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# Preface

There once was a time when the doctrine of the covenant was a hot topic for discussion; a time, before, during and after 1944, when Reformed people were far more conversant about covenant theology than they often are today. In those days, what you believed about the covenant was a matter of the greatest importance. Believe one way and you could comfortably remain in the church of your youth. Believe another way and you could expect to be rudely shown the door. Our forefathers took their covenant theology very seriously. With the heat of those controversies so far in the past, it might be easy to forget the vital importance of understanding, believing, and living what Scripture teaches about these things. This little book is partly an effort to remind Reformed believers of this important doctrine.

It is also partly an effort to state clearly how our Reformed churches differ from much of the “New Calvinism” or “Young, Restless, and Reformed” movement. In fact, this material is a light re-working of a series of catechetical sermons delivered for the Providence Canadian Reformed Church of Hamilton in early 2014. Parishioners were asking about the differences between us and some of the “New Calvinist” churches in our area. The consistory asked me to address this in a systematic (but easily understandable) way from the pulpit.

While we may agree broadly with the “New Calvinists” about the doctrines of grace, we part ways with many of them when it comes to covenant theology. If covenant theology is essential to being Reformed (and I believe it is), it becomes rather difficult to maintain that many “New Calvinist” churches are Reformed in any meaningful way beyond the doctrines of grace. Therefore, when a Christian born and raised in a Reformed church withdraws from

that church to join a “New Calvinist” group, it is an impoverishment, not an improvement.

Another purpose behind this booklet is an effort to subvert the false teaching known as Federal Vision. For some years now, Reformed and Presbyterian churches have been troubled by this movement which appears to draw from the theological heritage of the Canadian Reformed Churches, especially in regards to the doctrine of the covenant. This is not the place to outline why this movement should be regarded as deviating from confessionally Reformed orthodoxy – I have done that elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Suffice it to say that I have no sympathies for this movement and, while it is not explicitly mentioned in the following pages, it was certainly in the back of my mind.

Besides those polemical purposes, I pray that readers will come away with a greater appreciation for the fact that the doctrine of the covenant of grace is a great source of gospel encouragement. In this doctrine, we find comfort, hope, and joy in Jesus Christ. In this doctrine, we discover the gracious way of life given by God and the blessed way of life before God. Whether you read this on your own for personal edification or as part of a study group in the communion of saints, my prayer for you is that the covenant of grace will be appreciated and experienced as the blessing it is intended to be.

A final note: I have tried to keep things as simple as possible in the body of the chapters. I have included a short appendix that is more geared towards the theologically inclined. There is also an annotated bibliography for those who might want to do further study in this important subject.

*Wes Bredenhof*  
*November 2014*

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1. See my *Federal Vision: A Canadian Reformed Pastor's Perspective* (Grandville: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2014).

**CHAPTER ONE – Introducing the Big Idea**

**Scripture: Genesis 17:1-14; Hebrews 8:1-7**  
**Confessions: Belgic Confession article 17**

What is the covenant of grace? I once heard it explained like this: “The covenant is where God does his part and we do our part, and then we get saved and get to go to heaven.” Now that explanation came from a Canadian Reformed young person and perhaps we can cut that person some slack because of their youth. However, I wonder how many of us would get it right if we were randomly asked. Would we make it sound like we believe that salvation is partly God’s work and partly ours just because the covenant speaks of God’s promises and our obligations?

What is the covenant of grace? That is an important question because we have attached so much importance to the covenant in our churches. It is an important part of our history. It is not an understatement to say that the Canadian Reformed Churches exist because of the doctrine of the covenant. During the 1930s and 1940s, there were intense debates about this doctrine. When the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the early 1940s decided to bind everyone to the views of Abraham Kuyper on the covenant (and several other doctrinal matters), that led to the Liberation of 1944. When immigrants from the Liberated Reformed Churches came over to Canada beginning in the 1950s, they were compelled to establish the Canadian Reformed Churches. So the covenant is crucially important in our history.

It is also important in the life of our churches. The covenant is behind the way we do certain things. For example, it impacts the

us, but on him. Without Christ the Mediator, there would be no covenant of grace. There would be no relationship of peace with our Creator.

With that in mind, I want to urge you to continue looking to our Mediator in faith. Without him, this relationship would not be established. Without him, this relationship would have no hope of continuing in a healthy way. You need Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace does not replace Jesus Christ, as if you could have the covenant instead of him. Rather, the covenant depends on Christ and here too we desperately need him. We must not look to ourselves in any way, but only to our Saviour, because everything hangs on him.

As we conclude this chapter, let us review what we have learned. The essence of the covenant is a relationship. The origins of the covenant are with God – hence we speak of the covenant of grace. The parties in the covenant are God, believers and their children, with Christ as the Mediator. With the big idea now sketched out, we can proceed to look at the covenant of grace in more detail.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

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1. Why is there a persistent temptation to make the covenant of grace into another form of works-salvation?
2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the covenant of grace?
3. What are some potential dangers associated with speaking of the covenant of grace as a legal agreement or contract?
4. As noted above, the parties in the covenant of grace are God together with believers and their children, with Christ as Mediator. Does the covenant of grace have any significance for the created world around us?
5. How would you evaluate the following statement? “In our churches, we need to speak less about the covenant and more about the gospel.”