

PREACHING AND COVENANT

Dirk Postma



(ENGLISH TRANSLATION ONLY)

PIETER VANDERMEYDEN

Translator-Editor

Preaching and Covenant

By: Dirk Postma

Translator/Editor: Pieter VanderMeyden

©2024 Pieter VanderMeyden (Vineland, ON, Canada)

<http://www.cjbf.co.za/boeke/PredikingenVerbond.pdf>

Afrikaans edition, 1980.

CJBF

Posbus 2004

North Bridge, Potchefstroom

First edition 1980

ISBN 0 86955 017 7

Afrikaans original language edition translated with permission of
Deputies of GKSA: <http://www.cjbf.co.za/boeke/boeke.html>

PREACHING AND COVENANT

Dirk Postma

Terrain Determination

Preaching:

By this we mean the official ministry of Word and Sacrament in the worship services of the congregation of believers.

This also encompasses the work of the pastor in family visitation and the work of the catechist in catechising, in fact wherever the covenant congregation is to be built up in the true faith by means of the ministry of the holy gospel.

Covenant:

This is the faithful relationship in which God has bound Himself to His congregation, His children to Himself: the Father and His "household".

I wish to assert, on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions, that although it is established that the eternal destiny of man - including the covenant children - lies in the eternal counsel of the Electing God, not election, but the covenant must be the **point of departure**, the **seedbed**¹ in which the preaching flows. This does not place election over against covenant! On the contrary, the two are bound together at their very core,

¹ [The **bold** font in the body of the text is original to the author and conveys his own intended emphasis. – [Bracketed] footnotes are added by the translator–editor - pvm.]

as we will try to demonstrate later. We will also point out the place which the election should occupy in the preaching and in the life of a covenant child.

I would further assert that the **particular covenant view** held by the minister of the Word will largely determine the character, appeal and effect of his preaching. I am convinced that a certain covenant view which exists in many reformed circles (past and present) has robbed the proclamation of the Word of much of its power, yes even of its essential power. It is therefore extremely important that, in the light of Scripture and the Confessions, the covenant should take its place in, and behind the preaching in the proper manner.

1. Election and the Preaching ?

We all know the **methodistic-pietistic** view and approach to salvation, a ramification and consequence of Arminianism.²

There is no covenant relationship to speak of in the Scriptural sense, and the relationship between God and those people who need to be converted is very loose. Consequently, in the Christian congregation and in realm of the Christian church, conversion is vigorously urged. The members are seen as detached individuals, actually also separated from God, who then, when they accept "Jesus (seldom Christ!) as their personal Savior" on that day and date, they become "children of God." Salvation is thus made practically dependent on the human will. Here the human responsibility is emphasized **at the expense** of Divine sovereignty.

² [The author uses "Remonstrantism," which refers to the theology movement initiated by the Dutch theologian, Arminius (Jacob Harmesen, 1559-1609) or of his followers; "Arminian" will be used as translation.]

The Reformed have seen the logical alternative to this unscriptural approach as one in which the free will is not the decisive factor, but the electing work of God – **rightly so!** But erroneously election has been regarded in practice as the starting point for everything, and we have taken a predestinationist approach, where now this again amounts to over-emphasising divine sovereignty **at the expense of** human responsibility. This has brought with it that in practice God's predestination is made the basis for every call to faith and repentance. "You cannot be saved if you have not been chosen" becomes the tone of this preaching - although this is not always put in those words! The result has been a resignation and fatalistic view of life in the faith of many non-communicants, and a feeling of uncertainty and doubt on the part of believers and communicants with regard to the compassionate Fatherly love of the faithful Covenant God. Here it is forgotten that election belongs to the 'hidden things', and that it must therefore be handled with the greatest carefulness in preaching, which is actually about the 'revealed things'.

The **truth** here too is not a middle way between the two extremes, but rather lies entirely on another plane: that of the 'revealed things' of God's covenant of grace with His children.

The only sound and sensible point of departure for preaching in the Christian congregation is that of a **Biblical covenantal approach**. **This**, and **not** the predestinationist one, is the logical alternative to the methodistic-Arminian approach. Election is fully recognized as the first cause of faith and conversion in the covenant child, but the 'hidden' election should not try to be encoded in the 'revealed' covenant, as often happens, and which means that afterwards all kinds of scholastic distinctions of 'external' and 'internal' covenant and 'appearance' and 'essence' of the covenant are made. More about this later.

2. Covenant and The Preaching !

2.1 Covenant: Yes or No?

According to Holy Scriptures, the Lord has established His covenant of grace with believers and their children. Those who are baptized must see in the sign and seal of the sacrament the confirmation of their birthright, and the glory of the gospel **promise** as it is due to them, but also the **requirement** of faith and obedience. "All covenants have two parts ..."
(*Form for Baptism*)

The preaching must always take this truth into account. Indeed, preaching must never forget this relationship between the LORD and his covenant children.

What is covenantal preaching?

This is **not**

- preaching about the covenant as such;
- preaching in which the term "covenant" necessarily appears in every sermon;
- preaching which artificially forces everything into a [theological] system of the covenant.

However, it *is* preaching which **always, without exception**, proceeds from the living covenant relationship between God and His covenant people, the church of Jesus Christ. Just as a father in all his dealings with his children in his home can not for one moment forget that they are his children and not orphans or strangers, so also a preacher, regarding the congregation, can not and may not in any sermon forget that he has before him: children of God; obedient children and disobedient children;

Yes, but still always children: **God's household**. With the children of your home, you talk and act differently than with the neighbors' children and the children on the street!

Preaching **in the congregation** as comforting, strengthening, admonishing, teaching always proceeds from this faithful relationship. The covenant determines the manner in which conversion is called for: Not: repent or else you will go to hell, but: repent, for the LORD your Father loves you with an unfathomable love in Christ ...

Covenant: Yes, or No? in the preaching? Fortunately, there are no differences regarding this in Reformed circles. There is an unequivocal **YES!** Perhaps some preachers of the gospel just need to experience it more and embody it in the sermon!

However, the difference of approach comes with the following:

2.2 Covenant: How?

This is where opinions have diverged sharply during the history of the Reformed churches. Regarding the history of the views on the covenant, and the address of the promise of the covenant (only to the elect, those who share in the "internal" covenant, the essence of the covenant, or to all **baptized?**) cannot be fully considered here.

It will suffice us to point out that in the theological circles of the Secession in the Netherlands in 1834 there was no mention of the later distinctions made in connection with the covenant as mentioned above.³ It was

³ [About the Secession history see: Cornelis Pronk, **A Goodly Heritage**: the Secession of 1834 and Its Impact on Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and North America, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2019); It could be argued that the seeds of later distinctions were latent in the discussions

Abraham Kuyper⁴ who, with the Union [1892] of the 'Dolerenden'⁵ and the Christian Reformed Church [CGK] in the 1880's, introduced into the Reformed Church [GKN] the well-known structure of 'essence' and 'appearance' of the covenant and of baptism on the basis of a 'presumed regeneration'. We will get into those peculiarities later.

We must again realize that a simple, clear covenant view, based on the Scriptures, as was also held by Calvin, was to be found very strongly among the early theologians of the Reformed Church in Holland and initially in South Africa as it came over with Postma.⁶ Veenhof in his *Prediking en Uitverkiesing* points fully to the conservative convictions of Helenius de Cock, son of Hendrik de Cock of the "Afscheiding" [Secession, 1834] in Ulrum. Helenius was professor of Dogmatics at Kampen for many

and tensions between Scholte and De Cock in the early synods of 1837 - 1840.]

⁴ [Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), Dutch pastor, theologian, statesman, and journalist. He served as prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905.]

⁵ [Literally: "the Aggrieved Ones"; That is those who in the *Doleantie* (1886) movement followed Kuyper out of the Reformed (state) Church, who in 1892 united with many of the CGKN.]

⁶ [Rev. Dirk Postma (1818-1890) was the first pastor of the Reformed Churches in South Africa ("die Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika") as well as the founder and first professor at the denomination's theological school at Burgersdorp in the Northern Cape, the forerunner of the Theological School and University at Potchefstroom. His biographer, Dr. G.C.P. Van der Vyver has written (1958) the only comprehensive biography of Postma so far (in 2016).]

years and he was succeeded in 1883 by Prof. Dr. H. Bavinck. (1ⁱ. C. Veenhof: *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, Kok, Kampen, 1959, 88 ff.).⁷

Through the later Professors Schilder, Greijdanus, Holwerda and others, there was a return to the old views of Calvin, De Cock, Bavinck, including those of Covenant and Regeneration⁸ and the offer of grace in the promise of the gospel, etc.

It is my belief that this is not some mediocre matter with which we are dealing here, but one of **vital importance** for the preaching and its appeal for faith, the obedience of faith and the assurance of faith of the child of the covenant.

Therefore, we must first go into some aspects of the Covenant:

⁷ [Cf. C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing* (“Preaching and Election”) – kort overzicht vande strijd, gevoerd in de Christelijk Afscheidene Gereformeerde kerk tussen 1850 en 1870, over de plaats van de leer der uitverkiezing in de prediking, (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1959). As the subtitle indicates this is a “short review of the controversy experienced in the Christian Seceded Reformed Church between the years 1850 and 1870, about the place of the teaching of election in preaching.” Veenhof tracks the conflict focused on election, the covenant and the free offer, including the relevant synodical proclamations and the role of the teachings of Prof. Helenius de Cock (1824-1894). **NOTE:**Postma’s endnotes will be included in the text; see them all, Appendix “B”]

⁸ [Possibly the author is referring to these to the topics addressed by Herman Bavinck in the early 1900’s; for example, in *Roeping en Wedergeboorte*. (“*Calling and Regeneration*”) republished in English recently as: Herman Bavinck, ***Saved by Grace*** – *The Holy Spirit’s Work in Calling and Regeneration*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008), with an “Introductory Essay” covering the historical issues by J. Mark Beach and an Appendix: *The Conclusions of Utrecht 1905*.]

2.2.1 What is the Covenant?

Prof. W. Heyns, Professor of Dogmatics at the Theological School,⁹ Grand Rapids, defines it in His "Reformed Doctrine of Faith" as follows: (translated from the Dutch):

"The Covenant of Grace is the special form of the administration of salvation in which the Triune God binds Himself by covenant and oath to the believers and their descendants to be a Father, Savior and Sanctifier to them, and commits them to Himself to be His own and to serve Him, such that they can only be lost through unbelief and disobedience to this Covenant"

(2: W. Heyns: *Geref. Geloofsleer..* 1927. Sneek, pg. 126).¹⁰

This is therefore a faithful agreement into which God enters with the believers and their seed whereby He makes certain faithful promises to them but demands faith and obedience from them. Cf. the Covenant with Abraham, (Gen. 17:2 ff.) and those promises to the believers and their children. (Acts 2:38-39).

Essential to that covenant is the authoritative promise. Heyns states: "The Covenant of Grace is: that promise of salvation in the form of a covenant".¹¹ The Scripture teaches us that every covenant of God with

⁹ [Now Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI).]

¹⁰ [cf. William Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1926), 125. While Postma renders the Dutch edition precisely, the English edition ends as: "...thus ensuring their salvation, unless they break the Covenant by unbelief and disobedience, Gen.17:7; Hebr. 3:18,19."]

¹¹ [cf. Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 125.]

man was nothing else than a promise, given in the strengthened form of a covenant.

The **Covenant of Works** (with Adam) was the **promise** of life in the way of obedience, given in the form of a covenant.

The Covenant of Nature (with Noah) was once again the **promise** that God would not destroy the earth by water again, and that there would be living space on earth, again given in the form of a covenant.

The Covenant of Grace with Abraham is the **promise** of God to be God of Abraham and his descendants, the salvation promise in the form of a covenant. Therefore, we understand that in Gen 17:7 and in Gen 9:11 the promise itself is called the covenant.

In many places the word "promise" is used, where the covenant of grace is meant, e.g. Acts 2:39; 13:32; 26:6 ; Rom 15:8; Gal 3:16 , Gal 3:17, Gal 3:18, Gal 3:21, Gal 3:29. Heb 6:13, Heb 6:15, Heb 6:17; Heb 7:6; Heb 11:9, Heb 11:17. And in Eph. 2:12 the covenant of grace is spoken of as 'the covenants of promise'. The Heidelberg Catechism also equates the covenant of grace with the administration of salvation when it calls the promise of the covenant the 'promise of the gospel' (Question 66).¹²

Much emphasis is placed on this so that we would realize that the essence of the covenant is **the promise**: This is what God **wants** to be for His covenant children. How beautifully the promise is stated in the *Baptismal Form* where we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

¹² [These four paragraphs, including the Scripture references are from Heyns. Cf. Heyns, Manual of Reformed Doctrine, 125-126.]

"Therefore, He **will** provide us with every good thing and avert all evil from us . . ."; ". . . the Holy Spirit assures us that He **will** dwell in us and that He **will** sanctify us to be members of Christ."

Here the promise is primary. Thus, the covenant is monopleuric, one-side in its origin. Out of free grace God comes to us with His promise. The promise includes all the benefits of salvation: all of salvation for time and eternity. In Baptism and [Lord's] Supper this promise is thus signified and sealed to those baptized and to the communicants.

But also essential to the covenant, though secondarily, is the **demand**, namely of faith and repentance. Cf. Gen 15:6 : "And he (Abraham) believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness." Gen 17:9 : "But you must **keep** My covenant . . .". *Baptism Form*: "Every covenant has two sides..." In its progress covenant is dipleuric, two-sided. The promise is always first: to that faith must hold fast.

Faith is simply: to receive the promise; the appropriation of the promise. The promise is addressed to **every** covenant child, but also the **demand** of faith and repentance. This leads to the important question:

2.2.2 With whom is the covenant established?

The question here is: Was the covenant **actually** established just with the elect (Kuyper) because after all it is clear that not all who are baptized (i.e., covenant children) become saved? Should we talk of an "essential" covenant just with the elect, and an "external" covenant with **all** the baptized?

Nowhere does Scripture attempt to reason from the *hidden* predestination in connection with the covenant parties. God's *revealed* way is clear. The covenant was established in the Old Testament with Abraham and his descendants, his natural descendants, also Ishmael. Ishmael also shares in the promise of salvation, though Isaac is a special

child of the promise in that he was born as the fruit of a miracle (and not by fleshly planning as Ishmael was), and that out of him the promised Christ would be born. Scripture nowhere leads us to regard Ishmael, and later also Esau, as partakers merely of an 'external' covenant.

In the New Testament, however, the covenant members are no longer Abraham's natural seed which was broken off by 'unbelief'. (Rom 11:20) But Abraham's spiritual descendants, that is, "they which are of faith", Gal 3:7. But then this is the believers with their natural children, Acts 2:39, for the covenant is continued in the generations. "And I will establish my covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in your generations as an everlasting covenant . . ." ¹³ Gen 17:7. It is therefore entirely in accordance with God's Word when the Heidelberg Catechism in Answer 74 confesses: "since the young children are included in the covenant of God and in His congregation¹⁴ as well as the adults, and to them no less than to the adults through the blood of Christ is promised the remission of sins and the Holy Spirit which worketh faith... "

Thus, the covenant members are the natural children of believing parents, who as the sign of the covenant in the Old Testament received circumcision and in the New Testament received the baptism. **All those** therefore who are responsibly baptized in the church of Christ, according to the requirement of the Word, are true covenant children to whom the promise of salvation by grace is bestowed. Please note: the Baptismal Form calls the baptism administered to **all** children of believing parents

¹³ [As in SA "jou" the KJV "thee" (sing.) is transparent: "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant..." (Gen. 17:7); God addressed Abraham, as believer (singularly) regarding the covenantal inclusion of his seed.]

¹⁴ ["congregation" is a more accurate translation of the Dutch "gemeente" than "church".]

an “undoubted testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God” and this can only be the case as it speaks of the covenant promises which, objectively, are due to all those baptized, and not just to the elect. Similarly, the [Lord’s] Supper Form says: “And that we might **firmly believe** that we belong to this covenant of grace, the Lord Jesus in his last Supper...”.

The heathen who come to repentance, through their profession of faith and subsequent baptism are ingrafted into the covenant. This is, in fact, the way in which the covenant came into being and continued in the New Testament. “For the promise is unto them, and to your children, and to **all that are afar off**, as many as the Lord our God will call unto Himself” Hand. 2:39.¹⁵

Thus, the Bible gives us no right, as Kuyper does, to speak of a **two-fold covenant** (external - with all the baptized; internally - with the elect). If you come up with such a distinction, you must also speak of a **two-fold promise**. Those who hold this view speak on the one hand of a promise as a guaranteed assurance of salvation for the elect, and on the other hand of a promise as a conditional offer of salvation for all. Thereby a **twofold baptism** is taught: a 'complete' baptism with 'complete' promises – only for the elect; and an incomplete baptism with incomplete promises for all.

You see clearly how such a teaching actually makes God untrustworthy and ambiguous in His speaking. In this way one makes God, who speaks **the same words** to all covenant members (the baptized), **yet** for one

¹⁵ [cf. “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call.” (KJV, Acts 2:39)]

covenant member to mean something completely different than for another covenant member.

One may rightly ask: What remains of baptism as a sacrament (seal, guarantee) if you make it so duplicitous? What certainty does my baptism, if it is such a baptism (perhaps a non-full baptism with non-full promise) give me if when in doubt I seek confirmation from the Lord?

Therefore, the minister of the Word proceeds from the **certainty** that **all those** whom he has before him in the gathering of the congregation are true covenant children of God, all of whom are equally entitled to the promise of the gospel.

And here we come to the next important distinction:

2.2.3 The granting of the covenant promise, and the partaking of the promised benefit of salvation¹⁶

On the basis of the foregoing, the question arises: How can the non-elect be given the promise? They will not be saved anyway!

The answer is: **the promise has not yet been fulfilled**. We must distinguish between the genuine grant¹⁷ of the promise, as extended to **all** children of believing parents, and participation in the promised benefits of salvation as such, which the Holy Spirit brings about only in the elect covenant members.

¹⁶ [Here the author discusses the well-known distinctions of “granting” and “partaking” which is expressed in Dutch as “schenking en deelachtigmaking.”]

¹⁷ [SA “waaragtige skenk”; similar connotation as: “well-meant offer.”]

Nor is the promise a prediction! Rev. Venema puts it this way:

In a prediction, the Lord says what will surely happen according to his **unchanging** counsel. A prediction is also always fulfilled unconditionally. But this does not apply to God's covenant promise. God does not predict for us salvation in the covenant... He does not say to us, "You will be saved." But He **promises** us salvation. Inextricably linked to the **promise** is the **demand** for faith and repentance. Without faith and repentance, the promise will not be fulfilled.

Now we must not say: "I have nothing with such a promise, because with that God does not give me the promised salvation." Whoever argues in this way speaks in unbelief and despises God's promise. The promise is not equal to the promised salvation, but God still connected the promised salvation to the promise. God gives us in and with the promise also the promised salvation: Christ and all his saving deeds. He connected the promised salvation to the promise and **indeed through the bond of faith**. Through unbelief we separate what God has joined together, and we separate the promised salvation from the promise. Through unbelief we do not partake of the promised salvation. Through unbelief we lose what God has already granted us in and with the promise. Through unbelief we despise Christ and all his saving benefits which have been granted to us in the promise.

(3. F. F. Venema, *Wat is een christen nodig te geloven*, Gereformeerde Boekery, 'De Lantaarn,' p.92.).

Thus, according to Venema.

So, the promise is not fulfilled automatically. God fulfills his covenant promises in the way of the appropriation by faith of the covenant child. If I offer you R10.00, you don't have it yet. It becomes yours, if you reach out your hand and take it and put it in your pocket!

More about this later, about the place of faith in the fulfillment of the promises, in connection with the Sacraments and the ministry of the Word.

Suffice it to point out, to substantiate what is mentioned above, how beautifully the prayer of thanksgiving at our Lord's Supper Form acknowledges and upholds the above distinction:

". . . We thank Theethat out of unmerited mercy Thou hast bestowed upon us Thine only begotten Son as a Mediator and sacrifice for our sins and as our meat and drink of the eternal life" (the promise). We also thank You for giving us an upright faith "by which we are made partakers of these benefits." (the fulfillment).

2.2.4 Covenant blessing and covenant wrath

In light of the foregoing 2 sections, it should now be very clear what is meant by these terms. We have seen: That the promise is extended to all covenant members – equally. That the demand of faith in the promises and obedience to God's will also applies to all covenant members.

Faith in the promises leads to covenant fulfillment and thus to the richly blessed possession of the promised benefits of salvation. (By the way: this faith is worked by the Holy Spirit in the heart of the covenant children – to which we will come back later).

This is the **covenant blessing**. How beautifully we see this in Abraham: By faith the promised benefits of salvation become a richly blessed possession for him: Gen 15:6 : "And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Compare also Rom 4:18-22 where the same is clearly set forth in connection with Abraham, and Rom 5:1-2 where the blessing is thus described: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we **have** peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; through

Whom also we **have obtained access** by faith into this grace wherein we stand".

On the other hand, unbelief in the promises and disobedience to the demand lead to **covenant wrath** and eternal damnation of the covenant child. Of this the Holy Scripture speaks abundantly. Some examples:

Mat 11:20-24 : The "covenant towns" of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum receive a heavier judgment than the "pagan towns" Tyre and Sidon, for the former have received so much more.

Heb 3:14-19 to Heb 4:3, is a **very clear** statement of the wrath which Israel received because of **unbelief** in the promises, and a strong warning to the partakers of the New Covenant not to go down the same road 'while the promise to enter into His rest still stands'.

Compare further Heb 10:26-31 which ends with the appalling word: "Vengeance belongeth unto Me, I will recompense . . . The Lord shall judge His people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God". Although "covenant" revenge is not spoken of in so many words, it is assumed because the keynote of the letter to the Hebrews is the glory of the New Covenant in which the Old has passed in Christ.¹⁸ Think further of the Old Testament prophets, Amos (Amos 3:1-2); Hosea (11 and 12) and so many others. Deut. 11:26-29 is very clear.

This is a logical question – how can there be any mention of covenant breaking and covenant vengeance among those who speak of the internal-external covenant? (cf. section 2.2.2).

¹⁸ [SA: "die Nuwe Verbond waarin die Oue oorgegaan het in Christus." could also be: "the New Covenant to which the Old transitioned in Christ." -tr.]

After all, how can you break the covenant if you have not really belonged to the covenant, or have just received merely "half" a promise or an "incomplete" baptism? Those who do not **really** belong to the covenant cannot be punished as covenant-breakers!

For further explanation a simple example:

A father with ten children, if they act so disobediently and throw their father's love back in his face, can disinherit and expel them from his home... But this does not make them just 'outward' or 'not-fully' children!

Simply stated: **The obedient covenant children** inherit the blessings. Jacob, though a deceiver, is repentant and wrestles with God for the blessings.¹⁹

The disobedient covenant child experiences the vengeance. Esau, despised his firstborn-birthright and is called a "fornicator" (Heb 12:16). This points to his **unfaithfulness** in the covenant. This could not be said if he did not substantially belong to the covenant!

To summarize: To all those baptized, all the covenant members, the promises are truly and rightly directed: "I grant you eternal life". **To all, equally,** comes the demand: Believe this and be converted to a life of obedience in Christ." Faith leads to covenant blessing. Unbelief leads to covenant vengeance.

2.2.5 Relationship between covenant and election

God is the God who elects, and in His eternal Council the number of His elect is known to Him from eternity. Those whom He ordains to this end

¹⁹ [Cf. the Peniel experience in Genesis 32:24-32.]

shall be saved. (*Canons of Dordt* ch. I, par. 8.) With God the "point of departure" in connection with His work is always His eternal Council.

These are for us the hidden things.

For us humans, it's about the revealed things, and so the starting point can not be election.²⁰

Good! Now then what do we **know**?

We can sum up as follows:

1. All children of believers, the baptized, are truly covenant children.
2. Not all covenant children are elect (because in practice the vengeance of the covenant strikes some because of unbelief).
3. So, there are thus obedient covenant children and disobedient covenant children.
4. The obedient covenant children are those who wholeheartedly appropriate the promise with a true faith.
5. Therefore they become saved, and thus **it is manifest that they are** elect, for only the elect become saved.
6. However, that faith is also a gift of God, so that there is no question of Arminianism (free will of man); yet practically the full **responsibility**²¹ of man is maintained **alongside** of God's sovereignty.

²⁰ [cf. Deut. 29:29.]

²¹ [SA: "verantwoordelijkheid", literally, "answerability"; while "responsibility" is the word often used for this, some suggest that

7. The believing, obedient covenant children are thus manifest to be elect.
8. Thus, for us humans the point of departure is the covenant and the **point of arrival**²² is election.²³

The relationship between Election and Covenant can thus be formulated:

God realizes His eternal election here in time, within the covenant, with the children of the covenant who, through His grace in Christ, heartily believe the promise.

Even shorter: Election and covenant both reach their fulfilment²⁴ in the salvation of those covenant children who believe.

2.2.6 Covenant and assurance of faith²⁵

To come to assurance of faith, the covenant child in their self-examination (self-testing) does not begin with election. For then he would have to look for subjective **marks**²⁶ from which he could deduce whether he truly belongs to God or not! Then your assurance becomes dependent on your feelings and that is very unreliable. A skipper, to remain firm in

“accountability” is better; sharing in guilt for forfeiting the “*ability*,” before God we are yet justly “answerable.”]

²² [SA: “aankomspunt” or “point of destination.”]

²³ [In practical theology this would be a reference to “assurance of election.” Cf. 2 Peter 1:3.]

²⁴ [SA: “voleindiging” “end goal, completion.”]

²⁵ [SA: “geloofsekerheid” lit. “certainty of faith.” There is some potential for ambiguity here; whether it refers to the **certainty** of the believer regarding objective Gospel truth, or the certainty of having a saving faith, thus **assurance** about one’s own salvation.]

²⁶ [SA: “kenmerke”; also “characteristics”]

stormy waters, casts his anchor **not on the lower deck** but outside upon the rocky bottom!

We need **reliable grounds**. And we find them in the covenant and God's promise.

The covenant child therefore never doubtfully asks "Am I a child of God?" in order to come to a positive conclusion on the basis of all kinds of marks. The covenant child states, "I am child of God!" (4. Cf. B. Holwerda: *De dingen die ons van God geschonken zijn*, Vol.3, Sermon about Lord's Day 30, Heidelberg Catechism.) For God has let you be born as His child of believing parents. Self-examination then does include: What kind of child am I? If disobedient, I must repent and be obedient. The one seeking assurance of faith does not ask: Am I in the covenant, but **says**, I am in the covenant! Then he asks: Do I live as befits a covenant child?

After all, I **never ask**, Am I a child of my father and mother? Then, based on all sorts of features and personal feelings, to finally establish that I do belong to them! My being their child is not dependent on how I am feeling as their child! I say: I am my father and mother's child. They brought me into the world.

Then I do ask: What **kind of a child** of my parents am I? And then I must correct the things that are wrong! How much the more then in connection with our covenant relationship to God?

One thing the seeker may always **know**: (Here he never needs to "hope" or "presume"). The promise of eternal life is truly meant for me. I must simply believe. And in the way of that faith the covenant child also ultimately obtains certainty regarding his election.

Here just one **self-evident remark**: The often mentioned "external-internal" covenant administration, of "complete-incomplete" promise, etc. will be an obvious death knell to the assurance of faith. After all, on

what objective solid bottom can I cast my anchor? Now I can only say that I belong to the external covenant... Thank God for the faithfulness and certainty of God's promises.

What an advantage that here this promise of the gospel may be preached, with the commandment of faith and repentance!

It is therefore now time to pay more specific attention, against this whole background, to **the preaching**.

3. THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL AND AGAINST THE ABOVE BACKGROUND

After all, what is preaching other than the official bestowal of this promise to God's Covenant children?

Let us state this clearly:

Covenant is the **basis** of the relationship between God and His children.

Preaching is God's meeting with His children, precisely on that basis.

As we have stated in the beginning, preaching also includes the ministry of the Sacraments because both proclaim the same gospel (cf. Question and Answer 67 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*) and the Sacraments are also used to strengthen faith.

It may seem that we are going to start in reverse order by looking at the Sacraments first, but we do so for two reasons:

- First, the covenant child is first faced with Baptism and then with the preaching of the Word, and this is important in order to see **what** baptism proclaims and dispenses to the unbaptized, because in Reformed circles attitudes vary widely on this subject.

- Secondly, regarding Preaching of the Word, we want to briefly take note of A. Kuyper's interesting viewpoint, which is connected with his sacramental teaching, and which can more easily be understood if we first look at his view of the sacrament.

3.1 What do the sacraments teach and seal?

Let us take note of Kuyper's view, which is still widely followed in Reformed circles.

C. Veenhof in his book *Predik het Woord*²⁷ [*Preach the Word*] analyzes Kuyper's view of baptism, and clearly shows how he sees the ground for infant baptism in a "presumed regeneration".

Kuyper's views on "regeneration" are well known. According to him, regeneration is the implantation of a 'seed of faith', the potentiality of faith or ability of faith in the heart of the child in its earliest moments of existence. This takes place by a direct work of the Holy Spirit. This "seed" can lie dormant for many years, and then, through the proclamation of the Word, germinate to develop as "faith's belief-potential"²⁸ and then later as the activity of faith.

Now Kuyper says: The possibility of such a gracious work of God in the soul of our child must be accepted for all our children. When the parents really live in the covenant, then it is their duty for each of their children which are born to them "in the presumption that the work of God's grace has already taken place in them, to have them baptized in the name of

²⁷ [C. Veenhof, *Predik het Woord - gedachten en beschouwingen van Dr. A. Kuyper over de prediking* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1943), 249.].

²⁸ ["gelooftsgeloofsvermoë" (?) "ability of faith's belief"]

God Triune". (5 A. Kuyper: *E Voto III* pag. 10, 11, 12; C. Veenhof: *Predik het Woord*. Oosterbaan en Le Cointre, Goes, pag 249.)

Elsewhere, Kuyper wrote: "Our idea amounts to this that Holy Baptism presupposes a prior work of God's grace and is thus a seal of what He has already previously done in the soul." (5. A. Kuyper: *E Voto III* pag. 10, 11, 12; C. Veenhof: *Predik het Woord*. Oosterbaan en Le Cointre, Goes, pag 249).

And "the administration itself of Baptism can never rest on anything but the assumption that in the child to be baptized the implanted faith-potential itself is already present in a manner hidden to us". (5. A. Kuyper: *E Voto III*, page 50. Cf. C. Veenhof: *Predik het Woord.*, pag. 249.)²⁹

This assumption of a pre-baptismal work of God's grace **in the heart** of the child to be baptized – of a pre-baptismal, already-present seed of regeneration, potential faith or seed of faith – is here for Kuyper the ground for infant baptism. Although later he wrote "that the basic right to infant baptism can only be derived from the covenant; ... but the deeper, the spiritual ground lies only in the assumed regeneration, in the presupposed regeneration". (6. A. Kuyper: *De Gemeene Gratie*, Vol.2, page 219. Cf. C. Veenhof, op. cit., p. 253.)

Baptism, therefore, seals internal grace which has already been bestowed by a direct, immediate work of the Holy Spirit. Once again regarding the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper, according to Kuyper, seals in the adult the internal grace he has already received. **The sacraments thus seal to the covenant child that he has been regenerated.** But at baptism you can only "presuppose" the regeneration!

²⁹ [Postma references (as #5) page 249 of Veenhof for three citations of Kuyper.]

Thus, now I can state this it this way:

Baptism is a seal; that is to say, **guaranteed certainty**.

Seal of what?

The seal of a presupposition!

How can this be?

What is the meaning of such a sacrament?

Here also arises the **insurmountable problem of *those, who are baptised and attend the Lord's Supper, who are lost***. Because not all baptized children of the covenant become saved. Was their baptism then a mistake? Kuyper acknowledges that this matter belongs to the hidden counsel of God. He further says that only regarding those who possess faith (i.e. as a germ, potential) can we speak of a true baptism, and that the baptized persons in whose heart this faith was not present, only received an **apparent** baptism.³⁰

Over against this, I believe that the mystery or incomprehensibility of the baptized who are lost does not lie in the matter of a true (complete) baptism or pseudo-baptism, but in the matter of **unbelief** in the promises of the covenant. How can a covenant member be lost? Not because he merely received a **pseudo-baptism**, but because he did not properly value his genuine baptism!!

According to Kuyper, what happens to:

³⁰ ["skyndoop" – "a pseudo-baptism."]

- the **certainty** (seal) of the sacrament - (what if, “my baptism was just a pseudo-baptism”) and

- the **responsibility** of the covenant member? (Can one who has merely had a pseudo-baptism be held responsible later because he has not walked in new obedience? (cf. *Baptism Form*: "All covenants have two parts ...").

What is the use of such a sacrament to me that is based on presupposition?

Let us know: Scripture and Confession know of only one ground for the administration of the Sacraments, **namely the Covenant**. The children are baptized "because they are included in the covenant." (*Heidelberg Catechism* Q&A 74). The adults use the Lord's Supper because they belong to the covenant of grace (Lord's Supper Form: "And that we may **firmly believe** that we belong to this Covenant of Grace, the Lord Jesus...").

What do the Sacraments signify and seal?

Not that we are already saved.

Not that we are regenerated.

Not that we have been elected to eternal salvation.

Not that we have received an infused grace.

Thus, not what we are internally before God, but rather **who God is objectively for us**.

The sacraments confirm the truth and faithfulness of God's words to us in the covenant promises. The promises are sealed **and not our faith**. The sealing of the promises, then, actually call for our believing appropriation of them.

To come back to our earlier simple illustration: I have \$10.00 in my pocket that I want to give you. I tell you, "I want to give you the \$10.00 in my pocket." (The promise in the proclamation of the Word). You find this difficult to believe; I take the \$10.00 out of my pocket and **show** it to you and say: **Look** at it; and receive it. (The sacrament as seal of that promise). The sacrament seals **not that you already have it**, but rather that it is **sincerely** granted to you.

This promise comes to us in the Covenant, in the sacrament by way of **an oath**. The objection is sometimes raised: "But if all this is so, is this different than the gospel promise to the Gentiles? To the heathen the offer of grace also comes as a sincere offer?" Heyns put this nicely:

"The heathen to whom the Gospel comes, therein has the offer, the grant of all that the Covenant grants to the Covenant member. But this does not mean that as soon as the Gospel comes to the heathen, he shares in all the benefits in which the Covenant member shares. On the contrary; the Gentile only has the gift in the form of a simple offer, but the Covenant member has the granting in the form of a covenant, of a divine one, sworn to with an oath, and sealed by Baptism as an "undoubtable testimony" to him as a sealed bond,... "that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have taken refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us," (Heb 6:18).... And, which is no less a matter of glorious significance: not the heathen, but the covenant member is made a branch of the true vine."(7. Heyns, op. cit. pag. 137.)³¹

³¹ [Compare with Wm. Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 137-138. (cf. Heyns, Dutch 1916 ed. P.135, (#249))]

We repeat: The sacraments seal the **promise** and not our faith. About this, the Heidelberg Catechism is very clear:

A. 66: "The Sacraments are . . . instituted by God in order that by the use thereof He may the better declare and seal the promise of the gospel ...".

A.69: "So, that Christ ... thereby promised the ..."

Q. 71: "Where has Christ promised us, that He will as certainly wash us by His blood and Spirit, as we are washed with the water of baptism...?" (Note the "will"). (Cf. also A. 75 "and thereby also promised"..).

But now it is left up to the Covenant member and to their responsibility **to believe** the promises. The Sacraments make them easier to believe.

Only if you believe will the promise to you be fulfilled. (cf. what has been said to us in this connection in section 2.2.3). Let there be no ambiguity about this: faith is an absolute condition for salvation. In the covenant, even with the use of sacraments, you are never 'automatically' saved!

If you are lost, the fault lies not with the sacrament or with God, or with the gospel (external, incomplete administration), but with **you** who did not **want** to believe. If you believe, on the other hand, it is not your free will and your merit, but merely God's grace. The Canons of Dordt are very clear about these two truths, namely the human responsibility **and** the Sovereign grace of God. (Cf. ch. 2, par. 5, 6, 7; and Ch. 3 and 4, par. 9 and 10.)

We can also repeat here what was said earlier: God realizes³² His election purpose in the Covenant children who receive the promise (as sealed in the sacraments) by a true faith.

³² ["verwerklik" - "realizes" or "actualizes."]

There is no question of Arminianism here, for faith always remains the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Here we quietly bow before the hidden counsel of God, according to which divine sovereignty and human responsibility are fully upheld alongside of each other.

We will return to the place of faith in relation to the promise, and faith as a condition of salvation in the next paragraph, where we specifically focus on preaching. For both means of grace, the Word and Sacrament, call for faith on the part of the Covenant child.

Let us now look at this in more detail.

3.2 To whom specifically in the congregation does the preaching of the gospel (the promise) direct itself?

3.2.1 Kuyper's View

Here we must again examine Kuyper's view, and we will see that everything is in line with his view of the sacrament.

Does preaching only take into consideration those who are spiritually alive (true believers) or also the [spiritually] dead (hypocrites)?

Here we follow with a short exposition of Kuyper's view in this regard: (8. C. Veenhof, *Predik het Woord*, 275ff.)

Just as with the Sacraments, where in their administration regeneration is presupposed, so also preaching reckons only with the regenerate. There are the 'living' and the 'dead'. The dead are dead and cannot be made alive by any preaching. For the preaching in the congregation occurs on the assumption that the preaching can be **heard**, and of that hearing only the 'living' are capable. The 'dead' do **not hear**.

"But dead must be taken as dead, and not as **apparently** dead, or as **half**-alive, or as having fallen away of their own accord. Dead means: hating

God and man. Dead means 'incapable of any good and inclined to all evil.' Dead means deaf, spiritually deaf, and unable, bereft of all spiritual hearing, or understanding... Only he who has ears to hear, he hears what the Spirit says to the church." (Kuyper, "*De Reformatie*" no 949, March 1, 1896.)

So then, this means that the Ministry of the Word just can not reckon with the "Dead"!

Now we should point out again that Kuyper has his own view of the regeneration from the "state of death." As we saw in the preceding section, the Holy Spirit, according to Kuyper, works regeneration immediately, "Without and prior to the Word" (9. Veenhof, op.cit., p. 279.) in the heart of man, when the germ [seed] of faith-potential, the faith as a 'something' an 'ability' is implanted in the heart of man. (Kuyper: *E Voto III*, p. 410 ff.)

If a preacher now ministers to the congregation of believers, then he has before him those who have received Holy Baptism as children of believers, and therefore should be reckoned as regenerated, until the contrary is evident and it later appears that they only received a pseudo-baptism, and all this time were actually "dead."

But in preaching, according to Kuyper, just as with the sacrament, you proceed from a "presumed regeneration" regarding the hearers. You presume that they are already partakers of grace and of the seed of faith. Now then, according to Kuyper, the administration of the Word in the congregation implies that the Word must call to repentance those of whom the church assumes that the grace of regeneration is apparently already their portion, and that **on that basis** they can and must heed the call to repentance.

There are thus **two kinds** of grace: the first, fundamental grace makes the dead come to life (regeneration, apart from, and prior to the Ministry of the Word) and the second, grace awakens the dormant seed of faith to a conscious living faith.

However, whereas the presumption at baptism may in later life of a person become contradicted and this can show that a baptized person is in fact not 'alive' but dead, therefore the preaching must serve to reveal this, to bring this to light, and thus to preserve the believing character of the church.

Thus, it comes down to this: Preaching must remove the unconvertible (the dead) from the congregation; bring the convertible (those who do have the presumed seed of faith) to repentance, and to lead those already repentant from grace to grace. With these three functions the Ministry of the Word fulfills its task. (Cf. "*De Reformatie*" no 955, April 12, 1896).

For Kuyper therefore there are only two recognizable groups as the object of preaching; namely, the unconverted and the converted (the unconverted which were 'convertible', for these were 'unconverted' in the sense of the ones who already possessed the faith-potential,³³ but it had not come to fruition). The dead (hypocrites) cannot be reckoned with. For them the preaching only had the significance that they will become manifest as dead and will become more hardened. Nothing more.

Thus far Kuyper.

³³ ["geloofsvermoë" (SA), "geloofsvermogen" (D), - "potential-faith"; Kuyper used the Latin: "*fides potentialis*".]

3.2.2 What is the consequence of this teaching in practice?

In my opinion, we can sum it up this way: It causes turmoil and uncertainty in true believers; It brings with it indifference in the unbeliever and the hypocrite - and that, while preaching the gospel was intended to bring about exactly the opposite!

I say this for the following reasons:

Here the hearer of the Word cannot boldly appropriate the promise for himself. Because what if I'm a 'dead man', I don't have the 'seed' of faith? What if I'm **unconvertible**? Therefore, the hearer will first have to determine along the path of subjective self-examination whether or not he detects in himself the signs of life, in order then to conclude whether or not he is one of the elect, regenerated or not. And if so, only then may he have the courage to accept the promise!

What turmoil and uncertainty! And how all peace of mind is made dependent on subjective feelings and signs!

On the other hand, it would happen that the hypocrite, who should be called to repentance, fatalistically and passively discards his responsibility, because – “I did not receive the seed of faith; I was not regenerated by the Spirit...”

In summary: thus, the Ministry of the Word is robbed of its typical covenantal character as promise **and** demand. Its essential assuring **and** the compelling aspects are actually missing.

3.2.3 How should we further assess the view of Kuyper and those who follow him?

Here they operate proceeding from the 'hidden things' which entails that you fall into uncertainties and presuppositions. (Which the Sacrament,

with its sealing character, and similarly the Word with its promise character, does not intend! – They will provide **certainty** and confirmation!)

Kuyper unfairly pits divine sovereignty and human responsibility against each other. In this way, human responsibility does not come across much in practice.

Furthermore: The simple 'promise-and-faith way', as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, is displaced here by all kinds of philosophical, scholastic structures and constructs.

The concepts of 'grace' and 'faith' are seen in reality as **things**, practically **substances**, of which the human soul partakes. – You **receive** grace, you **have** faith. (Rebirth which plants "grace", "faith" in you as a seed, a germ which must later grow outward...) Related to this is that Word and Spirit are separated, and the danger of the mystical becomes real.

3.2.4 What is the language of Scripture and the Confessions, the revealed will of God.

First: Regeneration, Word and Spirit.

Scripture rarely uses the term "Rebirth." We find two examples in John 3:3 and 1 Pet. 1:23. We cannot now go into the details..., – but briefly we can state that in both these places '**being born again**', '**rebirth**', **refers to the total renewal of a sinner's life**.³⁴ Nicodemus's whole pattern of life (Pharisaism) must be radically changed to a life of faith in Jesus Christ - from a life of merit to a life of grace. Only then can he be saved. (John 3:16 and following verses). Peter also points to the new life that arises in the

³⁴ [On Scripture and historical views of regeneration, Cf. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), IV.46-95.]

believer through the proclaimed Word, the "seed of regeneration." Note well: That faith is not the 'seed'; but it is the Word! The beauty of it there: growing up by means of the 'untainted milk of the word'!

None of these places in any way indicate a mystical work of the Spirit that plants a "seed of faith" in a passive person. It is simply the Holy Spirit who, through the proclaimed Word, gives rise to faith and renews life.

Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Ans. 65;

" Then where does such faith come from? – From the Holy Spirit, who works faith in our hearts by the preaching of the holy Gospel..."

Also, *Belgic Confession*, Art. 24:

"We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life and sets him free from the slavery of sin."

Where the *Canons of Dordt* describe rebirth, it again indicates more that **first emergence** of new life in the dead heart, but then also does not view it as an implantation of a seed, or capacity of faith, by the Spirit apart from the Word.

Cf. Chs. 3 & 4 par. 12:

"... And this is not brought about in us by means of external preaching alone . . . But it is an entirely supernatural, very powerful ... operation of God in the heart..."

This is to say: the new life arises as a miracle, and God works in the heart and life of the sinner, not through the preaching alone, but also through the Spirit - Word and Spirit work together. The Spirit uses the Word as an instrument to produce life.

Cf. chap. 3 & 4, par. 17:

"...likewise, the aforementioned supernatural operation of God, by which He regenerates us, in no wise excludes, or subverts the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of the soul".

Whoever separates Word and Spirit puts asunder what God has joined together!

Secondly: "Grace" and "Faith".

Beautiful here - in its context – is Ephesians: 2:8, "For by grace have ye been saved, through faith."

By grace: 'Grace' is not some **thing** that flows into a person at baptism or at Lord's Supper or wherever; but it is always the [benevolent] **disposition** of God. Grace is: the way God is disposed towards man on the basis of reconciling merits in Christ.

Eph. 2:1-10 describes a **process**. The process of bringing dead sinners to life:

1. **"By grace."** God is graciously-disposed.
2. He manifests His grace – **evidenced by** the Mediatorial death of His Son Jesus Christ.
3. He offers us His **gifts** of grace (which amount to LIFE in all its forms and shades, Eph. 2:1, 5, 6.
4. He offers this to us through the **means** of grace: Word (and Sacraments) - vs. 17 (Eph 2:17): "And came to preach the gospel of peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were near..."

5. **"By faith."** This now we receive by faith. Faith' is not a 'seed', a potential, a substance, but an activity, a **knowing** and **trusting** (L.D. 7). Cf. Jesus' response to the disciples' **wrong** prayer for increased faith, Luke 17:5, where He shows that faith is not a substance of which you can have more or less.

Faith is: simply taking God at His Word and letting your course of life be determined accordingly,

Faith, our response to God's action, is the hand whereby we reach out to receive what God gives us in His Word.

6. Then a person is **JUSTIFIED by faith** (cf. Gen. 15:8). That man in Christ is again right with God. Therefore, he fully participates again in life. (Cf. *Heidelberg Catechism* LD. 23, questions 59-61, about justification by faith.)

We add **a few notes** regarding this 'process':

First, at pt. 3 and 4 [above]: the **offering of the gifts**, otherwise stated, "the granting of the promise": This "offer" applies to the whole congregation and not only the elect, or the "living," as Kuyper teaches.

Canons of Dordt ch. 2, par. 5:

"Furthermore, it is the promise of the Gospel that whoever believes in Christ crucified, shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published, to all nations and to all persons without distinction...."

And chap. 3 & 4 par. 8:

"As many as are called by the Gospel are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truthfully declared to us in His Word what is pleasing to Him; namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He also promises in all sincerity to all who come and believe in Him, rest for their souls and eternal life".

If all this is true for covenant children **and** pagans, how much more so for **all** covenant children!

In this connection Veenhof also cites Gispén:

"God does not call us mortals to understand Him in His sovereign will by means of our deductive thinking and reasoning; but He calls us to faith in His Son Jesus Christ, to acceptance of the gospel. Nor does He reveal Himself to us in a doctrine of reprobation; but He has related Himself to us in the Covenant of Grace, in the preaching of reconciliation ... 'Hold yourself to the revealed will of God. God offers His Son Jesus Christ through the Gospel. He invites whosoever will to come. He promises that all who believe in the Son will have eternal life.'" (10. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiesing*, pag 125)³⁵

Second note with pt. 5 and 6: "Justified by faith."

We may even put it this strongly: You become saved (righteous) **on the condition** that you believe. Heidelberg Catechism, ans. 60, where all the benefits in Christ are bestowed upon me, in reality, "inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart."

³⁵ [According to Veenhof, these last three statements Gispén quotes from W. a Brakel, *Redelijke Godsdienst* I-200, cf. W. à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (tran. B. Elshout) (Ligonier, PA: S.D.G., 1992), 246.]

Also, Heidelberg Catechism, Answer 84:

"... that whenever they receive the promise of the Gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ's merits."

Mark 16:16 - "He that believeth (and is baptized) shall be saved." John 3:15, John 3:16, John 3:18: "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already. . ."

Arminian "free will"? Roman Catholic doctrine of meritorious works? Oh, No!

Faith can never be a **meritorious** condition for salvation; but it is a mediate condition. Cf. Heid. Cat. Answer 61:

"Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the **worthiness** of my faith; but ... that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than **by** faith only."

We can say this: In preaching God offers the gifts of grace to His covenant children, **not BECAUSE** they stretch out the hand of faith, **but SO THAT** they will reach out and receive it.

If he then received it, if he believed, the covenant child comes to rest in the electing grace of God. Because even that faith is not of yourself, it is the gift of God. Heid. Cat., ans. 65, Eph. 2:8 ... "and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God".

Unbelief in that promise is one's own fault – Canons of Dordt II, par. 6.
Faith in that promise is sovereign grace – C.D. II, par. 7.

In this way God's sovereignty³⁶ and man's responsibility³⁷ are both maintained, without viewing the two as competing powers or playing off one against the other. **How** God maintains them both is a **mystery** to our human mind – we accept this by faith because that is how God teaches it in His Word.

But likewise: how gloriously clear is the revealed way of God's Word regarding the preaching of the gospel to the covenant congregation: it is the way of the 'promise-faith'!

3.2.5 Why did Kuyper come up with his philosophical, scholastic constructs?

That's a logical question! The answer is equally logical. If, in connection with the preaching of the gospel to the covenant congregation, you make **election** your **point of departure**, you **have to** try to understand and explain the *revealed* things on the basis of the *hidden* things. **That is** when you have no choice but to operate with 'presuppositions.'

With Kuyper this amounts to him wanting to accommodate a hidden election to a revealed covenant.

But [Helenius] De Cock³⁸ had by then already said that if one had any misgivings about the general preaching of the gospel to all, drawn from the doctrine of the election by God the Father ... then this only shows –

³⁶ [SA: “soewereine beskikking” – “Sovereign disposition”.]

³⁷ [SA: “die mens se verantwoordelikheid” – “man’s accountability”]

³⁸ [The following references to “De Cock” refer to Prof. Helenius De Cock (1824-1895), son of Hendrik De Cock. Helenius served at the CGK

"the pride of man by which he seeks to pry into the counsel hidden in God, and this meanwhile leads him to forget that God has not appointed us to comprehend the purposes hidden in Him, but to do His will as revealed to us in the gospel." (11. Veenhof, *op cit.*, p. 123.)³⁹

How beautifully, De Cock continued:

"Preach Christ at all times and with ever greater power. He is the whole Gospel; His person, His glory, His work must be the great, all-embracing theme of our speaking . . . Justification by faith, even much more than it is, must become the daily proclamation of Protestant pulpits, and when, subordinate to this main truth and in connection with it, the other doctrines are proclaimed with fidelity, the congregation and society will not remain unblessed . . . We have no calling to philosophy or metaphysics, but to proclaim the eternal Gospel. (12. Veenhof, *op cit.*, p.125.)⁴⁰

The next words (of De Cock) are very strong:

"In proclaiming the Gospel to sinners... we are to do ***as if election and reprobation did not exist.***"⁴¹

This is to say: when preaching we need not philosophize for a moment whether the persons to whom the preaching is directed are according to

Theological College, Kampen, from 1854-1882, after which time Herman Bavinck was appointed to teach Dogmatics at the Kampen seminary.]

³⁹ [Veenhof here quotes: Helenius De Cock, *Het Geoloof en Gave Gods, of Wedderlegging...* (Groningen, 1867), 29-30.]

⁴⁰ [Veenhof quotes Helenius De Cock as explicitly citing C.H. Spurgeon here. C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiesing*, 126-127; cf. Endnote #128).]

⁴¹ [This is cited by Veenhof as a statement with emphasis by Helenius De Cock. Cf. Veenhof, *op. cit.*, 124.]

God's decree elect or reprobate.⁴² The promise must be delivered to all as a sincere offer of grace.

But now De Cock also points out that, although the gospel must be preached to sinners as if neither election nor reprobation existed, this does not take away from the fact that the doctrine of election still has an important function in connection with preaching. The doctrine of election is for us a solid ground of certainty and consolation in relation to preaching. For the doctrine of election gives us the certain knowledge that our labor in the Lord will not be in vain; that there will always be those who believe since they were chosen by God in Christ from before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before Him in love.⁴³

We started this section with the question: does preaching reckon only with the living or also with the dead?

We trust that it is perfectly clear from Scripture and Confession that the preacher facing a Covenant congregation does not need to philosophically "presume" about the hearers that they already have received the "seed of faith" and an immediate regeneration, and that the promise can

⁴² [This explanatory statement by Veenhof himself, (*P&U*, 1959ed, 124), is in line with that which Veenhof later cites in his endnote (#125) in which, in regarding the command to preach to all, Bavinck writes: "In that connection, we have nothing to do with the decree of election and reprobation. The gospel is preached to humans not as elect or reprobate but as sinners, all of whom need redemption. Administered by people who do not know the hidden counsel of God, the gospel can only be universal in its offer." Bavinck, IV., 36 (#434).]

⁴³ [cf. Veenhof, op. cit.,124.]

therefore only be appropriated by those who know they are elect No, he preaches the gospel, the simple promise and demand to all covenant children, and he **knows** firmly and certainly that they are all covenant children, and he likewise **knows** firmly and certainly that the Electing God will work faith in the promise in the hearts of the children whom He has ordained to eternal life. He must simply bring the Word as the 'seed of regeneration' in the firm knowledge that the Holy Spirit is there to do as it pleases God.

Once you have truly understood all this, you no longer marvel at the fact that e.g. the Heidelberg Catechism almost never speaks of election -- and in that of Calvin not at all.⁴⁴ For if you speak thus of God's grace, of Jesus Christ, about Word and Sacrament, about sin, about justification by faith alone, as it is done in these catechisms, then you glorify and praise the electing God, then you *live* out of God's electing purpose in its full breadth and depth, and that in the only good and right way – even if you do not mention it in so many words! (**13**. Veenhof, op. cit. pg. 130.)

3.3 'Discriminating' Preaching – the Keys of the Kingdom

We still have to consider one important matter: the so-called "judgment" and "grace" in the preaching – the preaching as "two-edged sword" that must make a distinction, so that " he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still..." (Rev. 22:11) etc. What is the correct Scriptural covenantal approach here?

⁴⁴ [Cf. "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in John Calvin, *Selected Works*, ed. H. Beveridge, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 33-94.]

According to Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the preaching should do two things: comfort the believers and condemn the unbelievers.

So then this is about the so-called "discriminating" sermon. Some understand this to mean the following: The preacher must take into account that among the congregation there may be hypocrites. He first divides the congregation into two parts: the believers and the hypocrites. The latter should be unsettled by the preaching, lest, with an imagined heaven, they perish. They may not appropriate the promise. Therefore, the preacher must actually repeatedly ask or suggest the question: "Do you share in these promises?"

Practically, the application always boils down to this: What is written here in the text – the promise – is indeed true; But is it true for you too? "It is true," with that, the preacher reckons, the believers are then comforted. "Is that true for you too?" With that, the preacher reckons, the hypocrites were then admonished and discovered to themselves.

The reality is, however, that through such an approach the exact opposite happens. You make believers restless and put hypocrites to sleep. Because everything is left up in the air.⁴⁵ You give the promise with one hand but take it back again with the other hand. The believer is caused to doubt, and the hypocrite is not troubled at all. Because it is suggested to him that the church consists partly of people who have no part in the promise, to whom the promise is not extended, and who therefore bear no great responsibility for what they do with the promise!

⁴⁵ [SA: "op losse skroewe geplaas." The Dutch expression "op losse schroeven stellen" lit. "affix with loose screws," has the connotation of (needlessly or) implicitly leaving the thing questionable; or making it dubious. Hence, choosing the colloquial: "it is left up in the air."]

The big mistake is: Here the preacher no longer sees the congregation as church of Jesus Christ, and he does not take seriously the fact that the promise is extended to **everyone**, and that therefore **everyone's** responsibility is great, because the demand of faith and repentance also comes equally to **everyone**. Thus, he deprives the promise of its substance, and the warning of its cutting sharpness.

'Discriminating' preaching is needed. But then not in the above manner, according to which toward some more grace is preached and toward others more judgment; nor in such a way that sometimes grace and sometimes judgment are preached in order to maintain "a good balance" in the preaching. No, in this way the preaching becomes dualistic, as it were.

The truth is: God sends His servants with the same message to **everyone**. It is one word on the basis of the covenant that comes to **all**.

Is discriminating preaching then even possible? Yes, for in all covenants are two parts: **promise** and **demand**, and they are inextricably linked to each other. The point is this: **The promise immediately becomes a threat to those who don't believe**. Not 50% grace sermons and 50% judgment sermons, but 100% grace sermons that become 100% condemnation for those who do not believe!

Not a separate message of grace for those who believe and a separate message of judgment for those who do not believe, but the same message for all. Christ speaks the promises to all, also Judas - "*Your names are written... .*" But he also admonishes everyone, warning them: "*watch out for the leaven of the Pharisees.*" Hypocrites also need to hear the promise. And believers must also hear the warning.

"Discriminating" preaching, preaching as dealing with the keys of the heavenly Kingdom actually boils down to this: Not separate messages for

separate groups, **but separate effects of the same message**. Beautiful here is Jesus' answer to John the Baptist, Matt. 11, when He points to His word of grace and works of grace to the people and then says, "*And blessed is everyone who is not offended in Me*". There you have it! The irritation of grace! For grace softens hard hearts **and** hardens and angers haughty hearts that do **not want** to live by grace! And what a **judgment** that grace becomes! (Cf. the same Mat 11:20-24). Thus, the **promise** of the gospel is a two-edged sword, "*a savor of life unto life **and** a savor of death unto death.*"

With the covenant as a basis and point of departure, the preaching becomes the powerful weapon in the Hand of God the Holy Spirit to miraculously bring dead sinners back to life, but also to make those who in unbelief reject the promise experience the vengeance of the covenant unto eternal death.⁴⁶

"The Word of God is a living, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a judge of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Heb 4:12).

4. Conclusion: Biblical Covenant Preaching -- its Call; its Effect

Preaching is a weighty work. It is the meeting of the Covenant God with His children. If we now take into consideration all that has been said, what would we, in summary, suggest as the essential elements of preaching to the Covenant congregation?

⁴⁶ [The latter being most solemnly described in Heb.10:30, and by the phrase "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16).]

I want to mention FOUR things:

The member who listens to the ministry of the Word must be able to find the following clearly in every sermon:

The grace of God in Jesus Christ, as the **COVENANT PROMISE**. (The gospel, the message of deliverance from misery, the proclamation of God's ways). The member must know unequivocally: Here again today I find the way to redemption and re-creation; and need not go looking for it; I need not be worthy of the promise. God grants it to me unconditionally.

On that basis, the call to faith and obedience as **COVENANT CLAIM**. Under the preaching the member must know unequivocally: I must do something with this word of promise; it's not just given for my information; I must each time again appropriate Christ and His benefits with a true faith and turn to Him daily.

The resulting 'justification by faith' as **COVENANT BLESSING**. As a member, I should be able to gratefully say "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand..." (Romans 5:1-2.).

The possibility of the judgment of God becoming a reality if I don't believe, as **COVENANT WRATH**. As a hearer, I must clearly realize that if I carelessly and willfully despise the gracious love of God and do not want to believe the promise, I am far more worthy of condemnation than the non-covenant child, the gentile. (Mat 11:20-24.)

If in any sermon, these 4 elements: Covenant-promise, -demand, -benefits and -wrath, are not included in one form or another, it is no longer a sermon for the Christian congregation, for then it is not exercising the keys of Kingdom of Heaven.

On the one hand, by **pure covenant preaching** the **obedient covenant children**, who truly believe the promise, will be moved with humility and deep gratitude, knowing that that faith is not of themselves, but is the gracious gift of the sovereign God. Thus, the covenant child who realized his responsibility to believe comes to rest and security in the electing grace of God.

On the other hand, the **disobedient covenant child** will need to know clearly from the preaching that his unbelief and unrepentance are not the fault of God who had already rejected him, but **his own guilt** and responsibility. Herein, of course, lies for a **thinking** believer an incomprehensible mystery, but for the **believing** thinker a truth which he simply accepts, and which he does not worry about further, because he knows that in his practical life of faith he is dealing with the **revealed will** of God.

And now, finally, it only remains for us to give a summary compilation of the impact which this particular Covenant point of departure⁴⁷ has for the preaching, and especially the benefit of this preaching for and in the covenant church:

4.1 IN THIS PREACHING, THE ENTIRE CONGREGATION, HEAD FOR HEAD, IS SEEN AND ACCEPTED AS COVENANT CHILDREN. THIS PREACHING IS THEREFORE NOT A VAGUE GENERAL CALL TO VIRTUE AND CONVERSION TO SONSHIP BUT IS PRECISELY THE REAL-LIFE MEETING BETWEEN THE FATHER AND HIS CHILDREN.

⁴⁷ [lit. for “verbondsuitgangspunt” (SA) or “covenantal principle” or “covenantal presupposition”, the literal better serves the context of practical Biblical theology.]

It therefore brings a special bond between God and the whole congregation. This preaching has a deeper and more intimate tone, for the love of God is at the forefront and determines the whole approach.

4.2. THE PREACHING PROCLAIMS AND TESTIFIES TO ALL, HEAD FOR HEAD, THE SAME PROMISES OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE, AS TRUE AND SINCERE.

THE PREACHING REQUIRES OF ALL, HEAD FOR HEAD, THE SAME FAITH IN THE PROMISES OF THE COVENANT, AND CHILD-LIKE OBEDIENCE.

THEREFORE, IT PARTICULARLY EMPHASIZES THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE COVENANT CHILD.

Therefore, it means that the church will not be divided into two groups in advance with a separate "message" to each one. For **all**, it is true that the promised benefits of salvation become their part in the way of appropriation by faith, and that in this way by grace they partake of the **covenant blessing**. For **all**, the warning applies that the covenant **wrath** will come upon them if they reject the promised benefits of salvation in unbelief.

4.3 THIS PREACHING FULLY RECOGNIZES DIVINE ELECTION IN CHRIST AS THE FIRST CAUSE OF THE COVENANT CHILD'S BELIEVING APPROPRIATION OF THE PROMISES, AND WITH IT THE OBEDIENT REPENTANCE ACCORDING TO THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE COVENANT. HOWEVER, IT DOES NOT PROCLAIM TO ANYONE THAT HE IS NOT A CHOSEN ONE, FOR GOD ALONE KNOWS THE NUMBER OF THE ELECT, ALTHOUGH IN DUE TIME HE HIMSELF ASSURES EVERY CHOSEN ONE OF THEIR ELECTION.

Therefore, this preaching does not want to know anything about a 'free will' or about any merit in man before God (as, in fact, is sometimes said of it!)

4.4 THIS PREACHING DOES NOT PREACH, AND IS NOT BASED ON PRESUMPTIONS, BUT FIRM CERTAINTIES. FOR THIS MAKES ITS POINT OF DEPARTURE NOT A HIDDEN PREDESTINATION, BUT THE REVEALED COVENANT.

Thus, it knows no such thing as a presupposed regeneration, but proclaims the **certainty** of Who God is to the covenant children: The Faithful One in His word of promise. It does not proclaim who the children are before God in the sense of their "internal" participation in salvation. It emphasizes that the responsible **faith-response** of [covenant] children to the preached covenant promise bestows participation in salvation.

This preaching, therefore, helps covenant children toward a certain and firm realization of their state before God and contributes substantially toward a **conscious assurance of faith**.

4.5 THIS PREACHING, PRECISELY BECAUSE THE LOVE OF GOD IS PROMINENT (cf. 4.1), THEREFORE DOES NOT BECOME A "GENTLE-JESUS SENTIMENTALITY"; BUT IT PROCLAIMS THE JUDGMENT OF GOD EVEN MORE SHARPLY.

For: Despising gracious love carelessly and willfully is immensely more worthy of judgment than merely neglecting His commandments. Compare the well-known "Woe! Woe!" of Christ in the "grace-filled" Matt. 11 passage, where He **condemns** the 'covenant cities', not because they did not do their **duties**, but because the 'mighty deeds' left them unmoved.

4.6 THIS PREACHING WORKS AGAINST ALL KINDS OF RELIGIOUS FORMALISM:

For:

- For the covenant child this always presents first the **love** of the Father and **not** the retribution of God as Ruler or Tyrant, and this calls for the love of the child toward the Father (the root of [godly] religion⁴⁸) and not the formal duties of the slave for his master. (Cf. Mat 11:25-30: The well-known call of the Saviour: "*Come unto Me....*" and Hos 6:6 : "*for I delight in love and not in sacrifice*".)⁴⁹

-- It always makes a serious appeal to the responsibility of the covenant child to believe and repent, not on the basis of a **fear of hell**, **but** on the basis of a **consideration** of God's covenant grace toward him.

- This poses the core question of life to the covenant child: "What do you do, **not** primarily with the laws and ordinances of the Lord, **but** with His **gifts of grace**?"

-- It causes the obedient law-observance of the covenant child to grow out of a heart that has been renewed by the grace of God into a "delight and love to live according to the will of God in all good works," (H.C. A. 90). Cf. Galatians 2:20 : "I have been crucified with Christ, and **I** no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And *the life* I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me".

-- This shows **the essence of sin** to be, namely, not mere lawbreaking or disobedience (which are its symptoms!) but as **unbelief**, which comes out in the fact that man does not want to **receive** what God graciously **gives** him, (rather than that man does not want **to do** what God **asks** of him - this comes later, secondarily) and not wanting **to be** what his father **intended** him to be.

⁴⁸ ["Godsdiens" – "religion; worship; divine service." Cf. Rom.12:1-2.]

⁴⁹ ["For I desire mercy and not sacrifice...." (Hosea 6:6).]

-- This manifests unbelief regarding the promises, and disobedience regarding the demand, as the **willful** refusal and **personal fault** of the unbeliever, and thus confronts the hypocrite fully with his own responsibility.

-- This makes of the covenant congregation, rather than a LIVELY community, a LIVING congregation of Jesus Christ the Lord!⁵⁰

⁵⁰ [SA “Dit maak van die verbondsgemeente, eerder as 'n MEELEWENDE gemeente, 'n LEWENDE gemeente van Jesus Christus die Here!” Some of the intended final impact of this is unfortunately “lost in translation.”]

 ENDNOTES

AUTHOR'S ENDNOTES

[Below is the list of the author's endnotes; but these endnotes are now incorporated into the body of the text; as (# using the author's numbering.)

1. Compare: C. Veenhof: "*Prediking en Uitverkiezing*" [*Preaching and Election*] Kok, Kampen, 1959, pg. 88 ff.
2. W. Heyns: *W. Heyns: Geref. Geloofsleer*. 1927. Sneek, pg. 126. [cf. *William Heyns, Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1926), 125.
3. F.F. Venema: Wat is een Christen nodig te geloven. Gereformeerde Boekerij, 'De Lantaarn'. pag 92. [*What is a Christian needing to believe*].
4. Cf. B. Holwerda: *De dingen die ons van God gesckonken zijn*, Volume 111, sermon oor Sondag 30, Heidelberg Kategismus. [Postma here makes reference to a sermon by Holwerda on Lord's Day 30, *Heidelberg Catechism* entitled "*The Things which God has Granted to Us*" -.]
5. C. Veenhof: *Predik het Woord* [*Preach the Word*]. Oosterbaan en Le Cointre, Goes, pag 249.
6. C. Veenhof, a.w. pg. 253.
7. Heyns, a.w. pg. 137.
8. Veenhof, a.w. pg. 275 vv.
9. Veenhof, a.w. pg. 279.

10. Veenhof, Prediking en Uitverkiezing [Preaching and Election], pg. 125.
11. Veenhof, a.w. pg. 123.
12. Veenhof, a.w. pg. 125.
13. Veenhof, a.w. pg. 130.