of them wholeheartedly share Shepherd's and Boersema's doctrine of a conditional covenant. For them to take up the issue of the conditional covenant would mean exposing themselves as committed to the teaching that, with regard to covenant salvation and well-being, our salvation and well-being "are contingent in some way and to some extent on what we do," as committed to this gross heresy as are Shepherd, the Federal Vision, and Ralph Boersema.

Purported critic Cornelis P. Venema is quoted by Boersema, at great length, as approving Shepherd's doctrine of a conditional covenant (151-158). Among "Shepherd's…evident strengths," according to Venema (as quoted by Boersema), are his insistence on the "conditionality of the covenant relationship…. The covenant of grace is… conditional in its administration" (151).

According to Venema, *in a critique of Shepherd*, to view salvation "in terms of God's sovereign and unconditional electing grace" would make it impossible to do justice to "human responsibility" and to ward off "the error of antinomianism" (152).

Venema goes on to approve "Shepherd's advocacy of a covenant-evangelism approach" (152). This, as I have demonstrated from Shepherd himself, consists of saying to every human, on the basis of John 3:16, "God loves you with the (saving) love that gave His Son, desires to save you, had Christ die for you, and now graciously offers you salvation, if only you will perform the condition of accepting the offer." That is, Shepherd's approach to evangelism, warmly approved by Cornelis Venema, is the expression of the fundamental conviction that everyone's eternal welfare is contingent on what he himself does.

Not content with approving Shepherd's conditional-covenant-approach to evangelism, Venema must take a swipe at the approach to evangelism that is founded on and faithful to the decree of election. "Because the electing grace of God in Christ is unconditional, evangelism that is oriented to the decree of election also suffers…from an inordinate fear of emphasizing the gospel's condition of faith and obedience" (153).

The Arminians were right after all: predestination cannot assure; leads to antinomianism; and cannot evangelize.

Convinced as they are of the fatal and deplorable weaknesses of the Reformed faith, why do these theologians still want to identify themselves as Reformed, and why do they still make a pretense of representing this faith?

It will be interesting to observe whether a single non-Protestant Reformed critic of Shepherd will offer any objection to Shepherd's bold statement that our eternal welfare is contingent on what we do. And if one does, it will be still more interesting to see how he reconciles his objection with the doctrine of a conditional, that is, contingent, covenant.

Conditional Justification

Since Shepherd's and the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification is merely the effect and symptom of their doctrine of a conditional covenant, the reviewer of Boersema's book can be briefer in his analysis of this aspect of Shepherd's theology, as vigorously defended by Ralph Boersema.

Boersema does *defend* Shepherd's doctrine of justification. That aspect of the Federal Vision heresy that is too much even for some of the most devoted sympathizers with Shepherd's doctrine of a conditional covenant finds approval in the Liberated theologian.

Boersema's defense of Shepherd's doctrine of justification by faith and by good works, like Shepherd's own defense, is the contention that Shepherd is only concerned that the faith that justifies be a true and living faith.

But this defense fails.

It is the doctrine of Shepherd and the Federal Vision that in justifying the believing sinner God takes the good works of the sinner himself into account. Thus, it is also Shepherd's instruction to the sinner seeking justification that, for his justification, he present his own good works to God the judge.

Shepherd, therefore, teaches justification by faith *and by (faith's) good works*, in contradiction of the apostle in Romans 3:26: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."

Shepherd denies that the good works excluded from justification in Romans 3:28 are all good works whatever. He insists that Romans 3 and 4, particularly Romans 3:28, has in view only those works that were part of the "old, Mosaic covenant," for example, circumcision, and those works that are performed with the purpose of meriting salvation. "These 'works of the law' are not any and all good works" (xii).

According to Shepherd's own explanation of the text, therefore, Romans 3:28 must be read as follows: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without any works belonging to the Old Testament, Mosaic economy and without any works performed in order to merit, but, definitely and emphatically *with* good works performed by true faith." That is, justification by faith *and by (faith's) good works*.

Because, as all agree, in Romans 3:28 the apostle is teaching justification as the forensic act of God the judge, that is, God's declaration, or verdict, changing the legal standing of the sinner from guilt to innocence by forgiving his sins and imputing to him the righteousness of Christ, Shepherd's doctrine is that justification *as a forensic act of God* is by faith and works.

That he teaches justification by faith and works, Shepherd confirms by his exegesis of Romans 2:13, "For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified." Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation explained the text as teaching what would have to be the case if justification were by the law (which it is not, and cannot be). If justification were by the law, hearing the law would not be sufficient for justification. But one would have to do the law. Doing the law is utter impossibility. No totally depraved sinner can do the law. No regenerated, believing child of God can do the law. Doing the law consists of perfect love of God and perfect love of the neighbor every moment and regarding every thought, desire, and feeling, as well as regarding every word and every deed, all one's life long. One slip-up, one sin, in a lifetime of otherwise perfect obedience would make justification by the law impossible.

In Romans 2:13, according to the Reformation's (and the correct) interpretation, the apostle is laying the groundwork for his doctrine of gracious justification—justification by faith only—on the basis of the

perfect obedience and atoning death of the substitute for elect sinners, Jesus Christ.

But Shepherd, his Federal Vision cohorts, and Ralph Boersema dissent from this Reformation exegesis (which is not only that of Luther, but also that of Calvin). For Shepherd, "the Pauline affirmation in Romans 2:13, 'the doers of the Law will be justified,' is not to be understood hypothetically in the sense that there are no persons who fall into that class, but in the sense that faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ will be justified" (198). Boersema defends Shepherd's interpretation (198-201).

What this interpretation of Romans 2:13 affirms concerning justification is that justification is by doing the law.

In harmony with this Roman Catholic, Arminian, and Judaistic, self-righteous theology is Shepherd's explanation of James 2.

In James 2, the apostle exposes a false, dead faith. This is a certain intellectual knowledge of Christian doctrine and a profession of salvation in Jesus Christ that is devoid of good works, especially works of love on behalf of the needy members of the church. Though a church member says he has faith, if his faith does not work by love, his faith is "dead, being alone" (James 2:14-17). In the context of this warning against false faith, James declares that "by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (James 2:24).

At the Reformation, the Roman Catholic adversaries of Luther's, Calvin's, and the Reformation's doctrine of justification by faith only made James 2 the decisive passage on (forensic) justification, the chief bulwark with which to withstand the Reformation's gospel of justification by faith only and the main catapult with which to demolish the Reformation's gospel of grace.

Shepherd and the Federal Vision do the same, thus showing their colors.

The issue regarding James 2 is simply this: Does James 2 mean by "justification" the same truth as does Paul in Romans 3 and 4? Beyond all doubt and question, Paul speaks of justification as the forensic act of God the judge. That is, justification in Romans 3 and 4 is God's declaration pronouncing the sinner righteous, changing his legal standing from guilt to innocence.

In Romans 4:5, justification is God's counting, or reckoning, faith for righteousness.

According to Romans 4:6, 7, justification is the imputation of righteousness, thus forgiving iniquities.

According to Romans 4:8, justification is the non-imputation of sin.

Counting, reckoning, imputing, and forgiving are forensic terms, describing the legal declaration that effects a change in one's standing before the law and the judge.

If James 2 speaks of justification in the same sense, James contradicts Paul, with regard to a fundamental truth of the gospel. Whereas Paul teaches that justification is by faith only, apart from good works, James now teaches that justification is by faith and by good works, expressly denying that justification is by faith only.

This is impossible. Two apostles of Christ cannot contradict each other on the pages of inspired Scripture. Scripture does not contradict itself, least of all regarding such a fundamental truth as justification.

There are only two conceivable ways of harmonizing Paul and James. One is that Paul and James have two different kinds of works in mind. James refers to genuine good works. Paul refers to ceremonial works and to works that intend to merit salvation.

According to this way of harmonizing Paul and James, justification—the forensic act—is by faith and by faith's genuine good works.

This is the explanation of Shepherd, the Federal Vision, and Ralph Boersema. "Shepherd favors the forensic justification exegesis of James 2" (168).

And, let us not forget, the explanation of the Roman Catholic Church, to the overthrow of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church.

The other, and correct, harmonizing of Paul and James is that the two apostles speak of justification in two different senses. "Justification" does not have the same reference in James 2 that it has in Romans 3 and 4. Paul refers to the forensic act of God, beyond dispute. James, in contrast, refers to the *demonstration* of justification. Or, to say it differently, James refers to justification as it shows itself to

be genuine. Just as a faith devoid of good works shows itself to be a dead and false faith, so an alleged justification by such a dead faith is shown to be a spurious justification by the lack of good works as the fruit of justification.

This was the explanation, not only of Luther, but also of Calvin, indeed, of all the reformers.

It is significant that, eager as Shepherd, the Federal Vision, and Boersema are to support their doctrines by selected quotations of Calvin, at this critical point there is no reference to Calvin. The same is true regarding Shepherd's interpretation of Romans 2:13.

Condemned by the Creeds

If the contradiction of Calvin at the crucial points is significant, the contradiction of the Reformed creeds by Shepherd and his Federal Vision colleagues is damning.

Shepherd publicly teaches and defends justification by faith and by works in open defiance of Questions and Answers 59-64 of the Heidelberg Catechism, his own creed: "righteous only by faith" (Q. 61).

Against the teaching that is fundamental to Shepherd's and the Federal Vision's doctrine of justification, namely that the works excluded from justification by Paul in Romans 3 and 4 are only ceremonial works and works performed with the motive of meriting, stands the clear teaching of Question and Answer 62 of the Catechism. Here, the Catechism excludes from justification *all* our good works, not only ceremonial works that a Jew might perform. "Why can not our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?" The answer is not that ceremonial works have passed away, nor that the motive of works performed in order to merit is obnoxious to God. But the answer is, "the righteousness which can stand before the judgment-seat of God must be perfect throughout, and wholly conformable to the divine law; whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin."

Thus, the authoritative, binding doctrine of the creed is that the works excluded from consideration in justification include the good works of the believing child of God. In fact, the Catechism excludes

from justification our "best works," which would include feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, that is, all the good works James 2 exhorts upon us.

Lest there be any question about the good works excluded by the Catechism, Question 63 identifies them as works which "it is God's will to reward." Surely, these are not Old Testament ceremonies, or works done to merit.

It is the creedal doctrine of the Reformed faith that justification by faith only means that all good works are excluded from consideration in the justifying act of God, "also…our best works." The reason is that even the best works of a believer, those that proceed from true faith, are "all imperfect and defiled with sin."

It is the creedal doctrine of the Reformed faith also that the denial of justification by faith only, by introducing good works into the act of justification—as Shepherd does—is, in fact, making those good works "the whole or part of our righteousness before God" (Q. 62).

It is irrelevant that Shepherd denies that the good works by which the sinner is justified are meritorious. It is irrelevant that Shepherd denies that the good works by which the sinner is justified are the ground of justification.

To introduce works into the forensic act of justification, to read Romans 3:28 thus, "A man is justified by faith *and by the genuine good works that faith performs*," is, by virtue of the introduction of works into the act of justification, to be guilty of teaching that "our good works [are]…part of our righteousness before God" (Heid. Cat., Q. 62).

Similar is Shepherd's disregard of the creeds in his teaching that good works do not follow justification (as works of thankfulness for the forgiveness of sins), but accompany justification and even precede justification. Determined as he is to have good works a necessary aspect of justification, indeed necessary for justification, Shepherd argues at length that good works precede and accompany justification, rather than follow justification as fruit. His purpose is to establish that good works cannot be excluded from justification.

In a folksy manner, Boersema sums up Shepherd's opposition

to the teaching that good works follow justification, and Shepherd's reason for opposing the teaching.

> What some people don't like is that Shepherd says that works are necessary for justification. They say that works are the fruit and evidence of faith and always follow faith, but Shepherd says more than that. For him, works are not only necessary for sanctification, but also for justification (214).

Both Shepherd and his Liberated defender, Ralph Boersema, blithely ignore the doctrine of the Reformed creeds, particularly article 24 of the Belgic Confession.

> Works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by his grace: howbeit they are of no account towards our justification. For it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, *even before we do good works, otherwise they could not be good works any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good* (emphasis added).

The theology of Norman Shepherd includes a heretical doctrine of justification. Openly, Shepherd teaches justification by faith and by the good works that true faith performs.

This doctrine of justification stands condemned by the Reformed creeds, specifically by Questions and Answers 59-64 of the Heidelberg Catechism and by Articles 22-24 of the Belgic Confession. Shepherd's doctrine stands condemned by the Reformed creeds, regardless that Shepherd denies that the works are meritorious, and regardless that Shepherd denies that these works are the ground of the verdict. To teach (forensic) justification by faith and by works is heresy, regardless of any and all mitigating explanations.

Conclusion

Some Reformed theologians, not all, as Liberated theologian Ralph Boersema evidences, take issue with this aspect of Shepherd's and the Federal Vision's theology. They criticize Shepherd's doctrine of justification by faith and works.

But their opposition to this glaring error in Shepherd's theology will not be successful to root his theology out of their own denominations, or out of the Reformed community. Nor will their opposition prevent the theology of the Federal Vision from spreading.

For, as also this latest defense of Shepherd by Boersema recognizes (with the express approval of Shepherd himself), justification by good works is only one expression of the fundamental theology of Norman Shepherd. The fundamental theology of Shepherd is the doctrine of a conditional covenant, a covenant that does not have its source in eternal election, nor is governed by election.

And the essence of this covenant theology, in Shepherd's own words, is the doctrine that our eternal welfare is contingent on what we do.

This covenant doctrine, the root of the heresy, the notable critics of Shepherd and the Federal Vision will not touch with the proverbial ten-foot pole.

The reason is that they themselves are committed to the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Therefore, they share with Shepherd the conviction that our eternal welfare is contingent on what we do, although they are less candid than is Shepherd in acknowledging this conviction.

How can a Reformed theologian who himself preaches John 3:16 as a universal love of God and a Christ proceeding from this universal love, graciously offered to all in the sincere desire of God that all accept His love and His Christ, but contingent—all of it, the love of God, Christ, and the offer—on the acceptance by the sinner engage in serious theological battle with Shepherd and the men of the Federal Vision?

The sixteenth-century Reformation itself, obviously at stake in the heresy of justification by good works, is now being undone in the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches, while the theologians, ministers, and elders—appointed watchmen on the walls of Zion—either stand idly by, or, as is the case with Boersema, promote the overthrow of the Reformation.

God have mercy on the Reformed people!

And arise for the defense of the precious Reformed faith, His own gospel of grace! ●

Book Reviews

Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored, Michael G. Brown and Zach Keele. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2012. Pp. 165. $12.00 (paper). [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

The purpose of this book is commendable: an overview of the biblical doctrine of the covenant that will introduce this essential truth to Reformed and Presbyterian believers.

Sacred Bond gives brief explanations of all the important aspects of the covenant, from the source of the covenant in the "covenant of redemption" to the new covenant, including also the covenant with Adam in Paradise, the covenant with Noah, the Abrahamic covenant, the Sinaitic covenant, and the Davidic covenant. There are references to the main passages of Scripture teaching all the aspects of the covenant and brief explanations of these passages.

That the book fails to achieve its purpose is due to two serious faults. The explanation is not precise and consistent. And it is doctrinally erroneous in important respects.

The imprecision and inconsistency concern, chiefly, the definition, or basic description, of the covenant, no minor matter. The title of the book suggests the correct definition and right description: the sacred bond (of communion) between God and His elect people in Jesus Christ. Here and there, throughout the book, the authors renew the description of the title, referring to the covenant as a "relationship" and as "communion."

But the formal, authoritative, and controlling definition identifies the covenant as an "agreement that creates a relationship with legal aspects" (11). The emphasis throughout on conditions and conditionality indicates that the authors meant by "agreement" what the word signifies.

An agreement is not a sacred bond, or relationship. As the definition expresses, at best an agreement can *create* a relationship. When its mutual stipulations are violated, an agreement can also *destroy* a relationship.

As if this confusion were not enough, there is yet another description of the biblical cov-

enant: a promise. The important administration of the covenant with David—the "Davidic covenant"—is defined as "God's promise to David," etc. (123).

A promise is neither a sacred bond nor an agreement, but something quite different from both. Theologically, the concept of covenant promise (by God) *contradicts* the concept of covenant as mutual agreement.

Similarly, it is contradictory to assert, on the one hand, that "the covenant of redemption was not a 'plan B' to fix the mess Adam made, but the original blueprint for the work of Christ" and, in the same breath, to assert that God's plan regarding Christ was "to remedy the disastrous results of the first Adam's failure to fulfill the covenant of works in the garden of Eden and bring humankind to glory" (23).

The explanation of this contradiction is the authors' conviction that Adam might have accomplished for all humans what Jesus Christ accomplished only for some, that is, the meriting of eternal, heavenly, immortal life. Christ, therefore, was not decreed as the Savior whose purpose was served by the covenant with and the fall of Adam, but was planned by God merely as the (partial) "remedy" of the failure of Adam.

More grave is the inconsistency, indeed the contradiction, concerning the Sinaitic covenant, that is, the covenant established with Israel at Sinai. The book describes that covenant both as an administration of the covenant of grace, established originally with Adam in the promise of Genesis 3:15 and then with Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus Christ and as a republication of the covenant of works (as the authors see and call it) with Adam before the fall. As a republication of the covenant of works, the covenant with Israel put that nation in the position that "Israel's standing before God… rested on their keeping of the law…. The people's law-keeping was their merit or righteousness before the Lord" (110).

The authors suppose that they relieve this contradiction by distinguishing eternal benefits from temporal blessings and the heavenly Canaan from the earthly. But the fact remains that on their view the Sinaitic covenant was not *wholly* an administration of the covenant of grace. In an important respect, it was the imposition upon the people of

God of a covenant of works and merit. And the apostle's answer in Galatians 3:19-24 to his question, "Wherefore then serveth the law?" must be significantly qualified. In a certain respect, the law was indeed "against the promises of God."

This leads to the second fault of the book: It is doctrinally erroneous.

This reviewer marvels at the error, in light both of the identity of the authors and of the contemporary development of the doctrine of the covenant that these authors espouse. This development is the heresy of the Federal Vision. The heresy has grievously troubled the denominations to which the authors belong. One of the authors is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church; the other is a minister in the United Reformed Churches.

The Federal Vision is, as it advertises itself as being, the natural, inevitable development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Out of the theology of the covenant as a conditional agreement between God and men comes the denial of justification by faith alone, as of all the doctrines of grace.

In their exposition of the covenant, the authors of *Sacred Bond* show no awareness of the covenant heresy and its root. If they are aware, as one cannot imagine they are not, they have learned absolutely nothing from the heresy and its dreadful effects in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, including their own.

The biblical covenant confessed and explained by Brown and Keele is conditional from stem to stern, from source to fulfillment. The "covenant of redemption," whence the covenant and the covenant Christ originate, is a conditional agreement between the Father and the Son in the Godhead, with the Holy Spirit chipping in that He will apply the covenant. In this explanation of the "covenant of redemption," the authors pay no heed to any number of Reformed theologians, including Herman Bavinck and Herman Hoeksema, that the main Scriptural proof adduced for the explanation—Zechariah 6:12, 13—does not at all refer to a bargain of Father and Son in the Godhead, but to the union of the royal and the priestly offices in the Messiah.

Likewise, the book presents the covenant with Adam as a conditional pact between God and

Adam—a "covenant of works." Doing full justice to the word "condition," the authors declare that Adam could very really have merited eternal life by his obedience (44-46). Everlastingly, Adam and the entire human race might have shouted and sung in heaven about the highest life and supreme blessedness, "This is what we earned. Glory be to us!"

Although the authors recognize the covenant with Abraham as unconditional, they go on to describe the new covenant with believers and their children, which is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, as conditional: "Its [the new covenant's] condition is, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ'" (138). As though the Canons of Dordt had never exposed the Arminian heresy as teaching that faith is the new covenant condition of salvation, rather than obedience to the law in the old covenant (Canons, 2, Rejection of Errors: 4), the authors of *Sacred Bond* distinguish the new covenant from the old thus: "Its [the old covenant's] condition was, 'Do this and you will be blessed'…. The new covenant, on the other hand, is based on God's promise to save sinners. Its condition is, "`Believe…'" (138).

Especially is the error of works and merit prominent in the book's treatment of the covenant with Israel—the "old covenant." "God's promise is conditioned on Israel's performance" (109). "Israel's standing before God… rested on their keeping of the law. Israel would earn all sorts of blessings for obedience…" (110). "The people's law-keeping was their merit…" (110). "The Mosaic covenant is compared to a business deal…" (111).

The authors insist that, somehow, none of this crass doctrine of works and merit touches Israel's spiritual righteousness with God, eternal salvation, or the inheritance of the heavenly Canaan. It applies only to the earthly blessings and to the earthly Canaan.

Whether it is possible to protect the grace of Israel's salvation when one has so forcefully introduced meritorious works and conditionality into the covenant with Israel is dubious.

The truth is that all the physical blessings of old Israel were typical of spiritual salvation, as the earthly Canaan was typical of the heavenly. If Israel could merit the typical, it follows, and will certainly follow, that they could also merit the spiritual realities.

Introduction of the notion of merit, on the part of the sinner, into the gospel of covenant salvation, at any point and in any respect, is fatal to the gospel of grace. The sinner cannot merit. He cannot merit righteousness and eternal life. He cannot merit a cup of cold water, or his next breath. The elect, believing, sanctified sinner cannot merit. Whatever he receives is a gift of pure grace.

God cannot allow the sinner, or even the mere human, though he be sinless Adam, to merit. Merit puts God in the sinner's, or the mere human's, debt. This would be for God to "ungod" Himself.

If Reformed and Presbyterian theologians are determined not to listen to Martin Luther, "Away with that impious, profane word 'merit,'" why will they not hear Jesus Christ, "When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Luke 17:10)?

As for the covenant with Noah, that, according to *Sacred Bond*, was "the common grace covenant" (73). God made that covenant with "all humanity descended from Noah" (77). The covenant with Noah expresses God's grace toward reprobate, God-hating, depraved sinners and bestows God's blessings upon them, apart from the righteousness of the cross, in "sunshine, rain, food, and possessions…. They are common graces from God, and the Noahic covenant gives God's covenantal foundation for them" (75).

All humans have a grace of God in common. All humans alike are bound to God and to each other in a *divine covenant of grace*. *God* is bound, *in His covenant*, *graciously*, to the likes of Nero, Duke Alva, Hitler, Stalin, John Wayne Gacy, Richard Dawkins, and all those today whose rebellion against Him has reached the pitch of changing "the truth of God into a lie, and worship[ing] and serv[ing] the creature more than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25).

The authors put the blessing of God in the houses of all these wicked persons, where it may contend (successfully, the authors think) with the curse that God Himself has placed in these houses (see Prov. 3:33).

With utter disregard for the consequences in the twenty-first

century, in churches, in Christian schools, and in the lives of professing Christians, of Abraham Kuyper's and the Christian Reformed Church's theory of common grace, the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches go on enthusiastically promoting the theory. Regarding the covenant with Noah, they do not even bother to observe that many of the soundest Reformed theologians in the past explained it as an administration of the covenant of (saving) grace in Jesus Christ, with particular reference to the cosmic extent of the covenant.

To this reviewer, it is irksome that Reformed writers illustrate holy, biblical truths by scenes or lines from profane movies. The Christian life need not, and ought not, be taught by a line that a Hollywood actor portraying the unbelieving Wyatt Earp spoke to another Hollywood infidel acting out the life of godless Doc Holiday (70, 71). Perhaps this is the Christian "culture" that characterizes the theology and practice of common grace. If so, it is another reason why Reformed Christians should repudiate common grace. ●

Jesus and the Jewish Festivals: Uncover the Ancient Culture. Discover Hidden Meanings, by Gary M. Burge. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. Pp. 139. $14.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

"Why did Jesus break the Jewish Sabbath? How was a Passover lamb sacrificed? How did Jesus use Hanukkah to reveal his identity?" These questions and more are answered by Gary Burge in this very interesting and worthwhile book on the Old Testament stated solemnities. Burge begins the book with a chapter in which he gives a general introduction to the Jewish festivals. In chapter 2, he treats the Jewish Sabbath, specifically "Jesus and the Sabbath." Chapter 3 is entitled, "Jesus and the Passover." The fourth chapter deals with the feast of tabernacles or booths and is entitled "Jesus and Tabernacles." "Jesus and Hanukkah" is the title of chapter 5. In chapter 6, Burge treats "Jesus and His Final

Passover." And the concluding chapter is "The Early Christians and the Jewish Festivals." Burge demonstrates that the Jewish festivals were "based not only on the agricultural rhythms of the year, but also they served to tell the story of Israel's salvation" (122).

"Throughout the Roman Empire, the Jews were well-known for three distinguishing rituals: circumcision, Sabbath observance, and refusing to eat pork" (37). Although their religious observances were often a puzzlement to the Romans, the Roman government gave the Jews a great deal of freedom to practice their religion. This was the case even though they disdained Jewish circumcision and thought it to be mutilation. Both the Jews of the *diaspora* and the Jews in Palestine were generally permitted to observe the great festivals that marked Judaism.

Burge does a good job of explaining the various aspects of the Jewish festivals. This book will certainly enhance the reader's understanding of the Old Testament celebrations and enhance understanding generally of the life of the Old Testament people of God, which was regulated by observance of the stated solemnities. An understanding of the festivals is necessary for a clear understanding not only of the life of the Old Testament people of God, but also of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, which is the focus of the book. In addition, an understanding of the Jewish festivals is necessary in order to understand the ministry and travels of the apostle Paul, as well as the message of the Book of Hebrews.

One thing that Burge makes very clear in his book is that the Jewish rabbis added "word upon word and line upon line" to the Old Testament laws regulating the public and corporate worship of the people of God. He demonstrates clearly that they were guilty of "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Mark 7:7), for, "laying aside the commandment of God, [they held instead to] the tradition of men" (Mark 7:8), in the end "making the word of God of none effect [literally, of no authority] through your tradition, which ye have delivered" (Mark 7:13). He makes plain, for example, that Jesus did not break the Sabbath. Rather, Jesus repudiated, both by His teaching and practice, the view

of the Sabbath held by the leaders of the Jews. He did not break the Sabbath, claiming the right to do so as the Son of God. On the contrary, He kept the Sabbath, and in that way fulfilled the Sabbath.

One commendable feature of the book is that the reader will not find any premillennial/dispensational allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament feasts in order to support an erroneous eschatology, an eschatology that anticipates the reintroduction of the feasts in a coming millennial age. Commendable, I say.

The book is a very worthwhile read. Ministers who read the book will certainly learn things about the life and worship of the Old Testament people of God that will pay dividends in their preaching.

Gary M. Burge is a professor of New Testament in the Department of Biblical and Theological Studies at Wheaton College and Graduate School. ●

The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness, Kevin DeYoung. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012. Pp. 159 (cloth). [Reviewed by Martyn McGeown.]

Writing for a broadly evangelical audience Kevin DeYoung, pastor of University Reformed Church in Lansing, Michigan, identifies a neglected area among Christians: a passion for holiness. For many in the church, holiness is an optional extra; for others it is not their "thing"; and for others it belongs to the Puritan era but is not for today. DeYoung rightly identifies this as a "hole"—a gaping hole—in the modern church.

DeYoung insists, on the basis of the Word of God, that holiness must be the pursuit of *every* Christian because God is holy, Christ is holy, heaven is holy, and salvation is unto holiness.

Why is there a "hole" in our holiness and how can we fill that hole?

First, many Christians are discouraged in pursuing holiness because they have misconceptions about what holiness is. Holiness, writes DeYoung, is "more than middle-class family values" (34); it is not mere rule-keeping; it is not an uncritical adoption of

the morals of the past; it is not measured by how socially active (or not) one is, or by the amount of time one spends in prayer or in church activities. Holiness is not "some sort of snooty do-goodism, prudish moralism or ugly legalism" (146). Holiness is devotion to God in Jesus Christ manifested in thankful obedience to God's commandments.

Second, many Christians have little interest in holiness because it is too hard. Opposition from the world is enough to offend us, so we become lax in our pursuit of holiness. Writes DeYoung,

> We'll never make progress in holiness if we are waiting for the world to throw us a party for our piety.... Worldliness is whatever makes sin look normal and righteousness look strange.... Many Christians have the mistaken notion that if only we were better Christians everyone would appreciate us. They don't realise that holiness comes with a cost. Sure you can focus on the virtues the world likes. But if you pursue true religion that cares for orphans *and* promotes purity (James 1:27), you'll lose some of the friends you were so desperate to make.... The world provides no cheerleaders on the pathway to godliness (37-38).

Third, some Christians are suspicious of any talk of holiness because they suspect it is a threat to salvation by grace alone. This subtle Antinomianism—and that is really what it is—does not like commands in the Bible, and does not understand sanctification. DeYoung warns the reader: "Commands show us what God is like, what he prizes, what he detests, what it means to be holy as God is holy. To hate all rules is to hate God himself who ordained his rules to reflect his nature" (54); and he complains, "Many Christians, including preachers, don't know what to do with commands and are afraid to talk directly about obedience" (55).

Fourth, many Christians are put off by holiness because they believe holiness is *impossible*. They have been taught that all their righteousnesses are as filthy rags, and that they cannot do anything good. But that is only half the story! Not only *must* we be holy, not only *can* we be holy, but we *are* actually holy, and we *do* make real progress in holiness. That is what our Heidelberg Catechism teaches us: "[we]

begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God" (LD 44, Q&A 114). The problem is that we equate holiness with perfection, and then we lose heart, give up, and stop mortifying the old man and quickening the new man by the power of the Spirit. "Defeatist Christians," writes DeYoung, who do not fight against sins, because they figure they were 'born this way' or 'will never change' or 'don't have enough faith' are not being humble. They dishonour the Holy Spirit who strengthens us with supernatural power" (82). The truth is that we are not slaves to sin, because Christ has set us free. We deny the gospel when we live as if we were still slaves to sin. Using a boxing metaphor, DeYoung writes, "Sin may get in some good jabs. It may clean your clock once in a while. It may bring you to your knees. But, if you are in Christ it will never knock you out. You are no longer a slave, but free" (105).

Fifth, and most shamefully, many Christians do not make progress in holiness because "holiness is hard work and we're often lazy. We like our sins and dying to them is painful" (19). That is why the church occupies itself with "easier projects": "it is easier to sign a petition protesting man's inhumanity to man than to love your neighbour as yourself" (19). This is especially the case with sexual sin. DeYoung devotes an entire chapter to "Saints and Sexual Immorality." Listen to DeYoung's passionate, urgent warnings to the modern church, us included:

> If we could transport Christians from almost any other century to today's 'Christian' countries in the West, I believe what would surprise them most (besides our phenomenal affluence) is how at home Christians are with sexual impurity. It doesn't shock us. It doesn't offend our consciences. In fact, unless it's really bad, sexual immorality seems normal, just a way of life, and often downright entertaining (108).

> If you can't picture Christ with a prostitute or Christ in front of porn or Christ sleeping around, then you shouldn't picture yourself in those circumstances either. You belong to Christ. More than that, you are joined to Christ. If his body is pure, yours should be too (112).

> We must consider the possibility that much of what churchgoing people do to unwind would not pass muster for the apostle Paul. Not to mention God (119).

> The kinds of things Paul wouldn't even mention, the sort of sins he wouldn't dare joke about, the behaviours too shameful even to name—we hear about them in almost every sitcom and see them on screens bigger than our homes (120).

Finally, DeYoung promotes the means of holiness in the church. This is refreshing because modern evangelicalism downplays the value of the church. Writes DeYoung,

> The weakest Christians are those least connected to the body.... The man who attempts Christianity without the church shoots himself in the foot, shoots his children in the leg, and shoots his grandchildren in the heart (132).

Quite simply, preaching, the sacraments, prayer, fellowship with the saints are the ordinary ways in which God is pleased to sanctify us. "I don't apologise," writes DeYoung. "It may sound boring and out-of-date, but it just happens to be true: the way to grow in your relationship with Jesus is to pray, read your Bible, and go to a church where you'll get good preaching, good fellowship and receive the sacraments" (134). There are no shortcuts.

I recommend this book. It is well written, in a style that especially appeals to the youth, and it would be a suitable resource in a discussion group for which study questions are included. The church—and that includes us—needs to hear this message, and urgently needs to heed it. ●

Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root, David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI,: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2012. Pp. 252 (cloth). [Reviewed by Martyn McGeowen.]

The title of the book captures its essence. It has two parts: "heresy" and "root."

Engelsma insists that the Federal Vision (FV) is more than "theological imbalance" or "mis-

placed emphasis" but *heresy*. He writes, "The federal vision is a heresy. It is a stubborn, persistent, deliberate departure from and denial of a cardinal truth of Scripture, as this truth is rightly and authoritatively summarized and systematized in the Reformed creeds" (18). "The federal vision is the enemy of the Reformation. It is the enemy of the Reformation within the gates and therefore the most dangerous enemy of all" (64). And how will Engelsma deal with this heresy? Will he interact in a scholarly and detached way with it? Will he welcome it, and praise its valuable contribution to modern theological dialogue? Listen! "I expose the root of the federal vision. *I intend to destroy it*" (23). And destroy it, he does!

This book, then, does not promote "brotherly dialogue" with the men of the FV; this book will not be a "valuable contribution to the ongoing discussion" about the FV; this book is not "engaging," "winsome," or "charitable" with respect to the FV. This book *attacks* the FV. This does not mean that the book is written in a mean-spirited manner, but out of love *for the truth,* and out of love *for the church*. And that is needed today.

Nor does this mean that Engelsma—or the reviewer of this book—enjoys calling people heretics. Listen to Engelsma's rationale:

> Have we no regard for our brothers and sisters…? Have we no zeal for the faith itself that is being subverted? Have we no regard for the church of the future? If we fall silent for any reason—discouragement that seemingly no one listens, a false notion of being loving, a desire to be accepted and approved by other churches, unwillingness to be hated for our confession of the truth of grace, or any other reasons at all—God will raise up stones to make the confession we are privileged and called to make. And I cannot see why we should have any pleasure in the prospect that our refusal to witness to the gospel of grace *in the matter of the covenant* becomes the occasion for God turning to stones for a witness to the truth (203, Engelsma's italics).

That explains the first part of the title: "Federal Vision: *Heresy* at the Root."

The second part of the title, "Federal Vision: Heresy *at the*

Root" also requires explanation. Much of the response to the FV has been to attack the FV's fruit—justification by faith and works and a denial of the Five Points of Calvinism. Few, if any, outside of the PRCA, have attacked the FV's root—a conditional covenant. The reason is obvious—to attack the root would require theologians to reevaluate their own theology, admit their error, and embrace the truth confessed and defended by the PRCA. Until other Reformed theologians and churches embrace an *unconditional* covenant, their own position will leave them hacking off branches from the FV but never daring to uproot the pernicious weed of the FV from the garden of the Reformed churches. About this failure, Engelsma chides the Reformed and Presbyterian community:

> About the root of the federal vision—its distinctive doctrine of the covenant—a root that produces the fruit of the denial of the gospel of salvation by grace alone in its entirety, there is now, and has been for the past ten years…*silence*—earnest, studied, deliberate, deafening, astounding, inexcusable, blameworthy *silence* (42, Engelsma's italics).

Engelsma, on his part, refuses to be silent. He refuses to let his trumpet sound an uncertain sound. This is commendable because if Engelsma, the author of the book, does not think the FV a serious error, why should the reader bother to concern himself about it? But if Engelsma displays passion, we, the readers, will surely sit up and take notice.

The book itself is made up of two parts. The first section (15-73) is a greatly expanded transcript of a speech that Engelsma delivered in various parts of the USA and is a setting forth of what the FV is; who its main proponents and defenders are; its history and development; and an impassioned warning to all to flee from the FV to the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer and received by faith alone. The second section (79-216) is a lengthy response to questions, criticisms, and challenges to the original speech. The book ends with a critical review of a book supportive of the FV.

Let me list what I see as three commendable features of this book.

First, the book is clear. This is one of Engelsma's gifts as a writer. He is not only clear but accessible

to readers of all ages—after all, to the original speech believers *and their children* were invited, and they came! Thus Engelsma writes (and speaks) "in the simple language of the layman rather than the characteristic language of the theologian" (80-81). A critic of the book might disagree with Engelsma's conclusions—in light of Scripture and the Reformed confessions, which Engelsma ably explains, I cannot see how—but he cannot complain that Engelsma is *unclear*. Engelsma carefully, painstakingly, and repeatedly *defines* his terms. He defines covenant; he defines conditional covenant; he defines unconditional covenant; he defines condition; he defines promise.

Let us look at a few examples of how Engelsma explains key terms: condition, covenant of grace, head of the covenant, and covenant promise:

> By covenant condition the federal vision does not mean what the reformers meant and what the Westminster standards mean with the occasional use of "condition" in their doctrine of the covenant. By condition the reformers and the Westminster standards have strictly in mind the necessary means by which God fulfils his covenant promise to the elect and thus realises his covenant with them.
>
> The federal vision means something radically different. Covenant condition for the federal vision refers to the works of the child upon which the covenant, its promise, its grace, and its salvation depend. Covenant condition for the federal vision is a work of the child by which he distinguishes himself from other children who are objects of the same gracious promise and recipients of the same grace. Covenant condition for the federal vision is a work of the child that makes covenant grace effectual in his salvation, whereas without the work covenant grace would be impotent. Covenant condition for the federal vision is a work of the child without which covenant grace is resisted, frustrated, and lost (39-40).

"Covenant of grace" means that the covenant of God in Christ with men, women, and children is grace—pure grace, grace only, grace from beginning to end. It means that the covenant is established, maintained, and perfected with believers and their chil-

dren out of the sovereign, free favour of God, by the irresistible, saving power of God (the Spirit of Christ), and on the basis of the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

"Covenant of grace" means, negatively, that the covenant does not depend, whatsoever, in any respect, upon man.

"Covenant of grace" means, negatively, that the covenant is not established, is not maintained, and is not perfected on the basis of or by the power of the will, works, and worthiness of those with whom the covenant is established.

That is, "covenant of grace" means that the covenant is not conditional.

The "covenant of grace" is not the covenant of the federal vision (129).

[The federal vision] denies that Christ is the head of the covenant. If Christ is the head of the covenant, God makes the covenant with Jesus Christ *and with those who are Christ's by divine election*, and with no one else. If Christ is the head of the covenant—the legal representative of all who are in the covenant of grace—God makes the covenant promise to Christ *and to those who are Christ's by divine election*, and to no one else (38, Engelsma's italics).

According to the federal vision, when God gave the covenant promise to Abraham and his "seed," in Genesis 17, God made the promise to every physical descendant of Abraham. Today, at baptism, God makes the promise to every baptized child: "I swear by myself that I will be your God! I will unite you to Christ! I will save you in this life and in the life to come!"

But the promise fails (51-52).

Second, Engelsma is faithful in exposing the heresy and heretics—he is not afraid to identify the important names of influential theologians (Shepherd, Frame, Gaffin, Wilson, etc.) or to criticise theologians and churches that have failed to address the heresy of the FV. "Were I to assign a seminary student to critique the federal vision, and the result was a paper that examined all aspects of the federal vision except the fundamental teaching expressed by its name, I would mark the paper with an 'F' —not for federal but for failure," he writes (26). Those criticised are the Knox Theologi-

cal Colloquium (26), Guy Prentiss Waters (27), and the 2010 study committee report of the URC (42-45). About the latter, Engelsma writes:

> What the United Reformed synod ought to have decided is this: with regard to its doctrine of justification by faith and works and with regard to its denial of all the doctrines of salvation by sovereign grace in the covenant, synod declares the federal vision a heresy and advises every consistory vigorously to expose and condemn the federal vision, so that every member of the United Reformed Churches, man, woman, and child, is protected against this God-dishonouring and soul-destroying bringing up again of Arminianism out of hell.
>
> And then the synod of the United Reformed Churches ought to have added: fruit *and root*, that is, synod declares the federal vision heretical in its root, as well as in its fruit (43-44, Engelsma's italics).

Lest some be tempted to complain that Engelsma's criticism of other denominations is uncharitable, and that Engelsma believes that the PRCA are the only true churches in the world, let this citation silence the critics:

> The Protestant Reformed Churches and their spokesmen have never dreamed of teaching that only members of these churches are saved. The charge that we teach this is a slander by those who cannot refute our defence of the gospel of grace and are angered by our criticism of their corruption of the gospel of grace. Rather than address the issues, they revile the churches. It is the old story of killing the messenger.
>
> We are far too busy working on behalf of our own members' salvation, including working out our salvation in all areas of life in a wicked and hostile world, to wile away our time idly questioning the salvation of the members of other churches (180-181).

Third, Engelsma's approach, when dealing with objections and offering counsel, is not abstract, but practical, warm, pastoral, and comforting. The sections on assurance of salvation and on the place of covenant children are especially good in view of the devastating religion of doubt that is the FV. Writes Engelsma,

> If I have faith, no matter how weak, if I believe the gospel of grace from the heart, I am sure of my final salvation. The reason is not that I am sure that I will perform conditions upon which this final salvation depends. Of this I am not sure at all. But I am sure that God will perfect what he has begun in me. I am sure that God is faithful.
>
> The Reformed faith is a gospel of fearlessness.
>
> The federal vision is a religion of terror.
>
> And this is a reason we oppose the federal vision (170).

Compare this with the FV:

> ...despite all the loud trumpetings of the men of the federal vision that their doctrine gives absolute certainty concerning the salvation of every baptized infant, their affirmation of the salvation of every baptized child is meaningless, deceiving, heretical, and false. Their trumpetings are mere, loud noise. For according to the theology of the federal vision, the child—*every* child—can lose his salvation and perish everlastingly (166-167).

In conclusion, Engelsma does what he promises in the title and introduction—he exposes and destroys the root (and therefore the branches) of the FV. Others leave the root untouched. About the root others are silent. Because others believe the root—a conditional covenant—they are ultimately ineffective in their critiques of the bitter fruit of the FV.

There is so much packed into this small book that it is really a handy pocket guide to the FV. If you have never heard of the FV; if you want an accurate guide to what it is; and more importantly if you want to know how to answer it, and how to protect yourself, your family, and your church from the FV, read this superb book. ●

Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian. Ron Gleason. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2010. Pp. 511 (paper). [Reviewed by Russell J. Dykstra.]

One of the most information-rich biographies published in recent times is this new book by the Rev. Ron Gleason Ph.D., *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian*. Rev.

Gleason is a pastor in the PCA who served several congregations in the Canadian Reformed Churches as well as the Reformed Church in the Netherlands (Vrijgemaacht). His years in the Netherlands equipped him in the Dutch language, enabling him to research the life and times of Herman Bavinck. He utilized especially three Dutch biographies—two contemporaries of Bavinck (both published in 1921) and a later work published in 1966. The result is this wealth of material on the life of Herman Bavinck and the life of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN). Dr. Gleason opens up a large window into this history, a history heretofore not readily accessible to the English reader. He has done us a favor in putting this into a book.

Herman Bavinck is a giant of a theologian in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. His influence is significant in the Reformed churches in America. The recent publication of the translation of his mammoth, thorough *Reformed Dogmatics* has made the Reformed church world in America aware of the debt owed to Herman Bavinck. This is especially true of the Protestant Reformed Churches, which have discovered the close affinity to Bavinck, particularly on the doctrine of God's covenant of grace.

Gleason's account of Bavinck's life is fascinating. Herman Bavinck's roots are deep in the Afscheiding (Secession) of 1834. His father (Jan Bavinck) was a minister in the Afscheiding churches. Gleason traces those roots in the lives of Herman Bavinck's parents, including Jan Bavinck's pastorates. Herman Bavinck was born in 1854. His upbringing and schooling were Afscheiding in character with the emphasis on godliness. When Herman Bavinck decided to pursue the ministry of the Word, he first enrolled in the churches' seminary in Kampen. However, he did not relish studying there, perhaps due to the (relatively low) level of scholarship. He subsequently changed his plans and attended the theological school that was part of Leiden University. From this liberal institution, where Abraham Kuyper also had been educated, Bavinck eventually earned a doctor's degree, graduating in 1880.

Bavinck spent one year in a pastorate in Franeker, Friesland. The congregation had a history

of trouble with ministers. K. J. Pieters was one former minister in Franeker (1851-75). Gleason reports that Pieters' "sermons did not always square with true Reformed teaching" (72). (Though Gleason does not relate this, Pieters promoted the doctrine of a conditional covenant with every baptized child, in opposition to Rev. Simon Van Velzen's doctrine of a covenant with the elect only.) Problems in the personal life of Pieters eventually led to a dissolving of his relationship with that congregation (an Art. 11 release, perhaps), and his becoming pastor of a splinter group for a time. Pieters later took a call to the Free Evangelical Church in Franeker.

Herman Bavinck's time in the pastorate was cut very short by his appointment to the seminary in Kampen. Bavinck's outstanding abilities were widely recognized early on. Already in 1880 the Free University offered him a position in the newly established school alongside of Abraham Kuyper. Bavinck first accepted the position, but almost immediately drew back and declined it. The Free University tried again two years later (professor of Hermeneutics and New Testament exegesis), and Bavinck declined again. Instead he accepted the position offered him by the seminary in Kampen in the same year. Bavinck taught in Kampen from 1883 to 1902.

These were exciting times. In 1886 the Doleantie was put out of the Hervoormde Kerk, and quickly united six years later with the churches of the Secession to form the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN). Bavinck was a significant figure in that activity, though Abraham Kuyper was the driving force behind the merger. The union was hasty, and the two churches did not meld well.

Gleason pulls back the curtain to reveal the many conflicts of the age. He describes conflicts between the A churches and the B churches (Afscheiding and Doleantie). There were altogether too many quarreling among the men of the A churches, including wrangling among the professors in Kampen. Bitter disagreements arose over "the schools," Kampen Seminary and the Free University, on whether the seminary of the Reformed Churches ought to be a church-governed seminary or a university seminary (at the Free), or both.

These bitter fights eventually

led Bavinck to leave Kampen to take a position at the Free University in Amsterdam, where he replaced Kuyper as professor of Dogmatics. Bavinck's departure nearly destroyed the seminary in Kampen, as two other professors and most of the students left at the same time.

Bavinck's influence and renown grew after his appointment at the Free University. His focus also changed. He had mostly finished his *Reformed Dogmatics* by the time he left Kampen. From that time on, his writings were less and less on theology. Gleason makes the telling observation that the second edition of Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* began appearing in1906. However, "this and subsequent editions of the *RD* remained unchanged" (403). Bavinck dabbled in philosophy, education, and, increasingly, in matters of culture and social issues.

That change of focus is tied also to his involvement in politics. Gleason recounts Bavinck's work and influence in politics. Bavinck followed Abraham Kuyper into political activity in the Anti-Revolutionary Party. For a time, Bavinck headed that political party, expending his energies on seeking to expand the influence of the party. Bavinck served in the Parliament for ten years near the end of his life. Although Gleason approves of this involvement, he notes that Bavinck preached less, and wrote on social rather than theological issues. Gleason makes a case for the view that Bavinck did not change his theology later in his life, only his focus.

Be that as it may, it is sad that such outstanding theologians as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck would be willing to spend their time striving for political power and influence. Rather than following the pattern of John Calvin, who revised his *Institutes* regularly, Bavinck was busy promoting his party, and pushing for women suffrage in the Netherlands. Kuyper left the ministry of the Word, the highest calling in the world, for the sake of political power. And Bavinck, though retaining his position as professor, ceased developing theologically upon his entrance into politics.

This biography of Herman Bavinck is valuable, being the only major biography of the man in English. From the point of view of its content, it is priceless.

It has, however, serious weaknesses.

Although Dr. Gleason has compiled a tremendous amount of information on the life and times of Herman Bavinck, he displays a definite bias. Gleason served in the Liberated Churches and he shares the obviously anti-Abraham Kuyper spirit of the Liberated. In addition, although Gleason is well informed on the personal conflicts (of which, it seems, Bavinck was never at fault), he is not very precise in his description of doctrinal controversy. That comes out, for instance, in his treatment of the 1905 Conclusions of Utrecht, the controversy that led to the deposition of a certain Rev. Netelenbos, and the influence of the teachers of the "Ethical School." His treatment of the doctrines is generally vague and incomplete.

The book contains a number of appendices, the titles of which are very attractive, such as "'The Science of Holy Divinity': Bavinck's Inaugural Address," and, "The Christian Life and Worldview." These are not a little disappointing, since they are only brief summaries of the original untranslated works of Bavinck.

Finally, this work demands a thorough editing. It is characterized by blatant repetition and remarkable disorganization. For instance, extensive biographical information for Simon Van Velzen is given in a footnote on pages 22 and 23, and again in a footnote on page 30. Time and again, we are told that Bavinck was a popular preacher and speaker and there was standing room only when he preached. The repetition continued to the end, as an identical quotation from Jan Veenhof is given on pages 422-3 and 427-8. In addition, extraneous, facetious comments are tossed in by Gleason that have no place in a scholarly work. From many points of view, the book in its present form is an embarrassment for P&R Publishing.

For all that, the work is highly recommended for the wealth of material on Herman Bavinck and the churches in his lifetime. We can only hope that P&R will soon come out with a revised, improved edition. The subject material is worthy of it. ●

Intelligent Design 101, H. Wayne House (general editor). Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008. Pp. 284 (paper). [Reviewed by John P. Marcus.]

Intelligent Design 101 concerns the evolution/creation debate. Evolutionists generally argue that all of life evolved from a primordial soup of organic chemicals. Over time these chemicals randomly assembled themselves and, by blind chance, became living creatures. Chance and mutations operating over millions of years eventually brought forth more complex life forms, which evolved into the living creatures we see today, ranging from bacteria to humans.

In contrast, intelligent design (hereafter, ID) proponents argue that complex life cannot possibly arise by a process of blind chance operating over millions of years. Only the existence of a "designer," who has control over the process, can explain the presence of design. Design requires a designer is the truism defended by this book. When it comes to explaining design in the creation, materialistic theories fall utterly short.

Intelligent Design 101 looks at religious, philosophical, and scientific arguments to prove that materialistic explanations for the existence of complexity and life are bankrupt. The idea that "[b]lind, random, and unguided material forces brought about all forms of life" (17) is debunked. Therefore, it must be the case that "an intelligent agent designed life intentionally and with purpose" (17).

The book brings a number of well-known and some lesser-known authors to the table and gives a broad overview of the ID debate. As the title suggests by adding "101", the intended audience seems to be those with at least a high school education desiring an introduction to the currently debated issues in ID. The book is well-suited to that task.

The leadoff chapter is written by Philip Johnson, well known for his book *Darwin on Trial.* This chapter, entitled "Bringing Balance to a Fiery Debate," concerns the divide between naturalistic evolutionism as one extreme and biblical creationism on the other extreme. Johnson's balance is ID. He says, "Intelligent design

thus united into one movement people of many viewpoints who were once divided on side issues" (28).

On the one hand, he rejects the philosophy of naturalism, which has no place for a designer of any sort. On the other hand, he also rejects the biblical, young-earth creationists, "who believe that the 'right question' entails figuring out precise details about how and when God created." He says, moreover, "My goal has been to unite the divided theists and open-minded sceptics of religion, and divide the united evolutionist community" (32). On the one hand, he wants to unite all religions who believe that a god of some sort was responsible for creation. On the other hand, he wants theistic evolutionists to be separated from naturalistic evolutionists. And he wants all ID proponents to forget about "side issues" and fight for what he considers the most important issue(s).

Herein lies the greatest criticism of this entire book. Many ID proponents, including Johnson, want everyone to stop bickering about things such as the age of the earth, and who actually did the creating, and focus instead on proof of a grand designer. The ID movement proclaims that the world could not have come about by blind chance and circumstance, but it is nevertheless willing to embrace other serious errors. As long as some kind of a designer is involved, Johnson would apparently be content. It doesn't matter if the "mind" behind the creation is the God of Christians, the god of Muslims, or even some sort of pantheistic force. One gets the impression that many ID proponents would even be content if the "mind" that designed the creation were Lucifer. The Achilles' heel of the ID movement is that it sets aside the God of Scripture and pretends to focus on the "real issues." ID therefore ignores critical issues and fails to give honor to whom alone that honor is due. When ID proponents say that belief in Christ the Creator is not important, then Christ is left out in the cold.

Chapter 2, by J.P. Moreland, professor of theology, concerns "Intelligent Design and the Nature of Science." He acknowledges that the debate is not only about science but also about the nature of science. He rightly points out that "science" has been defined in such

a way that an intelligent designer cannot even be considered as a possibility. He calls this stance "methodological naturalism." As with Johnson, Moreland too sees that ID theory "does not attempt to identify the designer nor does it make explicit reference to God" (45). Again, this shows the glaring weakness, if not dangers, of the ID movement. Moreland's discussion is nevertheless useful in that he shows how ID has been blocked from the debate concerning origins simply by redefining what science is and then claiming that ID is not science. Darwinists define the practice of science as methodological naturalism, the idea that all things must be explained by 'natural law.' Of course, such a view explicitly denies any explanation of the world that invokes a supernatural cause. Says Moreland, "By adopting theistic evolution and methodological naturalism, one implicitly affirms scientism and its limits on knowledge and thereby contributes, even if unintentionally, to the marginalization of Christianity in culture" (56). Moreland points out the circular reasoning involved in much of the so-called science of naturalism. In addition, he answers some of the criticisms leveled against ID, including the criticism that invoking a designer simply invokes God when a gap in knowledge needs to be filled (hence, "god of the gaps"). He openly acknowledges that ID does not favor the Christian God over Allah or even Yoda.

Casey Luskin, in chapter 3, writes about "Finding Intelligent Design in Nature." He points out that "specified complexity" has the kind of information content that must have come from a designer. He gives an example of a sharp stone with a uniform triangular shape having a neck whereby it may be fastened to the tip of an arrow. These features indicate that a designer must have manufactured it. So too, a complex molecule, such as DNA, which enables the reproduction and functioning of life, must indicate the work of a designer. Luskin defines "specified complexity" this way: "Something is complex if it is unlikely and it is specified if it matches a preexisting pattern" (73). Language and computer codes are examples of specified complexity, which can be explained only by posting an intelligent source. After establishing the definition of specified complexity, Luskin shows how

laws that govern the universe as well as DNA conform well to the definition. Even the machinery of living cells that reads the DNA code and converts it to useful information displays specified complexity. Moreover, what scientists once labeled "junk" DNA is more and more recognized as having extremely important functions. The presence of specified complexity in stretches of DNA that were once thought to be junk, ought to have been a clue that these stretches were not meaningless. All the machinery of living cells displays an astounding level of specified complexity. One example is the micro-motor that causes flagellum to spin and propel bacteria through liquid. Luskin also looks at comparisons of DNA sequences between organisms and concludes that the best explanation is a designer using a common blueprint.

Michael Behe, known for his book *Darwin's Black Box,* contributes a chapter that nicely summarizes and updates the idea of "irreducible complexity." Irreducible complexity is a phenomenon found throughout the creation. A system is irreducibly complex if its proper functioning depends on any one component. For example, if a mousetrap lacked any single component (e.g., the spring, or the base), it would be completely useless. That is also the case with living systems such as the eye; take away one chemical, or one receptor, or one other component, and the eye would be rendered utterly useless. Irreducible complexity thus shows the impossibility of an eye evolving by small steps growing ever closer to perfection. Darwin himself is quoted as saying, "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down" (120).

Chapter five, "Why Are We Here? Accident or Purpose?" by Jay Richards, points to the exquisite design features of the planets and solar system to show that life would not be possible without these features. These include the presence of a stabilizing moon orbiting around the earth, an atmosphere rich in nitrogen and oxygen, the right kind of star to serve as our sun, the right locations in the galaxy, etc. Such a fine-tuned universe argues for a designer. Why is it

that the moon is the right size to give perfect solar eclipses? Why does Mt. Rushmore look like four presidents? The answer is the same: Designers with a purpose must have been involved in bringing them into being.

Eddie Colanter discusses the "Philosophical Implications of Neodarwinianism and ID." He says, "Philosophical implications are practical consequences: How people act or behave is in accordance with their beliefs or accepted ideas about theism and reality" (157). Our thoughts about God and origins have consequences. Neodarwinianism says life is the result of non-directed purposeless evolution. Inevitably this will affect one's morality. So too will the belief that we are the result of directed intelligence affect our morality. Neodarwinianism supports a materialistic worldview consistent with one's view of origins. Obviously, one's view of origins will affect the value he/she places on life. For an example, Colanter quotes Richard Weikart: "Darwinism by itself did not produce the Holocaust, but without Darwinism, especially in its social Darwinist and eugenics permutations, neither Hitler nor his Nazi followers would have had the necessary scientific underpinnings to convince themselves and their collaborators that one of the world's greatest atrocities was really morally praiseworthy. Darwinism—or at least some naturalistic interpretations of Darwinism—succeeded in turning morality on its head" (171).

Chapter seven, by H. Wayne House, discusses "Darwinism and the Law," giving an interesting description of the Scopes Trial in 1925. Apparently the trial was planned and staged to challenge the law that made it illegal to teach any theory that denied evolution. House shows that the real trial was very dissimilar to its depiction in the popular media. He then covers various laws that attempted to enforce balanced treatment of creation and evolution.

An appendix at the end of the book provides useful information to debunk the notion of a common ancestry of apes and humans. The discussion shows that the case of human descent from apes is not at all convincing.

In sum, this book is helpful if one desires to understand the present status of the ID movement. *Intelligent Design 101* is useful in giving a view of the

landscape surrounding the debate of origins. Inasmuch as ID promotes the idea that any god will do for explaining the origin of the universe, the movement may also give us a glimpse into the religion of antichrist, a religion that has room for "a higher power" and "a heavenly wisdom," but no room for Jesus Christ. The entire idea of intelligent design apart from the truth of Scripture should be no more appealing to believers than the idea of Baal as the creator of all things. ●

Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of the Puritan Reformed Orthodox Theologian, Thomas Goodwin (1600- 1680), Mark Jones. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010. $111.00. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, a German publishing company with an office in the United States, is a publisher of significant theological books. Recently it gave us William den Boer's important study of the theology of James Arminius (see the review in the April 2011 issue of this journal).

In this work, we are given a fine study of the Christology of Thomas Goodwin. Goodwin is identified as a "seventeenth-century Reformed orthodox Congregationalist theologian" (15). In fact, he was a prominent Puritan in England in Puritanism's heyday.

As I have demonstrated in my booklet "The Gift of Assurance,"[1] Thomas Goodwin was guilty of teaching the typical Puritan false doctrine of assurance, namely, that assurance of salvation is not inherent in faith, as a gift of God, but dependent on a mystical experience, for which the believer must labor long and hard. For assurance, exhorted Goodwin, "rest not in believing only."[2] In the theology of Goodwin, the sealing with the Spirit, which is assurance of salvation, is an im-

1 David J. Engelsma, *The Gift of Assurance* (South Holland, IL: Evangelism Committee of the Protestant Reformed Church, 2009).

2 Thomas Goodwin, "An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians," in *Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), 248.

mediate, extraordinary, mystical experience.

> There is an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost, by a heavenly and divine light, of a divine authority, which the Holy Ghost sheddeth in a man's heart, (not having relation to grace wrought, or anything in a man's self,) whereby he sealeth him up to the day of redemption…. One way [of assurance] is *discoursive*; a man gathereth that God loveth him from the effects…. But the other [for Goodwin, the sealing with the Spirit—DJE] is *intuitive*, as the angels are said to know things…. There is light that cometh and overpowereth a man's soul, and assureth him that God is his, and he is God's, and that God loveth him from everlasting.[3]

Regarding assurance of salvation, the book records a curious exchange between Oliver Cromwell, on his deathbed, and Goodwin. Cromwell asked Goodwin "if the doctrine of the saints' perseverance were true (i.e., the elect could never fall away from the faith)." Goodwin responded: "Nothing could be more certain." "'Then I am safe,' said Cromwell, 'for I am sure that once I was in a state of grace'" (49).

Goodwin also shared in another serious error (or helped to form it, as the case may be) of Puritanism: He was a fervent postmillennialist. Such was Goodwin's fervor for the coming "golden age" in history and on earth that he described the millennium as Christ's "'bring[ing] Heaven down' to earth." The glory of the millennium will include the bodily resurrection of the martyrs: "The souls of martyrs in heaven will return to earth, united to resurrection bodies, and reign during the millennium until Christ returns on the Day of Judgment" (218). Thus, postmillennialism agrees with dispensational premillennialism that there will be more than one resurrection of the dead, separated by many years.

This glorious earthly kingdom of Christ will be the perfection of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. At the end of the millennium, this "mediatorial kingdom…'ceaseth, for there will be no need of it'" (221).

As one of the main authors of the Savoy Declaration (AD 1658),

3 Goodwin, "An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians," 233.

Goodwin was able to introduce Puritanism's postmillennialism into the influential creed of the independents.

It is not these egregious errors that constitute the appeal of Jones' book to the Reformed reader. Nor are they the main content.

The book is an examination of Goodwin's theology concerning the relation of Jesus Christ as head and mediator of the covenant of grace and the pre-temporal source of Christ and the covenant in the eternity of God. Specifically, the book sets forth Goodwin's doctrine of what is known in Reformed theology as the "*pactum salutis*," that is, "the pact of salvation," which is also called the "covenant of redemption."

"Heaven's Kissing Earth," in the book's title, is the coming to earth of the covenant Christ and all His covenant work. "Why" in the title is the heavenly and eternal covenant of redemption, or the "*pactum salutis*."

In the course of his exploration of Goodwin's doctrine of the source and basis of the covenant of grace in eternity, the author sheds light on many other aspects of Goodwin's covenant theology, including such important doctrines as the covenant with Adam, the covenant with Noah, and the Sinaitic covenant with Israel.

A student of Reformed theology is interested in the covenant theology of such a prominent representative of that particular strand of the Reformed tradition at such an early time of the tradition.

Goodwin's theology of the covenant of grace contains a mixture of soundness and error—soundness that ought to be, but is not, considered by contemporary Reformed theologians with a view to development of the doctrine of the doctrine of the covenant and serious error, that is stubbornly perpetuated by many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, regardless that the error has degenerated into grievous heresy before their eyes.

Goodwin was right in his main theses. First, "for Goodwin, Christ is the Christ of the covenant" (13). Second, the covenant Christ and His covenant work have their origin and ground in eternity. That origin and ground, for Thomas Goodwin, is the "eternal covenant of redemption, also known as the *pactum salutis* or 'counsel of peace'" (13).

But Goodwin's conception of the covenant of redemption is seri-

ously flawed. He conceived it as an agreement between the Father and the Son. In fact, Goodwin viewed the origin of the covenant as a real "bargaining" of the first and second persons of the Trinity. "Christ bargained with the Father" (136). Such was the bargaining that the Son refused the first, stingy offer of the Father regarding a reward for the Son's covenant and redemptive work. The Father offered the Jews to the Son as His people. The Son upped the ante. The Son held out for the Gentiles as well. "Christ bargained with the Father and was not satisfied with the reward of the Jews. His work demanded a greater payment" (136). "Therefore, the Father 'comes off more freely'; he opens his heart more largely to Christ because Christ would undergo such humiliation, which culminated in his death," promising the Son also the elect of the Gentiles as His reward (136, 137).

It is no wonder that a contemporary scholar, David Wong, has criticized such a conception of the covenant of redemption as mercenary. "The pure, immediate love of the Father for the salvation of man is replaced by a mediate transaction between the Father and the Son. The picture of a loving and merciful Father is replaced by a commercial merchant God, who primarily honours the contract with His Son" (134).

Despite such criticism of the doctrine of the origin of the covenant as a bargain as unworthy of God and as unfitting with regard to the covenant of grace that flows from it, depends on it, and reflects it and despite the truth that the family life of God is certainly superior to ours, in which fathers do not dicker with sons like two Scottish, or Dutch, businessmen, contemporary Reformed theologians continue to preach the covenant of redemption as a cold, conditional contract. Reformed theology gets nowhere in sound development of the doctrine of the covenant.

Adding to the difficulty of conceiving the origin of the covenant Christ as the contracting of the Father and the Son is the obvious omission of the Holy Ghost from the wheeling and dealing in eternity. Jones himself, seldom a critic of Goodwin, is forced to recognize this weakness in Goodwin's theology of the covenant. "Reading only Goodwin's exposition of the *pactum salutis* in *Of Christ the Mediator* may indicate that Goodwin understood

the covenant of redemption primarily in terms of a Father-Son agreement…. Because of the relative Scriptural silence on the Spirit as a negotiating partner, Goodwin spends a good deal of effort on understanding the roles of the Father and the Son as the principal partners at the covenant of redemption. That is not to say, however, that there is no place for the Spirit" (141, 143).

Since the covenant of redemption is a divine work issuing outside of the being of God and since it is the source and ground of nothing less than the covenant Christ and all His redemptive work, keeping the third person of the Godhead on the sidelines of this great work is no small matter. It is nothing less than Trinitarian error. Nor is the problem solved by speaking of the Spirit's role in applying covenant salvation as Goodwin evidently attempted to do: "Goodwin…gives more attention to the Spirit's role in the history of redemption than his role as a covenanting partner" (144). The Spirit must be actively involved in the source and ground itself of covenant salvation in Jesus Christ.

As if these difficulties are not enough to call into question the conception of the origin of Christ as a conditional contract between Father and Son, the biblical evidence for this conception is "sparse," as Goodwin recognized. "Scripture seems to be sparse in speaking of the Son's will in the *pactum salutis*" (173). That is, when Scripture teaches concerning the eternal origin of the covenant Christ and His covenant work, it does not speak of two bargaining parties at all, but of the will of the Father.

This should have instructed Goodwin, as it ought to instruct legions of Reformed theologians today, that the origin of the covenant is not a bargaining session in eternity, or contract, at all, but the will, decree, or counsel of God the Father, that is, of the triune God, who is Father with regard to the covenant Messiah and with regard to the elect, covenant people of this Messiah.

This is the meaning of one of the most important passages of Scripture on the origin of the Christ and His work in eternity, a passage to which Goodwin appealed: Colossians 1:12-20. There is nothing in the profound passage about bargaining, or contract. But the origin of God's "dear Son, in whom we have

redemption through his blood" is the eternal "pleasure" of the Father. It is in the eternal fixing of the pleasure in the decree, or counsel, of the triune God that Jesus Christ is the "firstborn of every creature" and "before all things." Out of this pleasure of God in the eternal decree, Christ has come to earth, so that, "having made peace through the blood of his cross," by Him God might "reconcile all things unto himself."

The Christ, who is the eternal Son in human flesh, does not bargain about His mission and rewards, much less challenge His Father's first, meager offer. He submits to the will of God and carries it out wholeheartedly. He is a son, not a union laborer. "Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God" (Heb. 10:7).

Likewise, the Reformed creeds describe the origin of Christ as God's decree, not as a contract between Father and Son. With reference to Christ, Canons, I/7 states, "whom he [the triune God] from eternity appointed the Mediator and head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation."[4] Canons, II/8 locates the eternal source of Christ, who "by the blood of the cross…confirmed the new covenant," in "the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father."[5] Whether any Reformed creed describes the origin of the covenant Christ in a contract is doubtful. Certainly, this is not the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity.

Why contemporary Reformed theologians continue to describe the origin of Christ and the covenant as an agreement between two persons of the Trinity is a mystery.

Of special interest are also other aspects of Goodwin's theology of the covenant. Goodwin denied that the covenant with Adam, prior to the fall, placed the first man in a position to earn, or otherwise obtain, heaven for himself and his posterity. Adam could never have obtained the eternal, heavenly, highest life that Jesus Christ has earned for Himself and His church. Goodwin "argues that only life in the garden was promised [to Adam] 'and not the translating him, in the end, unto that Spiritual Life in Heaven'" (79).

Goodwin's reasoning was biblical and sound.

4 Canons, I/7, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 582.

5 Canons, II/8, in Schaff, 587.

> The first reason Goodwin gives why Adam's reward was only continued life on earth is that Christ is the heavenly man (I Cor 15:47) whereas Adam is the earthly man. Moreover, Christ was the first and only author of heavenly life which Christ's elect enjoy. Coming down from heaven, Christ raises his earthly saints into the heavenly places, and so 'the Apostle doth put our carrying to Heaven […] not so much upon the merit of Christ's Death, as upon his being the Lord from Heaven.' Furthermore, because Adam was a man from the Earth he could never have come to Heaven (John 3:13). The going of believers into heaven is based upon Christ who is the only one to have come down from heaven. In this way, Christ secures far greater eschatological blessings than Adam ever could have. The paradise that Adam enjoyed 'was but the Type of the Paradise above, and his Sabbath a Type of Heaven, as himself was of Christ.' Therefore, 'he was not to have entered into the heavenly paradise, except by this Second Adam, Christ, whose paradise alone it was […] Take away the Second Adam that was to come, and there had been no Second paradise for Adam, to come into, which that Paradise of his was the type of.' The second Adam, Jesus Christ, is the Mediator of the second covenant, the covenant of grace. This covenant far exceeded the promised rewards of the covenant of works on the basis that Christ's person and work far exceeded the person and work of the first Adam (80).

Reformed theologians should also take note of Goodwin's analysis of the covenant with Noah. With the majority of the older Reformed theologians—those doing theology prior to Abraham Kuyper—Goodwin did not view it as a covenant of common grace. Rather, Goodwin regarded the covenant with Noah as an aspect, as development, of the covenant of grace, promised in Genesis 3:15. In the light of Isaiah 54:7-11, Goodwin explained the covenant with Noah as "the pure Covenant of Grace, and the everlastingness and perpetuity of that Grace" (82) "The covenant made with Noah was [for Thomas Goodwin]…the covenant of grace; it represented advancement on Genesis 3:15 in terms of the content and clarity of God's redemptive purposes.

Christ is the object of faith and salvation is not by works but by grace" (82).

Regarding the Sinaitic covenant, however, Goodwin went wrong. He viewed the covenant established with Israel at Sinai as a "promulgation of the Covenant of Nature made with Adam in Paradise, in the moral part of the Ten Commandments" (84). The implication of this view of the Sinaitic covenant is, as Jones points out, that "the Mosaic covenant operated alongside, not in, the covenant of grace" (82).

This doctrine of the Sinaitic covenant ignores the explanation of it that Paul gives in Galatians 3. The covenant at Sinai, with its prominent feature of law and commandments, is an administration of the covenant of grace, effectively bringing the true Israel of God unto Christ, that they might be justified by faith. To place the Sinaitic covenant "alongside" the covenant of grace, as a republication of the covenant of creation, must prove to be fatal to the pure gospel of justification by faith alone, apart from works. As is happening in contemporary Reformed theology, placing the Adamic covenant outside the covenant of grace leads to the notion of meritorious works in some sense or other. In addition, the covenant with Adam, having served its purpose and having been broken by Adam, can never again be "promulgated."

Other important doctrines necessarily rise for consideration in a book on the covenant. There is, for instance, a treatment of justification from eternity. Goodwin taught three "stages or progresses" of justification. "The first Progress or Step was at the first Covenant-making and striking of the Bargain from all Eternity […] Justified then we were when first elected, though not in our own Persons, yet in our Head, as he had our Persons then given him, and we came to have a Being and Interest in him" (233). Jones explains: "Because of the nature of the covenant of redemption, namely, that Christ acts as surety on behalf of his people, the elect are 'in this respect justified from all Eternity'" (233).

The book is both a solid study of a notable theologian in the Reformed tradition and a stimulating examination of a vitally important and rich truth of the word of God.

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Introducing the Old Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message, by Tremper Longman III. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. Pp. 192. $14.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

All students of Scripture, whether ministers or not, can profit from owning several good books of introductions to the Scriptures. But "good" is the key word. Bad introductions are worthless.

The present volume gets a mixed review. To its credit, it is well written, simple to read, not too long, and neither technical nor scholarly. For this very reason, its appeal is more to the layperson than to the minister. It seems to me that, exactly because the minister does not need *many* introductions to the Old Testament in his library, he would want to be sure that the ones he has are comprehensive in their survey. This one is too simple. At the same time, the layperson will profit from it only if he is able to distinguish its strengths from its weaknesses. But because of the very nature of this book, its weaknesses might not be as apparent to a layperson.

Overview

In this book, Tremper Longman III introduces each of the 39 books of the Old Testament following the same structure in each chapter:

- a summary of the book's contents.
- a discussion of who wrote the book and when.
- an identification of the genre of the book.
- a section regarding how the book anticipates the gospel as fully revealed in the New Testament.
- a list of recommended resources.
- a list of questions for review and discussion. (Usually the heading includes the word "review"; on occasion it substitutes the word "reflection." The reason for this inconsistency is not clear; but it is a minor matter).

The book includes a brief introductory chapter, an excursus on theological history placed after the treatment of Esther, and a Scripture index.

The book is an abridgement of Longman's book *An Introduction to the Old Testament,* also published by Zondervan. In ad-

dition to the softcover format, the book is available as an ebook for $11.99.

Value

The summaries of each book are valuable. Initially I thought I would find them hardly necessary, as I have read through the whole Old Testament numerous times in my life, taught Old Testament history in catechism, led Bible studies on various Old Testament books or parts thereof (including some of the lesser known ones), preached on texts out of 32 Old Testament books to this point in my life, used passages from three or four more in connection with Heidelberg Catechism sermons, and preached series on parts or all of 13 Old Testament books.

Having read the summaries, however, I concluded that any student of the Scriptures can benefit from such, no matter how familiar with the Bible he is. Longman's summaries are more than the brief outlines found in many introductions; they give a full overview of the book. At the same time, they are not more than summaries; Longman faces questions of exegesis or translation only when necessary for an accurate summary.

These summaries enable the reader in a moment to understand the basic structure and contents of the various Old Testament books. This means that the book would be especially helpful to any Bible study society that decided to spend one or two evenings surveying each book of the Old Testament. In this case, the questions for review and discussion would also be helpful.

Then, the sections regarding how the book anticipates the New Testament gospel were valuable—but only generally. The problem is not with what Longman *says*, but with what he does *not* say. I realize that one cannot write in detail on this subject in just a few paragraphs, but I often wished Longman had expanded even more in these sections. One example I can take from the book of Numbers. Who, in thinking of the gospel as portrayed in that book, does not think of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness? But Longman does not even mention it.

Weaknesses

I found the book disappointing in several respects.

First, the section on authorship and date was often a disappoint-

ment. In referring to the book's author, Longman means not who *spoke* but who *wrote* the book. So with many of the prophets, for instance, Longman gave a brief indication of who the prophet was, but often concluded that we cannot be entirely sure who wrote the book, and when. Perhaps that is true. What disappointed me is that he seemed to put more emphasis on the scribe than the prophet.

Also disappointing in this section was the fact that Longman often gave several options regarding authorship and/or date, but rarely gave his own opinion. The reader is left knowing that there are many opinions about this—end of story. I would have preferred to see Longman take a stand on the issues, even if I were to disagree with his conclusions, rather than simply leave the reader hanging.

Second, Longman is quick to point out that the Old Testament Scriptures "interact extensively with ancient Near Eastern literature" (17). In this light he views the creation account in Genesis (17), Moses being born and placed into the ark of bulrushes (20), the covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai (38), some of the imagery in the Psalms (96), and the laments of Jeremiah (132).

I do not deny that there might be close similarities between some scriptural passages and some Near Eastern literature, but to say that the Scriptures "interact extensively" with Near Eastern literature is to suppose that the writers of the Scriptures borrowed from these sources, rather than supposing the opposite to be true.

This view of Longman significantly weakens his understanding of God's covenant: "a covenant is like a treaty between two nations" (38). This is true of covenants between men or nations —but not of God's covenant with Israel and His people in Christ, of which Longman speaks as he makes this analogy.

If the first weakness is disappointing, this second is alarming. But there is more: the third weakness is the book's fatal flaw.

Already in treating Genesis, Longman tips his hand to having a wrong view of the historical narratives in Scripture. This wrong view continues throughout his treatment of the books leading up to Esther; and, after the book of Esther, his "excursus on theological history" makes plain that his view of history is wrong. "Theological history" is a nice term,

and could be put to a proper use. And in his "excursus," Longman says many true things about theological history. But by using this term, Longman means to tell the reader that, though every historical narrative in the Bible teaches us something important about God and salvation, not every historical narrative recorded in the Bible literally happened the way the Bible presents it. Rather, the author selected certain aspects of that history, and artfully worked them into "storylike histories" (84).

With this view, Longman can tell the reader that the language of Genesis 1-2 is "highly figurative" and that its "purpose is not to explain *how* God created creation, but to proclaim that it was Yahweh rather than one of the other creation gods of the ancient Near East" (11). With this view he can label the book of Joshua as "a work of history," but say that this "does not necessarily imply that everything is presented accurately" (44).

This is why the reader must beware. Longman says nice things about the historical events, and makes a point to say that some are true: "in the case of the exodus event, its theological significance is dependent on its actually having happened" (23). But not everything actually happened the way the Bible says it did. And why he accepts the exodus event as historically factual, but not the creation account, he does not say.

Because of these weaknesses, this book is not the "good" introduction to the Old Testament that would serve ministers and laypersons well. Perhaps the writing and publishing of such an introduction, for both the Old and New Testaments, is yet another project for one of our ministers or professors, and for the RFPA. ●

By Good and Necessary Consequence, by Ryan M. McGraw. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012. Pp. xiv + 85. $10.00 (paper). [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

This book is part of the *Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology* series. The series intends to clarify issues raised in the creeds of the church, including the ancient creeds, but

especially focusing on the rich doctrinal standards that were produced by the Reformed churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The purpose is to make these creedal formularies more accessible to twenty-first century Christians. The hope is that contemporary Christians will reacquaint themselves with the classic creeds of the Reformed faith.

The *Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology* series aims to address confessional issues from four vantage points. In the "Series Preface," the editors explain what these four vantage points are:

> First, it views confessional issues from the *textual* vantage point, exploring such things as variants, textual development, and the development of language within the documents themselves as well as within the context in which these documents were written. Second, this series views confessional issues from the *historical* vantage point, exploring social history and the history of ideas that shed light upon these issues. Third, this series views confessional issues from the *theological* vantage point, exploring the issues of intra- and inter-confessional theology both in the days these documents were written as well as our day. Fourth, this series views confessional issues from the *pastoral* vantage point, exploring the pressing pastoral needs of certain doctrines and the implication of any issues that cause difficulty in the confessions (ix).

In his book *By Good and Necessary Consequence* Ryan McGraw focuses on the well-known qualifying statement in the first chapter, the sixth paragraph of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*." McGraw begins by establishing the importance of deducing from Scripture "by good and necessary consequence." His conviction is that

> [i]n this principle, as the Westminster Assembly of Divines stated it, lies not only a crucial justification of the importance and method of systematic theology, but also a key to understanding New Testament

> uses of the Old Testament, a solid connection between exposition and application in preaching, personal assurance of salvation, and the manner in which Jesus Himself interpreted the Scriptures (xiii).

McGraw begins by defining the phrase in the WCF. He writes:

> Good and necessary consequence is distinguished from matters concerning God's glory, man's salvation, and faith or life that are 'expressly set down in Scripture.' This includes direct precepts, prohibitions, statements of truth, and clearly approved examples. According to this statement, the term 'good and necessary consequence' refers to doctrines and precepts that are truly contained in and intended by the divine Author of Scripture, yet are not found or stated on the surface of the text and must be legitimately inferred from one or more passages of Scripture. As the phrase indicates, such inferences must be 'good,' or legitimately drawn from the text of Scripture. In addition, they must be 'necessary,' as opposed to imposed or arbitrary (3).

McGraw demonstrates the importance of the qualifying phrase, as well as its use in Scripture itself by Jesus and the apostles, and additionally by the church from the very beginning of her history. Resting as it does on the fundamental truth of the divine inspiration, infallibility, and authority of Holy Scripture, the qualifying phrase is at the basis of the whole task of systematic theology, as well as the church's development of the truth and defense of the truth against heretics.

> In summary, the principle of good and necessary consequence as set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith represents the result of the Reformed Protestant quest to justify the task of theology and to apply the Scriptures in a contemporary context for the edification of the church…. In large part, the entire Reformed tradition of doctrine and preaching hinges upon this point (28).

Throughout her history, as McGraw demonstrates, the church has never viewed nor made use of the Bible merely as a book of proof texts. The church has never been satisfied with proof-texting

in her response to heterodoxy. But in every major controversy, from the Trinitarian and Christological controversies, to the Reformation controversies, out of which came the body of Reformed confessions, to the controversy with the Arminians that culminated in the decisions of the Synod of Dordt, and later the formulation of the Westminster Standards, the church and its theologians have always drawn out from the Bible that which "by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."

> Good and necessary consequence is the foundation for understanding how the Westminster Assembly arrived at and constructed its theology. 'The whole counsel of God' as it is revealed in Scripture cannot be discerned by a simplistic us of proof texts or by the bare exposition of Scripture. The fact that many Christians have objected to this principle of biblical interpretation explains why many readers on a popular level regard the proof texts of the Westminster Standards as an example of twisting Scripture to fit into a presupposed body of doctrine (like cramming a square peg into a round hole). However, when we approach the proof texts of these Standards, we ought to ask what implications the divines intended us to draw from the texts they have cited. Without good and necessary consequence, producing a confession of faith would have been an impossible task. By means of this principle, the Westminster divines sought to sit at the feet of Jesus Christ and learn from His own use of Scripture. The Westminster Confession of faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms are evidence that they learned from their Master well (39).

With regard to the good and necessary deductions that may and must be drawn from Scripture, McGraw points out two important distinctions that must be made. First, it is important to distinguish between necessary deductions that rest on proper exegetical method and conclusions that are drawn on the basis of improper exegetical method. McGraw takes as an example Martin Luther's exposition of the standing still of the sun in the Book of Joshua, Joshua 10. On the basis of this passage. Luther insisted that the sun revolved around the earth and not the earth

about the sun. He declared any other view to be contrary to Scripture, without recognizing that the Bible describes the "movements" of the sun from man's earthbound perspective.

> The Bible neither denies nor requires that the sun revolve around the earth—it bypasses the question. The only sort of necessary conclusions that can be derived from this passage is that God is sovereign over the natural progression of day and night and that He is able to alter its course whenever and however He pleases. Moreover, the principle of good and necessary consequence is not a license to allegorize our interpretations of Scripture or to impose the ideas of men upon the Word of God. Rather, its purpose is to recognize unavoidable implications from the text of Scripture. These inferences ordinarily reflect the theological framework that the texts of the Bible assume and merely reveal these underlying assumptions by making them explicit (5).

A second important distinction that McGraw points out is the difference between "legitimate consequences" and "necessary consequences." He illustrates this distinction by appeal to an example made by the Puritan George Gillespie.

> To illustrate Gillespie's point, the duty of personal daily Bible reading is a necessary consequence drawn from those statements in Scripture that describe the godly person as meditating upon the law of God day and night (Ps. 1:2), that commend the saints for searching the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11), and that necessitate Bible reading for faith and godliness (2 Tim. 3:16). However, how much of the Bible Christians ought to read each day, the amount of time they spend upon it, and the hour(s) of the day that they use to read the Scriptures are legitimate applications (or consequences) that admit variable expressions. It is a necessary consequence that we must worship the God Triune on the Lord's Day, but the time of corporate worship is a legitimate consequence, or application. Such conclusions are 'agreeable' to the principles of Scripture, but their precise form is not necessitated from Scripture. If consequences drawn from Scripture are 'necessary' as

> well as good, then they carry the force of 'Thus saith the Lord' (31).

Adding to the value of the book is the separate chapter in which McGraw responds to various objections to the "by good and necessary consequence" principle. The objections are: 1) Necessary consequences cannot be binding, certainly not as binding as the express teaching of Scripture; 2) Necessary consequence elevates reason above faith; and 3) Necessary consequences take the Bible out of the hands of the people.

The one criticism that I have of the book is that in order to demonstrate the principle of "good and necessary consequence," McGraw calls attention to the development of the doctrine of "an eternal inter-trinitarian [*sic*—should be intra-trinitarian] covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son" (35ff.). He appeals to the development of the traditional covenant of redemption by David Dickson. I would not agree that Dickson's presentation of the covenant of redemption as a "bargain" hammered out between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity, the language found in "The Sum of Saving Knowledge," is drawing out "by good and necessary consequence [that which] may be deduced from Scripture."

Apart from this one criticism, I give high marks to this book and recommend it to students, ministers, and elders, as well as all the members of the church. We look forward to future books that will be a part of the *Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology* series. ●

Biblical Hebrew: A Compact Guide, by Mile V. Van Pelt. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. Pp. xi + 210. $19.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

Miles V. Van Pelt is a recognized Hebrew scholar and teacher. This "Compact Guide" is based on the Hebrew grammar that he co-authored with Gary D. Pratico, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew*. Van Pelt is the Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson,

Mississippi. He is a conservative biblical scholar who has a high view of Scripture, as comes out at various points in the *Basics of Biblical Hebrew*.

Biblical Hebrew: A Compact Guide is, indeed, a compact paperback book. Its size (4" x 6") makes it easy to carry in a briefcase, fit in a desk drawer, or slip into a pocket. It is a book that the seminary student or minister could make profitable use of. It is to be feared that after leaving seminary, busy pastors soon lose touch with Hebrew, and their Hebrew language skills become a bit rusty. Making use of this "Compact Guide" will not only aid in the identification of specific forms, but will also be an aid in recalling and recognizing the unique inflection of the various Hebrew verbal patterns.

The "Compact Guide" begins with the basics: the alphabet, vowels, and syllabification. It proceeds to the "Nominal System": nouns, definite article, conjunctive waw, prepositions, adjectives, independent personal pronouns, demonstratives, relative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, the pronominal suffixes, the construct chain, numbers, and particles. Much of the "Guide" is taken up with the "Verbal System": Qal Perfect, Imperfect, Imperative, Infinitives, Participles; Niphal; Piel; Pual, Hiphil, Hophal, Hithpael, and other less significant derived verbal stems.

The book is well-organized, easy to read, and easy to use. In addition, use is made of red lettering in all the charts in order to highlight endings, characteristic vocalization, the distinctive diagnostic features of the verbal patterns, the composition of prefixes and suffixes. This is a great help for recognition of forms. Besides a detailed "Table of Contents," the value of the book is greatly enhanced by a basic Hebrew-English lexicon, a lexicon that has over nine hundred entries—a great basic Hebrew vocabulary.

I highly recommend this latest contribution by Miles Van Pelt to students of biblical Hebrew. I have found the "Compact Guide" very useful. My hope is that others will also. Since the "Compact Guide" is based on *Basics of Biblical Hebrew*, by Pratico and Van Pelt, those who find the "Compact Guide" useful may want to consider purchasing their grammar, which is also a Zondervan publication. By all means—by all *these* means—let our ministers

do all that they can to keep their Hebrew language skills sharp. For the sake of good translation work and exegesis. For the sake of good Old Testament sermons that edify God's people. ●

The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ: An Assessment of the Reformation and the New Perspective on Paul, Cornelis P. Venema Edinburgh, Scotland, UK: Banner of Truth, 2006. Pp. 337 + xiii (cloth). [Reviewed by Martyn McGeown.]

Venema's goal in writing this book is to introduce the reader to the complicated theology of the increasingly popular "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP). While the truth is clear and disingenuous, error is convoluted. Anyone who has tried to make sense of N.T. Wright, probably the best known and most popular of the NPP men, knows what I mean. Therefore, a book that explains the NPP, sets forth its main ideas, and evaluates them in the light of Scripture and the confessions, is valuable to Reformed Christians and officebearers. Venema's book is—although not sharp—a critique of this theology as well as a defence of the Reformation. His conclusion is that the Reformation's "older" Perspective on Paul warrants our loyalty.

Venema makes a compelling case for rejecting the NPP and maintaining the Reformed, biblical, and creedal doctrine of justification by faith alone. If you want a good introduction to the NPP, I can recommend this book. Especially helpful is Venema's detailed explanation of the Reformed truth of justification *before* he gives a careful analysis of the main themes and arguments of the NPP.

Venema divides his material mainly into three sections: the Reformation Perspective on Paul (27-90); A New Perspective on Paul (93-139); and A Critical Assessment of the New Perspective on Paul (143-307). The first section provides helpful exegesis of several key passages from Romans, Galatians, and Philippians, as well as James 2, the key "battleground passage" at the time of the Reformation (and still today). The second section introduces the reader to the theology of the key NPP players, especially E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright. The third section is a detailed critical assessment of the NPP.

In the first section, Venema explains the fundamental differences between Reformed and Romish justification. "Does justification *declare* someone to be righteous and acceptable to God, as the Reformers maintained? Or, does justification involve a process whereby someone is *made righteous*, as the Roman Catholic Church taught?" (29, Venema's italics). Some Protestants have a superficial understanding of the differences between Rome and the Reformed, which is why they are easily duped by fine-sounding ecumenical statements. Venema gives valuable tools to analyze such deceptive statements by duplicitous theologians. For example, he writes, "While it may surprise some contemporary Protestants, even the Council of Trent, in its reply to the Reformation's doctrine of justification, acknowledged that justification includes a judicial declaration by God" (36). The issue lies in the declaration's *basis*: it includes, according to Rome, "those meritorious works of believers that are the fruit of their cooperation with the grace of God, which is communicated through the sacraments" (37). This is significant because the NPP is basically Roman Catholic justification dressed up in the garb of trendy scholarship. The NPP teaches that the basis of justification—*that* justification which determines entrance into heaven on the Last Day—is works produced by the gracious work of the Spirit in cooperation with man's free-will. No wonder N. T. Wright is so popular among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Evangelicals alike!

The main thrust of Venema's book is to demonstrate how the theologians of the NPP have taken biblical concepts from the Apostle Paul—justification, righteousness, works of the law—and redefined them. That is why the NPP is difficult to understand. Everything is turned on its head. Venema guides us through the maze. First, the NPP starts with the fundamental assumption that the Reformers *misunderstood* Paul because they misunderstood the nature of his battle with the Judaizers. Quite simply, says the NPP, "if Palestinian Judaism was a religion of grace, then the older view, which interpreted the apostle Paul's teaching on justification as an antidote to Jewish legalism, needs to be reassessed" (95). Second, justification for the NPP is God's gracious declaration that Jews and

Gentiles alike are *in the covenant of God*. It has nothing to do with sinners being righteous before God in the traditional Reformed sense. In other words, justification is not soteriological, but ecclesiological. Third, when Paul excludes the works of the law from justification, he only means those works (boundary markers) that tend to exclude Gentiles, that is, he excludes *only the ceremonial law*. Paul's polemic, then, is directed "against this *social* use of the law as a means of excluding Gentiles, and not against the use of the law as a means of self-justification" (110, Venema's italics). Fourth, justification is *not* by the imputed righteousness of another. Righteousness for the NPP is "God's own faithfulness to his covenant promise. It is not something he can bestow upon or impart to his people" (127).

Venema's critique of the main arguments of the NPP is compelling. Insisting that modern scholarship on so-called "Second-Temple Judaism" must *not* be the determining factor in interpreting Paul's epistles (147), Venema argues that the NPP has overstated the significance of E. P. Sanders' research. Venema includes a telling quote from Sanders: "The possibility cannot be completely excluded that there were Jews accurately hit by the polemic of Matthew 23 [woes against the scribes and Pharisees] who attended to trivia and neglected the weightier matters.... One must say, however, that the surviving literature [of Second-Temple Judaism] does not reveal them" (150). To this Venema remarks, "The remarkable feature of this observation by Sanders is that it only grudgingly admits that the woes of Matthew 23 may have hit a real and not imaginary target" (150-151). In other words, Sanders only grudgingly admits that there may have been *real legalism* among the Jews in the days of Christ and Paul! One wonders what these men make of the Pharisee and Publican in Luke 18. More devastating to the NPP thesis—remember that their whole scheme rests on the notion that the Jews of Paul's day were *not* legalistic, self-righteous Pharisees but Jews who believed in the grace of God—is Venema's argument that "Second-Temple Judaism" only serves to demonstrate that the Jews were (to use an anachronism) *Semi-Pelagian*, which is exactly the error of Medieval Romanism (156-158).

Writes Venema, "The irony here is that Sanders' description of covenantal nomism closely resembles a textbook description of semi-Pelagian teaching and therefore lends unwitting support to the Reformation argument" (158). Later he writes, "The Reformers never argued that the medieval Roman Catholic doctrine of justification was 'Pelagian' or, strictly speaking, grace-less. What they repudiated was the idea that works of any kind, even those prompted by grace, constitute part of the basis for the believer's acceptance with God" (300). Venema's careful exegesis demonstrates also that the other claims of the NPP are without foundation: "It is not difficult to show that the works of the law refer to more than the boundary-marker requirements of the law" (174); "No 'works of the law' of any kind whatsoever can possibly justify someone in the presence of God" (183); "Anyone who hopes to find life and blessing from God on the basis of his own observance of the law will experience only futility, frustration, and finally damnation" (201); "Whatever pleasure God takes in the otherwise imperfect works of his children, this pleasure wholly depends upon and is undergirded by his prior pleasure in their persons, which is on account of the righteousness of Christ alone" (264); "The works of believers will not be the reason or basis of God's favourable verdict and acquittal of believers in the final judgment.... The role of good works in the final judgment will be to offer the occasion for God to reward graciously, and not according to merit, those good works of believers that are the fruit of his gracious working in them" (266).

Venema's conclusion is negative. He says about the NPP that its claims are "not sustained" by a reading of Paul's epistles (174); that its conclusions are "unwarranted," "not sustainable," "untenable" (201); "inadequate and ought to be rejected" (223); that the men of the NPP are in "serious error" (228); that their doctrine is "not truly satisfying" (299) and even "vexing" (303). Venema even writes that the "carelessness with which writers of the new perspective speak of a final justification on the basis of works threatens the heart of Paul's gospel" (306).

But I have one major criticism. Like many other books on these kinds of subjects Venema's

book is too charitable toward the theologians of the NPP. You will search in vain for the word "heresy" or "heretic" in this book. The closest Venema comes is this statement: "An unqualified doctrine of a final justification which is suspended upon the works of believers is tantamount to 'another gospel' and merits Paul's apostolic 'anathema' of Galatians 1:8-9" (306).

Instead of clearly identifying *that* false gospel as the "gospel" of the NPP, Venema pulls back. Is the NPP another gospel or is it not? The reader must be told clearly and unmistakably. But here is Venema's conclusion: "The older Reformation perspective on the apostle Paul captures the heart of the gospel in a way that the new perspective does not. Our assessment of the new perspective demonstrates that it is neither as new as its proponents aver, nor as capable of providing a more satisfying interpretation of Paul as they promise" (306). Is it less satisfying, or is it a damnable false gospel?

Finally, why does the conclusion begin with the *commendable features* of the NPP? And they are a stretch! How a man like Venema can commend rank liberals for seeking to "honour the authority of Scripture" is beyond me! (296). After all, the NPP is predicated on the notion that there is a "theology of Paul," and a "theology of John," etc., something distasteful to one who confesses that the Holy Spirit is the author of the whole Bible (which, of course, Venema believes). Besides all this, did Paul evaluate the Judaizers by pointing out the commendable features of *their* error? Venema's misplaced charity is all too common today. An error such as the NPP *must* be called heresy, and a man like N.T. Wright—who is popular in evangelical and Reformed circles; witness his reception at places like Calvin College!— *must* be called a heretic. Only then do we warn our people against false teachers. We must not do so out of personal rancour for Wright or his colleagues in the NPP—they may very well have a pleasing personality; many heretics "outsmile" the orthodox—but out of love for the truth and for the sheep of Christ who are easy prey for wolves like Wright and the men of the NPP.

Venema's failure urgently to sound the trumpet is profoundly disappointing. ●

Our Only Comfort:
Celebrating the 450th Anniversary of the Heidelberg Catechism

Thursday Evening, October 17, 2013

7:00 P.M. ..... Greeting and Introduction

7:15 P.M. ..... Speech #1

The History and Purpose of the Heidelberg Catechism

Dr. Jürgen-Burkhard Klautke

8:15 P.M. ..... Speech #2

The Heidelberg Catechism's Theme of Comfort

Prof. Ronald Cammenga

Friday Evening, October 18, 2013

7:00 P.M. ..... Speech #3

Systematic Preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism

Prof. Barrett Gritters

8:00 P.M. ..... Speech #4

The Heidelberg Catechism's View of the Christian Life as Gratitude

Rev. Carl Haak

Saturday Morning, October 19, 2013

9:00 A.M. ..... Speech #5

The Irenic/Polemical Nature of the Heidelberg Catechism

Rev. Angus Stewart

10:30 A.M. ..... Speech #6

The Heidelberg Catechism's Teaching Concerning God's Covenant

Prof. Russell Dykstra

Venue:
Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church
5101 Beechtree St.,
Hudsonville, Michigan

Sponsored by:
Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary

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