

1. COVENANT AND HISTORY

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It's a great pleasure to be with you here this morning. I'm a little taller than Norman Shepherd. I also speak a little faster than he does. So you'll notice a few differences in the conference schedule.

One of the things that you may have noticed is that, if you thought about it, a topic called covenant and history really touches on everything. Quite literally, it touches on everything from before the creation to after the consummation. And when I say that, you're probably starting to look at your watch and you're thinking to yourself, "I thought this was only a fifty minute lecture."

It's going to be impossible to cover everything, obviously, let alone to do justice to everything. As I prepared this lecture, I was painfully aware that there are all kinds of gaps. There are many things that I say that might need to be qualified further. As I discuss, for instance, the newness of the New Covenant or the oldness of the Old Covenant, you might say, "Well, what about *that* verse where Paul says such and such." I'm aware that there are many things that could be said. But in fifty minutes, it's impossible to cover everything.

I'd like to start with a bit of a discussion about what covenant is. You have Steve Schlissel's definition from yesterday, and that's helpful. My definition will be somewhat different, but complementary. First of all, let me say this, covenant isn't a *thing*. Covenant isn't a thing that you can analyze. Covenant is a *relationship*. It is a personal, ordered, and formally binding relationship.¹

It's *personal*. It's not just a legal relationship. Sometimes people present the covenant as if it were something somewhat cold and impersonal, like a business contract. But when the Bible talks about covenant, it talks about it in terms of a marriage, for instance. You may choose to view your marriage as a legal contract, but your wife wouldn't appreciate that. I hope your marriage is more than just a legal contract.

The covenant is *ordered*, which means there are structures to it. There are mutual duties, obligations, commitments, and hierarchies.

And the covenant is also *objective*, like your marriage. It's there whether the members of the covenant feel it's there, whether they believe it's there, whether they even believe in the covenant or not. If you were to stop believing that you were married, you would still be married. If you stopped feeling married, you would still be married. Your marriage exists.

¹I am grateful to Jeff Meyers for clarifying my thinking with regard to the elements of this definition. For much of what follows, I am indebted to James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999) and "The Gospel: Glorification by Faith," *Biblical Horizons* 152 (Apr. 2002), which I had read in a draft version shortly before giving my lectures in Monroe in January 2002.

When we talk about covenant, we tend to jump immediately to God's relationship to man. And that's how we find the term used in Scripture. The first use of the term *covenant* is in connection with Noah in Genesis 9:9.

But Jesus teaches us that the relationship between the persons of the Trinity is also covenantal.² I'm not speaking here of what is sometimes referred to in theology as the *pactum salutis*, the covenant of redemption where God the Father covenanted with God the Son to send Him into the world to die for sinners. I'm saying that all the relationships between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can best be described as covenantal.

We see this in John 17. When Jesus prays to the Father in John 17, He prays that we might be one. Several times in John 17 He talks about oneness. He prays that we might be one as He and the Father are one. Elsewhere in John, Jesus says things such as "I and the Father are one."

I realize that sometimes those verses are used to show that there is only one God, that the Father and the Son are both that one God. But that isn't the kind of oneness that Jesus is speaking about when He says, "I and the Father are one." He's not speaking about a oneness of essence, oneness of being. He is speaking about a covenantal unity. We know that because He prays that we, as believers, we as a church, might be one as He and the Father are one. He's not praying that all of us, as His people, might somehow become one in being, one in essence. But He is praying that we might be one, that we might be covenantally united to one another, as He and the Father are in covenant relationship with each other.

And we find that idea of covenantal unity between Father and Son all the way through John's Gospel. It's one of the major themes of John's Gospel. John begins, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was *with* God and the Word was God." The Word is *with* God. He is already there present with God in the beginning.

As John goes on in his prologue, he says that "the Son was in the bosom of the Father." Those are terms of relationship. Again and again in John, we find Father and Son in a relationship. Even those names, *Father* and *Son*, imply relationship. They imply a covenantal union, family life.

That term "the Word" that John uses also has something to do with covenant. The Word there is God's own communication. The idea that John is painting for us over and over again in his Gospel, is that in eternity — even apart from God's creation of heaven and earth, even apart from His creation of us — covenant already existed. There was a covenant. The Father has had fellowship, communication, union, communion, covenant life with the Son and the Spirit.

We should never think of God as being cold, distant, lonely, alone. That's the view, by the way, that is taught by Islam. When we start talking about covenant and Trinity, we're discovering something that is uniquely Christian, something that we need to understand, especially with regard to our evangelism of people who are enslaved to Islam.

²See Ralph Allan Smith, *Trinity and Covenant*, ch. 1 (<http://www.berith.org/essays/tcv/tcv02.html>) and "Trinity in Covenant," *Christendom Essays*, ed. James B. Jordan (Niceville: Transfiguration, 1997), pp. 70-85. A revised form of the latter essay is available at <http://www.berith.org/essays/j17/>.

In Islam you have one God, who for all eternity has been alone. Love is not essential to his being. Love is not essential to his nature. He hasn't loved, he doesn't love, for all eternity. If love is essential to his nature, then he depends upon creatures for love and he isn't much of a god at all. But if he doesn't depend on his creatures for love, then love isn't essential to who he is. He just lonely and alone. He doesn't need love. Covenant, communication, union and communion — those things don't matter to the god of Islam.

There are social implications to this view of God. When you yourself love, according to Islam, that doesn't reflect anything about God, about God's character. Your own emotions, your own covenant commitments — those don't reflect anything in God. Submission to God is what's required.

It's not too much of a stretch to discover that that view of God leads to a certain view of your wife. There's a strict hierarchy. Those under you must submit. But there's no love, no fellowship, no idea of husband and wife in covenant union. Those things flow out of the denial of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Conversely our own marriages ought to be affected by the doctrine of the Trinity. We always become like the God we worship. And since our God is in constant fellowship, constant love, union and communion, the more we grow to be like our God, the more loving we become, the warmer we become, the more we work on developing that union and communion and fellowship in our marriages, in our churches, in all of life.

The covenant, then, starts with the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You can define the covenant this way, then: *the covenant is a personal, ordered bond between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. That's the heart of the covenant. God has always had this covenantal relationship.

But then — and this ought to be a great surprise to us every time we meditate on it — out of overflow of sheer goodness, God also created a world He didn't need. He created a world to be in fellowship — to be in covenant — with Himself. Creation itself is covenantal. God creates not by a wave of His hand, not by thinking, but by *speaking*, by commanding. Many times in the Psalms we read, "He commanded and it stood fast."

That implies *hierarchy*, for one thing. God commands, "Let there be light" and there is light. Everything obeys His command. Creation is God's obedient kingdom.

God doesn't create impersonally. He creates *personally*. He doesn't create from a distance. His Spirit is present hovering like a bird over the waters, like a bird over her young.

From the very beginning, from those first words of creation, God establishes a relationship with the universe. He also establishes a special relationship with man, a covenant with man.

Quite often in our theology, we speak of that first covenant as a "covenant of works." I'd like to spend a little bit of time examining that term. There may be a sense in which it is

appropriate to refer to it as a “covenant of works.” But quite often, people take that phrase — which is found, for instance, in the Westminster Confession of Faith — and they interpret it to mean that Adam in the garden was required to earn something from God, that by his obedience Adam would somehow *merit* eternal life and glorification.

As we read Genesis 1, however, there’s no hint in the passage that the Lord requires Adam to *earn* or to *merit* anything. What we discover is that everything that Adam has is sheer gift, sheer grace. The Heidelberg Catechism, as it summarizes what Scripture teaches about Adam being created in the image of God, says that Adam was created in righteousness and holiness and that he was created to live with God in eternal blessedness.

It’s not that Adam had to *earn* something to live with God in eternal blessedness. He didn’t have to earn righteousness. He was created in righteousness. He was created holy. That is, he had access to God, which is the essence of holiness. And already then you could say he had the beginnings of eternal life.

He was created as a son of God, Luke tells us in Luke 3. From the very beginning of Adam’s life, he was already experiencing union and communion with God. He was born, as it were, into a relationship with God. And God placed him in a good world. We’re told that there was gold in that world (Gen. 1:12), for instance. Those descriptions emphasize the goodness of the world in which God placed Adam. God gave him good gifts. He gave him a wife, plants, work. And He blessed him. And none of that Adam earned.

God also gave him unlimited access to the tree of life. It’s not as if Adam was forbidden to eat from *two* trees, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil *and* the Tree of Life. As far as we know, Adam did eat from the Tree of Life as long as he was in the garden.³ He could have eaten from that tree every day. You could say that that tree was a sacrament. By eating of that Tree of Life, he would be growing in maturity. He would be growing and developing in his relationship with God and doing his work under God’s blessing.

Adam’s work involves three areas: the Garden, the Land, and the World. We’ll find those three areas cropping up again and again as we read through the rest of Scripture: Garden, Land (of Eden), and World.

Adam’s covenant of God did involve commandments. In particular, it involved the commandment that he shouldn’t eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And there were sanctions. But again, it was not if, by not eating, Adam could somehow earn a standing with God or earn anything from God. But by eating Adam could lose everything. He could forfeit everything. He couldn’t earn by not eating, but he could lose by eating.

Again, when we think about covenant, we shouldn’t think of it simply as a contract, as if God spelled out a number of things: “Do this and you get that; do that and you get this.” This is

³Since giving this lecture, I have come to think that Adam likely did not eat from the Tree of Life before he sinned and was expelled from the Garden. Nevertheless, he was certainly *permitted* to eat from that Tree. That is to say, God did not require Adam to earn his access to the Tree of Life, though Adam could certainly forfeit that access by his sin.

a relationship. Adam is a son of God. This isn't a labor contract; it's a covenant. It is worse for a wife to whore than it is for an employee to steal. For an employee to violate his labor contract is bad, but it's far worse to violate a relationship, such as the marriage relationship, the relationship of sonship.

God placed the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden as a test of Adam's love, as a test of his faith. Would he believe God? Would he live by everything God had said? And it is there also as a spur to maturity.

We can see that the goal that God set before Adam was an increased maturity. We're not told in Genesis that God said, "If you persevere for x number of years, I will then glorify you." But as we look at the rest of Scripture — and especially the way Scripture ends, the goal of Scripture — we discover that the goal all along was a transfigured, transformed life, a life of glorification.

I won't defend this here, but it is possible that Adam would at one point have been permitted to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Lord did say to him, "*All* the trees of the garden *shall* be food for you." It's possible that at some point, the Lord would have said, "Now you may eat from this tree," and that by eating Adam would have passed beyond his current life into a state of glorification. There would be a sort of death and resurrection apart from sin, similar to Adam's deep sleep when God took Eve from his side. And then he might have passed into glorification. As I say, that's one possibility.

But we see from Scripture that God's ultimate goal was not that Adam could continue in a state where he could sin but that God would bring Adam to the state that we also will eventually inherit, a state of glorification where Adam would no longer be able to sin because he would be confirmed in his love for God.

But Adam doesn't persevere unto glorification. He sins and therefore humanity isn't glorified. Instead humanity is subjected to death. That's crucial for our understanding of the covenant and for all the covenants leading up to Christ. Every covenant, until the New Covenant, is an *Adamic* covenant and cannot save from death, cannot overcome death and bring glorification.

You know the story. Things go downhill from Adam to Noah. With Noah there is a flood. There's a new creation, earth emerging out of water again, which we rightly connect to baptism as a new creation. And then with Noah, God confirms the covenant. He doesn't *create* the covenant. The Bible uses a word which means that the covenant is *confirmed* with Noah.

This covenant, you notice, has a lot of similarity to the pre-fall covenant. When we speak of the covenant with Noah, it's certainly part of the covenant of grace. And its similarity to the pre-fall covenant would lead us to understand that the pre-fall covenant is also a gracious covenant. We find, for instance, the same kind of commandment given to Noah: "Be fruitful and multiply."

In Noah the world is restored. I said there were these three environments, Garden, Land and World. With Noah, the *World* then existed. There's no Garden and there's no Land yet.

This Noahic covenant includes Noah and his descendants who will go out and populate all of that world. Noah *and his descendants*, Genesis 9 says, are included in the covenant.

From Noah to Abraham, things go downhill again. People end up in idolatry and paganism. Then God calls Abraham, and again He *confirms* — not creates, but *confirms* — His covenant with him. Adam fell, and Abraham and Noah are the beginnings of the restoration from the fall, the reversal of the fall. With Noah we find the *World*, but no Land and Garden. With Abraham, the *Land* is now promised. God gives promises of land and offspring.

With Abraham, we also hear for the first time the covenant motto that we find all the way through Scripture, again and again, from Abraham on: “I will be your God and you will be My people.” And that covenant promise — “I will be your God and you will be My people” — includes Abraham *and his descendants*, and so all of Abraham’s descendants must be circumcised. As I said earlier, the covenant is *objective*. It includes Abraham’s descendants, even though those descendants may be eight-day-old males who have no understanding of the covenant. Whether they feel they’re in the covenant or not doesn’t matter. Whether they believe they’re in the covenant or not at that point doesn’t matter. They are in the covenant with Abraham.

Sometimes people express the difference between the covenant with Adam and the covenant with Abraham and the covenant of Moses this way, that the covenants with Adam and Moses involve works to some degree, but the covenant with Abraham is an *unconditional* covenant. And yet that isn’t exactly what we find.

In Genesis 18, the Lord is speaking to Abraham about Sodom. The Lord is deliberating out loud about whether to tell Abraham about the destruction of Sodom. And He says in verse 19, “I have known him in order that he may command his children and his household after him that they keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has spoken to him.”

The Lord is saying that Abraham must command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord *so that* the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has promised him, what He has spoken to him. There’s a condition. The Lord will bring to Abraham the fulfillment of His promises on the condition that Abraham and his family keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice.

We also read in Genesis 26:3-5 something about the conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant. The Lord says to Isaac, “Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and bless you, for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I *will* perform the oath, which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven. I will give to your descendants all these lands, and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed *because* Abraham obeyed My voice and kept my charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.” *Because* Abraham obeyed, the Lord will fulfill His promise to Abraham and to his seed after him.

The covenant with Abraham involves conditions: circumcision, a living and working faith, walking blamelessly before the Lord. But it is not meritorious. Abraham uses Hagar to beget Ishmael, to try to find a seed for himself, but that's something the Lord rejects. The fulfillment of the promise is sheer grace. Sarah is barren and by God's sheer grace Abraham and Sarah bear a son, Isaac.

The fulfillment of these promises isn't something that Abraham can somehow do for himself. He can't merit it; he can't earn it; he can't accomplish it. It is sheer grace. And yet it is tied covenantally to Abraham's own walking in a living faith with God.

From Abraham to Moses things go downhill. By the time of Moses, Israel is dead. They're in slavery in Egypt. Again, these covenants are *Adamic*. The covenant with Abraham could not guarantee life. It couldn't bring about the glorification of God's people, the ultimate goal.

Through Moses, the Lord leads His people out of slavery. He redeems them. He resurrects them, which is a hint of things to come. He has them baptized in the Red Sea and there is a new creation like the original creation, the earth emerging from the water. Like the earth emerging from of the water after the flood, Israel emerges unharmed as a new creation.

This covenant with Moses, which the Bible refers to as the "Old Covenant," is itself grounded on God's grace, God's gracious resurrection of Israel out of death into life. Sometimes this covenant is referred to as a "covenant of works republished," the idea being that Israel had somehow to earn, if not salvation, then at least life in the land. You will find this idea, for instance, in Mark Karlberg's writings. Karlberg believes that Israel's salvation, her eternal salvation, was gracious, but her life in the land depended on her merit, upon her obedience.⁴

That isn't what we see in Scripture. This covenant, too, is grounded on grace. It is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises. Israel doesn't receive the land because of her own goodness. In fact, in Deuteronomy 7 and Deuteronomy 9, the Lord stresses that it is *not* because of Israel's goodness that He is giving them the land. They don't receive the land because of their own goodness.

Every year Israel presented firstfruits to the Lord and confessed the history of His salvation: "My father was a wandering Aramean..." — the whole history. "I didn't earn this land; I didn't earn this crop," the Israelites had to say every year as they presented the crop to the Lord. It was not as if Israel somehow *earned* her life in the land or God's blessings in the land. In fact the Israelites were warned about the time when they would say, "My hand has gotten me all this wealth." Israel couldn't earn anything.

Furthermore, this covenant through Moses, this Old Covenant, has many gracious elements. Again we find that covenant motto, "I will be your God; you will be my people" (Exodus 6:7). We find that Israel receives the *Land*, so now there is not only the world, there is also the land. But even before they receive the land, God now restores the *Garden* — the sanctuary, the

⁴Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), e.g., pp. 33, 43, 47, 194, 198-199, 248-249.

tabernacle, the temple. And this Garden has an “Adam” in it. For the first time since Adam was driven out of the garden, there is an “Adam” in the Garden. The High Priest gets to go right into the holy of holies, past the cherubim who are woven onto the veil, symbolizing the cherubim who were guarding the Garden of Eden. He gets to go past, once a year, into the very presence of God. Those are all gracious elements.

The sacrifices in the law are also a gracious element in the law. The law was never meant for a sinless people. It’s not as if the law required you to keep the commandments perfectly and was very disappointed when you didn’t and had no provisions for lawbreaking. The law was meant for a sinful people. The Lord knew His people would sin. And every sacrifice is a promise in the law.

There are other laws that are full of promise, as well, laws that point forward to the renewal of humanity. The law forbidding you to cut yourself for the dead and identify yourself too closely with the dead is itself a promise of resurrection. Every one of the laws in the Old Covenant points forward to something future. Those are gracious elements in the law.

Nor was it impossible to keep the Old Covenant. It wasn’t impossible for Israel to keep the Old Covenant. The psalmists frequently ask the Lord to deliver them because of their righteousness. They’re not claiming works-righteousness: “Look, Lord, I’ve earned it. Now You owe me.” But they are speaking about their righteousness as a ground for their plea. They don’t believe they’ve achieved sinless perfection, but they are appealing to their covenant faithfulness, to the fact that they have kept faith with God.

The Bible, for instance, refers to Job as being blameless (Job 1:1). It tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, kept God’s commandments blamelessly (Luke 1:6). That doesn’t mean that they never sinned, but it does mean that when they sinned, they repented. When they sinned, they turned away from their sin back to the Lord and they offered up the sacrifices that God required.

The Old Testament, the Old Covenant, has gracious elements. In fact, the Apostle John says that with the coming of Christ, there was “*grace instead of grace*” (John 1:16, literally). That is to say, Christ’s coming, the coming of the New Covenant, was a grace that replaced a previous grace, that is, the Old Covenant grace.

But the whole book of Hebrews and other passages in Scripture tell us that the Old Covenant was flawed. Israel is a priest for the world with access to God. Israel has been brought near to God. She is separated from the Gentiles by some of those Old Covenant laws. And yet Israel can’t live up to that status. Israel’s own kings and priests, lead Israel into sin. And the Old Covenant sacrifices couldn’t take away sin. People were forgiven. They were justified by faith alone. But the Old Covenant couldn’t get Israel past death to resurrection, to transfiguration, to glorification. Israel’s history is a history of failure. There are high points — David, the building of the temple — but Israel’s sin is constantly calling down God’s judgment and finally exile.

Even exile, though, leads to a new period, a new glorification. There’s a movement from glory to glory in the Old Covenant. And we find that not only is there a Garden and a Land, but

now, in this stage after the exile, even the *World* and its rulers — think of Nebuchadnezzar — are recognizing and bowing down to Israel's God.

And yet, even after the exile, the covenant is still Adamic. You read that genealogy in Matthew 1 from Abraham up to the high point of David, from David down to exile. Do you recognize any of the names after the exile? They're nobodies. And the whole house of David is whittled down to the stump of Jesse and a nobody named Joseph up in a hick town in Galilee. Israel is almost dead at the end of the Old Covenant.

But as we survey the Old Covenant and the old Adamic covenant period, all of those covenants that God made were *objective*. If you were circumcised, you were an Israelite, whether you believed God's promises, whether you identified with the Israelites or not. All of those covenants included the descendants as well as the parents, and they were gracious, but they were Adamic.

Israel's history leads from Garden to Land to World, but there is no triumph over death, no final forgiveness of sins, no glorification. Israel is heaping up covenant curse upon herself. Those covenants couldn't take people into a new, transfigured kind of life — through death, past death to glorification. They're only a new start — a more glorious start, but only a new start in that same Adamic situation.

But then, when Israel is facing destruction, representing the whole world which is facing destruction, God finally sends His Son to be Israel's king, the Messiah, the representative, who would do for Israel what Israel couldn't do for herself. He comes as the faithful "Son of God". That's a title that has Old Testament roots. Adam is the Lord's son. Israel is God's firstborn son. And Jesus comes to be Israel, the new Adam, the firstborn Son of God. God's eternal Son comes to pick up the destiny of Adam, to draw the destiny of Israel onto Himself. He keeps covenant with God. He dies as the spotless lamb, the sinless substitute. He takes the covenant curse upon Himself. And at last there is a legal basis for forgiveness.

He dies as Adam died, as all the people in Adamic covenants through history died. But for the first time there is resurrection. And there is a dramatic change, then, in God's covenant relation with His people.

The New Covenant is not just the next in a series of Adamic covenants. It's radically different. It's still a covenant. It's still a personal, ordered, binding relationship between God and His people. But it is the transformation, the glorification, of all the older covenants' features. Now there is resurrection and people can be vindicated before God. Christ ascends and He rules at God's right hand and now there is glorification. Finally somebody has been raised, somebody has been glorified. And what the Jews expected, what they longed for at the end of history, has now happened in the middle of history in Christ.⁵

Christ is glorified. But He doesn't keep that glory, that resurrection life, that vindication to Himself. He is resurrected, He ascends, He is glorified *as Israel's king*, as Israel's representative.

⁵I owe a lot of these thoughts to N. T. Wright's treatment in *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 39-62. This last sentence is classic Wright, but I'm not sure where it's from.

And then He pours out His Holy Spirit upon His people, upon the new Israel that He has gathered around Himself, upon His church.

Christ receives the Spirit when He is baptized by John. And now at Pentecost, He pours out the Spirit upon His church. The whole church is baptized with the Holy Spirit. And the whole church, then, shares in the fulfillment of all those promises of a better covenant. All the promised elements in the previous covenants — summed up in that covenant motto, “I will be your God, you will be My people” — are picked up again in the New Covenant. There is union with Christ, which is now union with the triune God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — so that we become one with Him as Jesus and His Father are one.

That gives us a perspective on covenant. Covenant is not a mechanism to get us somewhere. Covenant relationship with God is not a means to an end. In many ways it is the end itself. There is nothing better, nothing more glorious, than living in covenant with God, being brought right into the family life of the triune God, being children of the Father, and — corporately, as the church — being the bride of the Son.

Christ transfigures everything from the Old Covenant. Garden, Land, World — all of those things are taken up in Christ. The whole of creation is going to be glorified. There’s a new creation, a new heavens, a new earth. That new creation begins in Christ and it begins in His people. We are a new creation. “If anyone is in Christ,” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, “he is a new creation.” And now glorification begins to spread through the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The whole Old Testament law is now transfigured in Christ. We can’t simply go back to the Old Testament and read as if we were still in the Adamic covenants before Christ. Whenever we go back to the Old Covenant, whenever we go back to anything in the Old Testament, we have to go past Christ’s cross and empty tomb. We can’t apply things directly. We apply them through Christ. We need to read the Old Covenant laws and ask how these things speak of Christ, how they speak about Christ’s work, how they are transfigured and transformed, and then how they apply to us in Christ.

All of our blessings, all the blessings of salvation, are blessings that we experience in union with Christ. Because we are united with Christ, because He is our covenantal representative, when He was raised from the dead and vindicated by God, we were vindicated by God, justified. In Christ we have sanctification; we are set apart to belong to God. When Christ was raised from the dead, we were raised from the dead as well, so that we have new life in Christ. Christ has the Spirit, and we are in Christ and we have the Spirit, too. Christ has been glorified; we have been glorified. In Romans 8, Paul uses the past tense when he says that those who are justified were glorified. Already now, we have the beginnings of glorification because we have the Spirit of the glorified Jesus.

But who shares in those blessings? All those blessings are found in Christ, but who is in Christ? The answer the Bible gives is that those people are in Christ who have been *baptized into Christ*.

As in the Old Covenant, so in the New Covenant there is an *objective* covenant made of believers and their children. Every baptized person is in covenant with God and is in union, then, with Christ and with the triune God. The Bible doesn't know of a distinction between being *internally* in the covenant, *really* in the covenant, and being only *externally* in the covenant, just in the *sphere* of the covenant.

The Bible speaks about the reality, the efficacy of baptism. Every baptized person is truly a member of God's covenant. As it was in the Old Covenant, so it is in the New Covenant. As it was in all the Adamic covenants, so it is now that those covenants have been fulfilled in Christ. Every baptized person is in Christ and therefore shares in His new life, shares in the new summons to life, and still receives not only the covenant promises but also the covenant demands and the covenant warnings.

What I've been saying applies to our preaching. As we preach, we need to preach the *promises* to our people. Sometimes Reformed preachers switch to the third person when they preach. A classic example of this is Martin Lloyd-Jones, whom I respect greatly. Constantly when you're reading Lloyd-Jones's sermons, you'll find him saying something like this: "A Christian is one who..." or "The essence of the Christian position is..." Only occasionally does he directly address the congregation and say, "This is true for you."

But we need to be able to tell our congregations, and to tell individual members, not just "Jesus died for *the elect*" or "Jesus died for Christians." We need to be able to say, "Jesus died for you personally." And we mean it. We can say that to them, head for head, everyone of them. How do we know that? Because they are in covenant with God.

We view them as brothers and sisters, because that's who they really are. When we look around the congregation and we see other people in the congregation, we do not give them a "judgment of charity" that says, "Well, I don't know. Maybe he's a Christian; maybe he isn't. So I'll be charitable and I'll regard him as a Christian. I'll treat him as a Christian. But I've got my doubts." Instead we go by God's promise. He has said that this person is in Christ and therefore, believing God's promise, we treat that person as who he really is: someone who is in Christ.

We preach the *demands* to the congregation as they are transformed and glorified in Christ. And we aren't embarrassed, then, by the Old Testament *threats* ("Oh, that was the Old Testament") because we recognize that God's covenant involves promise and demand and warning. And so we preach in terms of the covenant.

What is God's covenant? Let me give another definition. God's covenant is the free bond of union, communion, and love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into which God sovereignly and graciously brings believers and their children to live with Him in mutual love and faithfulness.

God's covenant is the free bond of union and communion and love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's fundamental. That's the foundation of God's covenant: this family life of the triune God, the constant love and union and communion that they have as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's covenant is that free bond of union, communion, and love between the Father,

Son and Holy Spirit, into which God sovereignly and graciously brings believers *and their children* to live with Him in mutual love and faithfulness.

Like the former covenants, this covenant involves believers *and their children*, professing believers and their children. It involves the *community*, not just individuals. Like the former covenants, the New Covenant is also *real* and *objective*, whether people in the covenant recognize it, or want to recognize it, or not.

And this covenant is not neutral. The covenant is not something that might kick in later for good or for ill. It's not something that's just in between: it might be good, it might turn out bad. The covenant is not neutral. It is *gracious*. It is fundamentally gracious and good because it fellowship with God through Jesus Christ by His Holy Spirit.

Our Father, as we think about your covenant with us, about the fellowship that we have with you as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it humbles us and it fills us with joy. We thank you that you have graciously brought us into that fellowship. We thank you that through Christ, you have provided the basis for the forgiveness of our sins. We thank you that in Christ we have passed from death to life. We have gone all the way into glorification already. We are seated with Christ in heavenly places. We thank you for that. We thank you for the privileges that you have given to us. And we ask, Father, that you will open up your word to us more and more, as we preach it, as we read it, that we might glory in what Christ has done for us and in the fellowship that we have with you. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

2. Covenant and election

John Barach

The topic for this afternoon is covenant and election and the relationship between them. It's a hot topic, as you discover when you start thinking about the covenant or when you start thinking about election, although quite often in our treatments of election — in our reformed textbooks on election, for instance — we don't talk very much about covenant.

One of the things that we want to maintain when we talk about the doctrine of election is that election is good news. Several years ago, the Christian Reformed theologian James Daane said, "You can't preach election."⁶ His theory was that many Reformed pastors were not actually preaching election. And that may be true. There may be many pastors that just shy away from the doctrine. Daane's argument was that the reason you can't preach election is because of the frightening flip-side of election, namely reprobation. Reprobation isn't good news.

Daane's thesis was that you can't preach election as good news. And our hackles rise when we hear that. Some of you are thinking, "Well I have; I can." We want to maintain what our confessions also maintain: election is good news.

The Reformed confessions universally, together with the Lutheran confessions for that matter, speak about God's election in the context of *comfort* for God's people and assurance of our salvation. We think of Ephesians 1, for instance, where all of our salvation found in Christ is grounded in the fact that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. Election is the bedrock on which we rest our salvation and our assurance. God chose us.

That's what we maintain theoretically. And yet for many people, including pastors, election is actually a problem because of this question, "Who is elect?" We say that election is a great comfort, but to whom as a pastor can you apply that comfort?

There are people who worry about whether they are elect or not. "Is my faith real faith?" They think of the parable of the soils perhaps. They know that there is no obvious distinction between the one soil that produces grain that springs up immediately but later withers and the other soil that produces grain that lasts. They both seem to produce grain. And so they look at themselves and they look at their faith and they say, "How do I know that I am elect? How do I know that my faith is going to be persevering faith? Can I have any confidence of that whatsoever?"

People worry about that with regard to themselves. They also wonder about it in connection with others, and perhaps especially as pastors. Can you give somebody the comfort of his election? Can you assure somebody that he is one of God's chosen people? Or is that just something that people have to figure out for themselves? Is it something that nobody can know anyway?

⁶James Daane, *The Freedom of God: A Study of Election and Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 20. For a critique of Daane, see Norman Shepherd, "Election as Gospel," *Westminster Theological Journal* 36.3 (1974): 305-333.

But if nobody can know it anyway, then how does the doctrine of election function to comfort real people? If the doctrine of election becomes something that is simply true, some doctrine that is true up here somewhere, so that we have no idea if it applies to anybody sitting among us, then that doctrine doesn't really function. It's something we merely put in the closet and bring out for Bible study or for sermons once in a while. But in terms of pastoring it has no genuine relevance.

Can you give somebody the comfort of election? Can you assure somebody of his election? Can you know about your own election? Those questions have to do with the relationship of election to history, the relationship of election to real people, and ultimately, the relationship of election to the covenant. How is election related to the covenant?

It seems as if there are two possibilities: Either God makes the covenant with the elect only or God makes the covenant with elect and non-elect people. A lot of Reformed people opt for the former. God makes the covenant with the elect only. That view has results. There are people who view the congregation as a "mixed multitude"⁷: some are in covenant with God, some aren't.

There was a cartoon published in *Leadership* magazine many years ago which showed a church from the pastor's perspective. The pastor was saying, "I have been your pastor for a long time and I have gotten to know you all fairly well..." And you see the congregation and there are a couple of goats and a little sheep, and a couple of sheep and a goat, and another goat. The whole congregation is sheep and goats!

And there are Reformed pastors who really have that view of the congregation. They may not have faces attached ("That guy is a goat!"), but they see their congregation that way. They say to themselves, "There are a number of people out here and they fall into various categories. Some of my congregation are elect; some of my congregation are not elect. Some are regenerate; some of my congregation are not regenerate. Some are in covenant; some are not in covenant. Some are only in the sphere of the covenant (whatever that is) and others are really in the covenant." They divide up the congregation into all those various categories and then try to preach to each one of them.

You will find this in some Puritan writers. There are some Puritan writers who list seven or eight different categories that you must address in every sermon: the hardened unbeliever, the softened unbeliever — all kinds of different categories. And that is how some Reformed ministers view their congregation. They see their congregation roughly falling into all these different categories, and they try to tailor-make the sermon for each one of them.

That view, as I said, does affect your preaching. What it means is that you don't preach the promises directly to everybody. People are reluctant to say too much to the congregation or to say the wrong thing.

⁷This is actually an abuse of that term drawn from Scripture: the "mixed multitude" in Exodus 12:38 were believers who came out of Egypt with Israel..

We tend then to start with the doctrine of election and then to look out at the congregation and preach in the third person. You can preach to everybody in the first person (“we,” “us”) or the second person (“you”) when you are talking about sin. You say to your congregation, “You have sinned,” and they take it. And you can say to them, “We must obey.” You can talk about your duty in the first person or the second person.

But then the minister will say, “Jesus died for...” And he thinks, “Now wait a minute! Out here there are elect people and non-elect people. My theology says Jesus died for the elect only. I don’t want to say too much because that goat over there might think I am talking to him.” So then he says, “*You* have sinned. The Lord calls *you* to be faithful. Jesus died for ... His people. Jesus died for ... the elect,” and the congregation is left hanging: “Well, am I one of them?”

If we view the congregation that way, we end up not being able to say things as directly as Scripture says them to people. We resist saying to the congregation, “Christ died for you. Your sins are forgiven” or anything like that.

That view also affects the sacraments. In the question and answer period, I mentioned Abraham Kuyper’s view that sometimes there is a false baptism.⁸ Baptism is real only when it is applied to the elect, and for the rest it is a false baptism. We know from our confessions and from Scripture, that baptism is intended for our assurance. But if Kuyper is correct, could you ever look at your baptism in terms of assurance? You wouldn’t know if it is real.

If the government warns you that there are all kinds of counterfeit hundred dollar bills out there, and somebody offered to pay you in hundreds, you would be reluctant to take the money. You would like twenties and tens instead, because you just wouldn’t be sure you could trust that hundred dollar bill. You’d take it to the bank and the next thing you know, you would be in trouble because you’ve got counterfeit money.

If God would give out counterfeit promises — so that baptism is baptism only if you are elect and if you’re not elect, then everything the minister said as he was administering baptism wasn’t really true for you — you couldn’t trust those promises. What good is baptism if I don’t know if it is real? if I don’t know if it applies to me? if I don’t know if these promises are mine?

Those are the difficulties that flow from identifying covenant with election and viewing covenant in terms of election. We don’t know God’s secrets. And yet, as pastors and as congregation members, we look at other people in the congregation and we try sometimes to read God’s secrets and to view those people in the light of things that we don’t know. Who is elect and who isn’t?

I mentioned another possible view of the relation between covenant and election and that is the view that the covenant is made with people who are elect and with people who are not elect. The covenant include people from both categories because the covenant, Scripture teaches, is made with believers and their children. Abraham circumcises himself *and his children*. Esau was

⁸Abraham Kuyper, *Voor een distel een mirt: Geestelijke overdenkingen bij den heiligen Doop, bij het doen van belijdenis en het toegaan tot het Heilig Avondmaal* (Amsterdam, 1891), p. 54 cited in J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, trans. G. van Rongen (Launceston: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), pp. 24-25.

circumcised. Ishmael was circumcised right after circumcision is given as the sacrament of the covenant in Genesis 17.

The covenant is made with the believer and his descendants. We don't first ask "Are they elect or not?" and then decide if they are in the covenant. Rather, it is simply the case that the covenant *is* with them, whether they recognize it or not, whether they respond to it or not. They may apostatize from the covenant, but the covenant has genuinely been made with them.

That view takes history seriously. On that view we can say that every baptism is a genuine baptism, just as every circumcision in the Old Covenant was a genuine circumcision. Those people were really circumcised, and therefore they had to live in terms of it. This view that says the covenant is made of believers and their children, then, takes every baptism seriously but it recognizes that not every baptized person perseveres to the end.

But what about election then? On that view, how do we apply the comfort of election — if we do it at all — to any of the real people in our congregation? Do we just leave it as a mystery? Do we leave it up to them to examine their faith or perhaps try to measure the number of good works that they have accomplished to see if they *really* are elect or not? Or we could ask the question another way: Can we, as pastors, actually say to the congregation, "You are elect; God chose you"?

This afternoon I would like to argue for a third position. It is a modification of that second position I have outlined — the covenant is with believers with their children — but it is not exactly the same as that last view.

To get at it, we first need to turn to Scripture. We are going to start with the Old Testament. That's important. Some — in fact, *many* — popular treatments of election make it sound as if the doctrine of election unto salvation is something that is revealed only in the New Testament. It's there in a sketchy form in the Old Testament: "Jacob have I loved; Esau I have hated." But on the whole the doctrine is a New Testament thing.

But the Old Testament does have an important perspective to give us on the relationship between covenant and election. It teaches us to see election not as a *problem* but as a *promise*.

I would like to begin with something which has often been termed *covenantal election*, corporate election. In the Old Testament we discover that God chose and called Abraham. In Deuteronomy 4:37, Moses says to Israel, "Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power." We find something similar in Deuteronomy 10:14-15.

But the classic text for this covenantal election is Deuteronomy 7 where the Lord speaks about His choice of Israel. Beginning in verse 6, the Lord says, "You are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has *chosen you* to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor chose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your

forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

One of the things we learn from this passage is that God’s choice of Israel is unconditional. He chose them, but not because they were great in themselves, a great number, but simply because He loved them and because He kept His oath, which He made to Abraham. That oath too is grounded on His love.

And God’s election was then demonstrated, He says, by the Exodus. He says that He brought them out by a mighty hand and redeemed them from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. And the goal is to make them a holy people. This election language is supplied there in Deuteronomy 7 as a basis for saying they are the holy people of the Lord their God.

We find this talk about Israel being God’s chosen people again and again in Scripture. We find it in Deuteronomy 32:8-9, where the Lord says, “When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel. For the LORD’s portion is His people; Jacob is the allotment of His inheritance.” Again: the Lord chose His people.

In the Psalms, we find the language of “His chosen ones” applied to Israel. Israel was God’s chosen people. Their election was unconditional. It wasn’t grounded on anything in Israel. It was grounded on God’s love. And their election is demonstrated by the Exodus and it produced a holy people.

How should Israel have responded to what the Lord says here in Deuteronomy 7? They should have responded with faith, with a humble faith that lead to them listening to God and *living* as His chosen people. God didn’t chose them because of anything in them. He chose them because He loved them, and there is no more profound reason than that. But although their election was unconditional, we also read later on — in Hosea, for instance — that they are “not my people.” Israel had to live out her election in order to enjoy it.

What about an individual Israelite? How should an individual Israelite have heard Moses’ sermon here in Deuteronomy 7, when Moses says, “The Lord your God has chosen you (plural) to be a people for His own possession.”

He should have heard that, not only as some kind of bare statement that he was an Israelite and God chose Israel as a whole. He should have heard Moses saying that he himself — as an individual, but as part of this chosen people — was therefore an object of God’s love. As a part of the chosen people, he is in relationship to God, a relationship which is not grounded in anything in himself, but solely on God’s love. The Israelite standing there should have taken this corporate election, about which Moses speaks, and personalized it: “I also am here as an object of God’s love, God’s electing choosing love.”

Covenantal corporate election isn’t just an Old Testament idea, though. We find it also in the New Testament. We refer to 1 Peter 2:9ff. quite often when we want to show that the church

is Israel. Peter applies to the church the terms that were applied to Israel. Peter says, “You are a chosen race” — he is talking to the church — “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Peter says that we are the chosen people of God. We know from 1 Corinthians 1 that we weren’t chosen because we were wise or because we were powerful or because of anything in ourselves. But Peter says that we are God’s chosen people, God’s treasured possession, people who belong to Him.

Peter goes on to say that because God is our Father and He is holy, we are to be holy. But he also says here that we *are* a holy nation. We are holy, and we are to be holy. We are to live as who we are.

And again, the demonstration of God’s election is Exodus. Only here, he says you have been called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light. It’s the Exodus narrative retold: out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.

The church *is* God’s chosen people. Our tendency, though, is to say, “Yeah, but that’s only covenantal election.” We want to say, “That has nothing to do with individual election to eternal salvation. When Peter calls us ‘chosen people’ or ‘chosen nation,’ what that means is that the church as a whole is chosen, but not that any of the individual members are necessarily elect.” We want to say something like this: “At most, you can know that you have been chosen to belong to the church. That says nothing about your own status. You can’t rely upon that. You can’t look to that for any assurance. That just means that you are going to be a church member.”

What does it mean, though, to be a church member? What does it mean to be one of God’s covenant people? It means that you have been brought into a relationship with God. You are in fellowship with the triune God. You’ve been brought into His family life to share with him in His love. God has brought you into the people on whom He has set His love. And therefore, you personally are the object of God’s love. You’re among the people He saved — the people He has “Exodused” — and the people He has committed to saving.

Every individual Israelite shared in the history of the Exodus — including, apparently, some of that mixed multitude that came out of Egypt with the Israelites, including others who were grafted in along the way in the Old Covenant. They too, it seems, were to come at the firstfruits festival and recite their history, and say, not “My father was a pagan,” but “My father was an Aramean....” They weren’t pagans any longer. They were *in* Israel. And they confessed that their history was Israel’s history, that Israel’s history was their own history.

And so too, with Christians. We are united to Christ, and we share in His story. We share in His death, His resurrection, His ascension — all of that history, which is our salvation. God has demonstrated His love and His faithfulness to us as part of His covenant people. And as a member of the community, each one of us needs, to *personalize* the corporate identity: “God has saved for Himself a people, and I am one of them, and I apply that to myself. God has chosen us,

and I am one of those chosen people, and I apply that promise then to myself. I belong to His chosen people.”

What about Ephesians 1. People sometimes ask, “Is Ephesians 1 talking about covenant election or the election of individuals to eternal life?” Let’s read part of Ephesians 1. Paul begins this way:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth.

And he goes on, saying again and again, “In him, in him, in him, in Christ.”

What kind of election is he talking about when he says, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”? People say, “Well, this covenant election that Israel enjoyed, it certainly didn’t mean that everybody in Israel was going to be saved automatically.” (By the way, watch that word *automatically*. It’s a bit of a weasel word. People use it in odd ways.) They say, “Covenantal election doesn’t guarantee that you are going to heaven, no matter what. Covenant people fall away.” And so they say, “What Paul is talking about here in Ephesians 1 is the election of individuals to eternal life, special election. Paul says we *are* going to be holy, we *are* going to be blameless. This is not the same kind of election Moses was talking about when he said ‘God chose you.’”

It is true that Paul is certainly not talking about *bare* membership — nominal membership — in the church, if there is such a thing. He is talking about something living. He’s talking about something that entails genuine fellowship with God, something that entails eternal life. He is clearly talking about the things that our confessions are talking about when they use that term *election*.

But here is the question. *To whom* is Paul saying those things? He’s writing to the church at Ephesus, “to the saints and faithful ones.” Does that mean that Paul is writing only to the ones in the church who happen to be elect, whoever they may be, so that the people in the church aren’t even entirely sure themselves that this statement really applies to them and they don’t know if Paul is talking to them in his whole letter. Or does it mean that Paul is writing only to those who are *really* believers? To whom is Paul writing?

It is better to read Paul as writing to the *entire* church, head for head, men, women and little children at Ephesus. It's artificial and unnatural to think that Paul expects that some in the church will sit there in church while this letter is being read and say, "Well, that doesn't apply to me." This statement was read to the whole church and it applies to everybody in the church..

Besides we know that Paul says similar things to other churches. He frequently calls the churches "saints," because they are holy in Christ. He uses the term "elect" or "chosen" in passages like 2 Thessalonians 2, where he says "God chose you." He says this boldly to the entire church: "God chose you, brothers, beloved by the Lord," he says (2 Thess. 2:13).

Paul includes our children, too, here in Ephesians 1. He includes all kinds of different groups in the congregation in Ephesians. Later on, he says, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord" and we apply that verse to all of our children. We don't worry about whether this child is really elect. We don't apply this verse to our children only if we think the child falls into the category of the elect. We don't wonder if this verse is really for our child. We don't ask whether he's really "in the Lord." Rather, we apply this verse to our children because they're members of the church and this letter is written, not just to some people in the church, but to the whole church.

Furthermore, Paul goes on and he warns these people — the very same ones that he called *elect* here in chapter 1. He warns them in chapter 5 about the genuine possibility that they could be excluded from God's kingdom. In Ephesians 5:3ff., Paul begins by warning about immorality and greed and other sins, and then he says in verse 5 that nobody like that has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. He warns them not to be deceived because the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. "Don't be partakers with them," he says. Those were real warnings and they were given to people whom Paul had just finished calling "elect."

In fact, in Acts 20:30, we discover that Paul even *knows* that not everybody in Ephesus is going to persevere. He says, "From your own midst people are going to arise teaching destructive doctrines." He knows that not everybody in Ephesus is going to persevere. And he warns people here in this letter about falling away, about not inheriting the kingdom. He warns the very same people whom he has called *elect* in chapter 1.

What Paul says, then, is grounded, not upon his apostolic insight into the congregation, as if he knew that everybody out there, head for head, was going to end up in heaven. We know that that wasn't Paul's view; he knew that some would fall away. What he is saying is grounded on what he saw, what he knew for sure, what God had revealed.

He knew their status in Christ. They are saints in Christ; they are His holy nation. And he saw their evident faith. They received the gospel. They were the church in a pagan society. They had joined the church, they were persevering in the church in spite of opposition. Those things were observable, and so he calls them *elect*, based on what he sees.

And he connects election here to Christ. I emphasized that when I was reading: Paul says "In him, in him," again and again. That's crucial. We should never talk about election without

talking about Christ. Election isn't some abstract set of choices God made. It has everything to do with Christ.

The blessings that Paul mentions here are enjoyed only by those who are bound to Christ, and who are covenantally united to Him. They are *in Him*. That is covenantal language. That's the language that is used in the Old Testament for being *in David*. It's used for being associated covenantally with your king, David, so that he is your representative. This is the language of marriage, of mediatorship, of being united to the mediator.

As we read Scripture, we discover that Christ is *the* elect one. Think of 1 Peter 2:6 where He is referred to as the *elect* cornerstone. Christ is *the* elect one.

Now we have to modify that picture that we had of Old Testament and New Testament covenantal election. I said Israel was God's covenant nation, His elect nation, His chosen people, and the church is now God's chosen people, God's elect nation. We have to modify that. When I said that, I didn't bring Christ into the picture. It is *Christ* who is truly the great fulfillment of Israel's covenantal election. Christ *is* Israel, the elect one, the elect Son of God. And then in Him, in covenantal union with Christ, we are also elect. We are other stones being built, as Peter says, on the chosen cornerstone.

But then who is in Christ? Those who have been incorporated into Christ, those who have been brought into Christ, those who have been baptized into Christ. The people who are *in Christ* are covenant members. They are the ones that Paul is speaking to here in Ephesians when he says, "He chose *us* in Him before the foundation of the world."

Covenantal election and individual election to salvation aren't actually all that far apart. We can distinguish them perhaps, but we cannot and we may not divide them completely. What is the connection? The connection has to do with God's promise, God's speech to us. God has promised every covenant member that he or she is elect in Christ.

What do I mean when I talk about a covenantal promise? I don't mean a prediction ("This is going to happen, no matter what"). Part of the problem is that we think about election this way: "If I knew I was elect, then I could sin all I want, because I am going to heaven no matter what." But the Bible doesn't know about that kind of election. The Bible doesn't have a hyper-Calvinist bone in its body. There is no such thing as a kind of election that allows you to sin all you want and still end up saved on the last day.

When God speaks to His people and calls them elect, He is not simply *predicting* that something will happen; He is making a *pledge* to them. God's promise comes in all of His speech. His promise is not simply something that will happen in the future, something that needs to be fulfilled later on. His promise is this, that He administers His salvation to us by speaking to us, by telling us who He is for us, by telling us what He has done for us. He can promise us stuff that has happened in the past. "Jesus died for you" can be a promise, but what makes it a promise and not just a statement of fact are the words "for you." God pledges that what happened on the cross is for *you*.

In the gospel and through baptism, God promises us that He unites us to Christ. So Paul can address the entire congregation — men, women, and children — as those who are in Christ and who are chosen in Christ.

And that's how we should view ourselves. We are covenantally united to Jesus Christ and share in all of His riches. What's missing in Jesus? In Him you have redemption, righteousness, justification, sanctification, the Holy Spirit, glorification, *and* election. The whole package of salvation, you could say, from eternity past to eternity future is all found in Christ. You need nothing beside Christ.

He is the elect one, and God tells you that you are united to Him. We may not feel that that is true. Who feels elect? But we must believe that it's true, because God said so and to doubt God's promises is sin. We need to teach our congregations to be assured, because doubting what God has said to us is sin. Faith banks on God's promises. Faith lives in terms of God's promises.

There are churches which teach that you really need an experience to let you know that you are elect. You can't get that assurance from the promises of Scripture or from your baptism or from any sermon you have ever heard because those promises are covenant promises and the covenant is only for the elect. You need a special experience, these churches say. You need a dramatic experience to let you know that you are really one of the elect and only then you can start believing.

But you don't need a special, dramatic, revivalistic conversion to let you know that you are elect. You have had *the* special experience that God gives you. It was called baptism. That's *the* special experience that lets you know that you are one of God's chosen people.

If you're interested in this view in church history, we find it in Zwingli. He's quoted in Peter Lillback's *The Binding of God*. Zwingli is talking about God's relationship to the infants of believers, and he says this; "When he includes us under Abraham's covenant this word makes us no less certain of *their* election than of the old Hebrews'. For the statement that they are in the covenant, testament and people of God assures us of their election until the Lord announces something different of some one." He says again, "Indeed it is my opinion that all infants who are under the testament are doubtless of the elect *by the laws of the testament*."

And then he goes on to deal with Esau. What about Esau as an infant? Was he under the testament at first but was later rejected? Zwingli says, "We need to judge according to the law." That is, we need to judge according to what God has told us. "What then of Esau, if he had died as an infant? Would your judgment place him among the elect? Yes," says Zwingli. "Then does election remain sure? It does. And rejection remains also. But listen. If Esau had died an infant he would doubtless have been elect. For if he had died then there would have been the seal of election, for the Lord would not have rejected him eternally. But since he lived and was of the non-elect, he so lived that we see in the fruit of his unfaith that he was rejected by the Lord."⁹

⁹Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 104-105.

Lillback goes on and discusses the difference between a man named Cellarius, who had no use for externals because only the elect were really in the covenant, and Zwingli, who emphasized the importance of baptism. Lillback summarizes it this way: “Zwingli believed that infant baptism was a sign of the covenant which brought a promise of salvation to the children. The very covenant sign for Zwingli was critical because it was an attestation of the decree of election for the parents and their child. One might later prove that he was not truly one of Christ’s by not manifesting the faith that was the fruit of election. But to assume that of any infant, or even to remain in an uncertain state as taught by Cellarius, was to deny the law of God which undergirded the covenant sign.”¹⁰

We find this also in the Canons of Dort, which we regard as being one of the first great confessional formations and statements of the doctrine of election. The First Head of Doctrine, Article 17, deals with the salvation of the infants of believers when those infants died in infancy. It says this, “Since we must make judgments about God’s will from His word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the gracious covenant, in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the *election* and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.”

“Godly parents ought not to doubt” — that is, they are forbidden to doubt, may not doubt, are not permitted to doubt — “the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.” Why? Because, say the Canons of Dort, those children have been included in God’s covenant together with their parents.

We find this approach also in the historic Reformed Baptismal Form. The form talks about the promises given to us by the Triune God when we’re baptized into His name. The Father promises to adopt us as His children. The Son promises to wash away our sins.¹¹ But that Form also talks about the Holy Spirit who promises to present us “without spot or blemish in the assembly of the elect in life eternal.” If the Spirit promises that you will be among the elect in life eternal, you can bank on it and trust that you are among the elect *now*.

This is one way that Reformed people have talked in the past about the relationship between election and covenant. For those who have been baptized into Christ and have trusted Him, those who believe God’s promise, your covenantal election *just is* God’s election of you as an individual unto eternal life. You will look back on that last day and you will see God’s love in Christ reaching all the way back to eternity past. You will see that your whole salvation flowed out of that love, and that you stand among the assembly of the elect in life eternal because God chose you.

But what about those who fall away? Our election is unconditional. God doesn’t choose us due to something in us. But our life in God’s covenant, including our enjoyment of that *promise* of election, does have conditions.

¹⁰Lillback, p. 108.

¹¹Note that this promise is not a promise to wash away our sins in the future sometime. Rather, it is His pledge that He *does* wash away our sins, which is why the prayer after baptism in the Form says, “We thank you that you have forgiven us and our children all our sins....”

Not everybody responds in faith. John 15 says that some *in Christ* are cut off and burned. There is no room in the covenant for presumption (“Well, I am elect, so I can sin all I like”). Those who fall away will be cut off from the church — not just cut off from Christ, but cut off from Christ’s body, the church — either in this life, in which case it happens formally through excommunication, or by Christ Himself when they die.

In the final judgment, the sheep and goats will be separated. The goats will not be forever among the covenant people, the elect of God, the church of God. Jesus will say to them, “I never knew you,” even if they call him “Lord, Lord.” And they will look back on that last day and discover that they were reprobate. But they will also see that in history — and this was always God’s plan for them — God did graciously and really bring them into His church, that He really made them a part of His chosen people for a time, that He gave them genuine promises that are just as real, just as dependable, just as trustworthy, as the promises He gave to the people who did persevere to the end. He gave them real promises of salvation. He united them to Christ in whom alone there is salvation. But they themselves willfully rejected it because they didn’t receive those promises mixed with faith (cf. Heb. 4:2). But for a time, they were really among God’s chosen people.

What’s the connection then between covenant and election? The key to understanding that relationship, I think, is a restoration of the concept of *covenantal election* — of being part of this corporate chosen body of Christ — and letting that covenantal election function in our own understanding and in our churches.

Who are God’s elect? They are not some mysterious group of people whom we can’t identify so that we have no idea whether we can comfort a church member or the whole congregation with the assurance that God has chosen them.

Who are the elect? They are as visible and obvious as your church membership role. That’s the answer in terms of what God has told us. We don’t know who is going to persevere to the end. We can’t tell that. We don’t need to know that. But we can address the church the way Paul does, and say to them “God chose us in Him” and expect every member of the church to say “That ‘us’ includes me, of all people.”

We don’t need to take a passage like Ephesians 1 and preach it the way it is sometimes is preached, preaching all these glorious promises and then saying at the end, “Can you say that?” so that everybody goes home wondering if the promises are really for them. “Those promises are glorious, but then, all of a sudden, at the last moment, they were taken away from me.”

We don’t need to preach this passage in a way that raises doubt: “Can you say that you were one of these chosen in Christ?” No, Paul is saying this to the church. He is telling them how to think of themselves: “God chose us in Him” That’s amazing! Why would God love me? Why in the world would God set His love on me and chose me?

That’s how you ought to respond to these passages. We need to teach our congregation to read Scripture this way and to say, “That’s me! I’ve been chosen! How do I know? I have been baptized into the church. I belong to Christ’s people.”

And then we can point them to Christ when they doubt. Calvin says, “Christ is the mirror of our election.” When you doubt, look at Him. You are chosen in Him. How do you know you are in Him? God gave you the sign and seal of baptism. He gave you that rite that brought you into Christ, and you can look at it and you can trust that God’s promises are objective.

Some may fall away; some do fall away; some are cut off. But that doesn’t thwart God’s purposes. His purposes cannot be frustrated. He gathers His elect. He preserves them — in the church, in this covenant community. And every member can confess with the Heidelberg Catechism when it says,

“What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church?”

“I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end” — this by the way, is the only statement about election directly in the Heidelberg Catechism — “the Son of God ... out the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community *chosen for eternal life* and united in true faith. And of this community *I am, and always will be*, a living member.”

God chooses a church. It is amazing: the Heidelberg Catechism links the doctrine of election with the doctrine of the *church*, and then teaches all of the church’s children and the entire church community to confess, “The Son of God gathers His chosen church, and I am and always will be a living member of it.” That’s our confession of faith.

God’s election isn’t a problem to worry about; it is a promise to bank on, as part of that full package of salvation given to us in Christ. When you stray you can plead His promise of forgiveness and know that it is for you. When you are weak, you can call upon Him for the Spirit because He promised the Spirit to you. When you are assailed by doubts, you can pray to Him as your Father, and know that He is. He chose you. You can know that for sure — not because you can climb up into heaven and look into the Book of Life and see if you are there, or anything like that. You can know it for sure because He said so and His word is trustworthy.

Let’s pray.

Thank you, Father, that you don’t require us to live our lives in terms of things that we can’t know, that we can’t see. You don’t require us to guess or to presume but you speak to us. We acknowledge that we haven’t seen very much of our salvation. We haven’t even seen our sins forgiven. What does that look like? We don’t know, Father. We haven’t seen all of these things that you have promised. We don’t even see our union with Christ, but you have told us in your Word that you have united us to Christ and that in Him we share in all of His riches. Teach us to believe that, Father. Teach us to view your church and to preach to your church in terms of your promise, and to live on the basis of it. Thank you for your electing love to us who don’t deserve any of it. Thank you for the assurance that you give us. And cause us to glory in that assurance, and then to respond by living faithful lives as your holy people. We ask this, Father, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

3. COVENANT AND EVANGELISM

John Barach

Tonight we are going to be looking at God's covenant in connection with evangelism. Earlier this afternoon, we talked about covenant and election. We talked about the warnings of the covenant. And a lot of application was made to congregational life. More will be made tonight as we talk about evangelism, as well, but we'll also go outside the congregation to those who do not yet enjoy covenant fellowship with God.

Like covenant, evangelism does not begin with the New Testament. Already in Genesis, we find that God makes promises to Abraham. He promises him that he will be the father of nations. He promises that Sarah will be a mother of nations.

But we recognize that those promises did not yet reach full fulfillment in the Old Covenant. There were people from the nations who bowed before Israel's God. We find that Ruth is drawn in, for instance, so that she also becomes part of Israel. We think of Rahab. Others come in in odd ways. Think of the Gibeonites, the ones who became part of God's people through deception and trickery. Egyptians come in after the Exodus. There was evangelism in the Old Covenant. And yet there was not the fathering of nations that we might have expected until the New Covenant.

Those promises that God made to Abraham and Sarah — "You will be the father of nations; you will be the mother of nations" — find fulfillment through the preaching of the Word. They find fulfillment in Christ as He sends us out in the Great Commission.

But it's important for us to realize that the covenant was never something that Israel should have hoarded to herself ("We are the covenant people — we alone. Nobody else can be, and we delight in that"). One of the Psalms does say that God has not revealed His word and His commandments to any other nation, praise the Lord (Ps. 147:19-20). But that is not a statement that we alone have them and we can hang onto them and gloat with regard to the rest of the world.

Israel was placed in the world to be a priest to the nations. The Israelites are a priestly people. And joy for Israel turns out to be joy for the world.

We even reflect that in our Christmas carols, appropriately enough. The angel announces that there is joy. We often speak about it as joy to all people, and that may be an appropriate application. But what the angel says is that there is "joy to all *the* people," that is, to all the nation of Israel.

But when Israel's salvation comes, when Israel's Messiah comes, then there is joy, not only for Israel, but for all the world because Israel is placed in the world as the world's representative. Israel is the representative of the world and the Messiah is the representative of Israel, so when the Messiah comes to do His work there is salvation for Israel and therefore there is also salvation that flows out to all the nations.

This evening, I would like to sketch something of the relationship between covenant and evangelism. A lot of what I say is going to be — and is intended to be — suggestive. I'm not going to spell things out in detail, in part because I would like to encourage us in our conversations afterward to continue to think through what it means to evangelize covenantally or to have a covenant consciousness in our evangelism. I certainly don't have the final word on that, but I'd like to throw a number of things out to help us in our reflection and our consideration.

One of the things that I'd like to begin with is the distinction that Norman Shepherd drew between home missions and foreign missions. You say, "Well, that's not an unusual distinction. We've heard that before." But we usually distinguish home missions and foreign missions this way: home missions means church planting, evangelism that takes place somewhere in North America (and in particular, the United States and Canada), and foreign missions is missions that takes place elsewhere, somewhere overseas.

Shepherd's distinction between home missions and foreign missions is worth thinking about. He said that home missions is the evangelism that takes place inside God's kingdom among God's covenant people. It's the evangelism that takes place in the church, the kingdom of God. Foreign missions is evangelism that takes place outside the covenant community.¹²

A. HOME MISSIONS

With that distinction in mind, I would like to begin talking about covenant and evangelism by talking about *home missions*, about the kind of missions and evangelism that takes place within the church. I don't mean that everybody in the church is an unbeliever or that we have to view them as unbelievers and hope that they get converted through our preaching. I think I've laid that assumption to rest already by my lecture on covenant and election. But I do mean that every one of us in the church needs to be called to faith, needs to be reminded of what the gospel is, needs to hear the gospel preached to him.

1. Liturgy

As we talk about home missions and evangelism within the covenant community, let's start with liturgy, with our worship service, and in particular with the structure and the patterns of our worship service.

In the Old Covenant you approached God through sacrifice. There are a number of sacrifices that were offered to bring Israel near to God. But today, we also approach God through sacrifice — not through animal sacrifices. Animal sacrifices have now ceased. But we still enter God's presence by the way of sacrifice.

We enter God's presence through Christ's one sacrifice. But that sacrifice is reflected in our worship and in our liturgy, in the various stages that we go through in our order of worship as we come into God's presence and worship before Him.

¹²If I recall correctly, I first heard this particular distinction from one of my seminary professors, who attributed it to Norman Shepherd.

In his book, *The Lord's Service*, Jeffrey Meyers puts it this way, "This is the way of sacrificial worship — united to Christ we are not only brought together by the Spirit, but by the same Spirit we are drawn into the Father's presence by cleansing, consecration, and communion"¹³ — those three steps in that order: cleansing, consecration and communion.

We learn something about our New Covenant worship even as we read books like Leviticus, as we read about animal sacrifices. There is an order to the sacrifices. First, the worshipper would place his hands on the head of the animal. The animal would then be killed, and the blood would be splashed on the altar. The first step of the sacrifice is *cleansing*.

Then the meat of the animal would be washed. The animal would be skinned, cut up, and arranged on the altar. There would be *consecration*.

And then that animal that had been killed would be turned into smoke. The Bible refers to that sacrifice as food for God. The burning of the animal is *communion*, fellowship with God. God eats the offering and — in some of the offerings, at least — the man, the offerer, got to eat as well, together with his family.

We see this order — cleansing, consecration, and communion — also in the order of the sacrifices. First, there would be a Purification Offering, the Sin Offering: *cleansing*. Then there is the offering commonly called the Burnt Offering — perhaps better translated as the "Ascension Offering," the offering that goes up¹⁴ — which indicates *consecration*, complete dedication to the Lord. And then came the sacrifice known as the Fellowship Offering, where you have *communion* with God. That was the offering, in particular, that people were allowed to eat.

These patterns of cleansing, consecration, communion are Old Testament patterns, but they say something about our worship as New Covenant people. This pattern of worship is appropriate for us as Christians.

This pattern is related to something else that we find in New Covenant worship and in worship in Scripture as whole, namely, the *dialogue* between God and His people. As we put these sacrifices together with our responses, you end up with an order of worship that goes something like this:

God calls us
 We gather together and praise Him
God cleanses us
 We confess our sins
God consecrates us
 We respond in prayer and offering

¹³Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord's Service: Worship at Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church*, expanded edition (St. Louis: Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church, 1999), p. 20. A revised version of this book is forthcoming from Canon Press.

¹⁴The Hebrew word for this sacrifice has nothing to do with burning. Rather, it is closely related to the word meaning "to ascend, to go up."

God communes with us
We eat God's food
God commissions us; He blesses us
We march out to serve God.¹⁵

That order of worship is evangelistic in structure. God calls us first. He brings us into His presence. He calls us to confess our sins, and He forgives our sins. He gives us His Word. He communes with us. He eats and drinks with us; we eat at His table. And then He commissions us; He sends us out into the world to serve. In fact, if your congregation understands the basics of that kind of liturgy, your congregation is being equipped already to know how to share the gospel.¹⁶

In connection with this, I might add that, in light of what we have been saying about the covenant and about speaking the language of Scripture, it is appropriate in our worship services to make some things about the gospel very clear for our congregations. They confess their sin regularly in our worship services, and it is appropriate to have an absolution.

That doesn't mean that the minister himself — by himself, by his own power — can somehow declare sins forgiven, that he himself can forgive. But ministerially — that is, in terms of administering God's Word — it is appropriate for the pastor, representing Christ, to call God's people to a confession of sins, to lead them in a prayer of confession of sin, and then to pronounce on behalf of Christ what Christ says in His Word about those who have confessed their sins.

It is appropriate to pronounce forgiveness, to declare that sins have been forgiven — and not just in general (“The sins of God's people are forgiven” or “The sins of the elect are forgiven, whoever you may be”). The Bible speaks very directly to us. It is appropriate to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” and to mean that for everyone who is sitting there, head for head. They have been led in the congregational confession of sin, and the Lord promises that those who confess their sins are forgiven. The Lord is faithful and just to forgive their sins. And so it is appropriate, when we have confessed our sins, for Christ's representative then to declare that our sins have been forgiven.

Now you might say, “Well, that isn't entirely necessary. We do that through the preaching of the Word as well.” And that's wonderful. But even if it isn't absolutely necessary, it is still appropriate for us, in our worship services, to make that declaration of forgiveness very clear for people. It's especially pastoral to do so for those who struggle with sin, who come to church burdened with their sins. It's pastoral to lead them to confess their sins, but then to have God's Word come to them from outside themselves, declaring authoritatively, “Your sins — the ones you've been so burdened with as you came to church — are forgiven.” How do you know they are? Christ has sent a herald to represent Him, to declare authoritatively that that is the case.

¹⁵Cf. Meyers, *Lord's Service*, p. 28.

¹⁶In fact, Burke Shade, the pastor of Cornerstone Reformed Church (CRE) in Carbondale, Illinois, has developed an evangelistic liturgy, that is, an explanation of the liturgy which enables congregation members to use their regular Sunday morning liturgy to present the gospel to unbelievers.

Our liturgy is often referred to as “covenant renewal” liturgy, because this was the pattern of covenant renewals in the Old Covenant. Covenant renewal liturgy is evangelistic for those who sit under the gospel week after week, who hear that their sins are forgiven, who leave the service renewed and equipped to serve God with assurance of their salvation. But it’s also evangelistic *indirectly* for those unbelievers who attend the service.

We should make unbelievers — the unchurched, the unbaptized — *welcome* in our services. We should not make them *comfortable*. Welcome but not comfortable. They should not be able to sit through a service and say, “This doesn’t touch me; I don’t mind hearing this.” Rather, they ought to hear the reality of sin. They ought to hear the warnings. They ought to see that these strong warnings are preached to God’s people so that they say to themselves, “How much more does that apply to me, since I’m not one of God’s people!” They ought to long for the assurance of forgiveness that is given to the people of God and the blessings that are given to the people of God. Even as they watch us worship, they are being taught about God calling us, about God cleansing us as we confess our sins, about God equipping us to live for Him in the world. They are being taught the gospel even through our liturgy.

2. Preaching

Liturgy is one aspect of our home missions. Preaching, of course, is part of that liturgy. As I said in my previous lectures, we need to preach to the congregation as to God’s covenant people, which means that we preach the promises boldly. We can say to them, “Your sins are forgiven.” We can tell them what the Bible says about them.

But we also preach to them the covenant demand. We preach to them the covenant warnings. We don’t need to look around the congregation and say, “Well, those people over there seem to be the faithful ones, so they get the promises, but that guy over here is a troublemaker and so the warning goes to him.”

As we preach to the congregation as God’s covenant people, we are relieved from any pressure to try to analyze the congregation and to tailor-make our application for certain people — the promise to the faithful, the warning to the unfaithful. Rather, we preach the promise to the entire congregation. The ones who are not living for the Lord receive the promise, too. It’s preached to them and it calls them to respond in faith. That promise is intended to elicit faith so that they repent of their sins. But we also preach the warnings to the entire congregation. We don’t preach the warnings only to the ones who seem to be straying. We preach the warnings to the ones who seem passionately faithful, because they also need to hear the whole of God’s Word, the whole of what God says. They need to hear the warnings.

Interestingly enough, when the Westminster Confession of Faith talks about faith says, “Faith trembles at the warnings” (cf. WCF 14.2) — not “Doubt trembles at the warnings,” but “Faith trembles at the warnings.” The Canons of Dort, when they talk about the assurance of salvation, the perseverance of the saints, say that the Lord confirms us and establishes us and causes us to persevere by *threats*, among other things. It lists a number of things that God uses, including threats and promises. The threats also are God’s means of taking strong faithful Christians and making them stronger, causing them to persevere.

So as we preach, we preach promise, we preach demand, we preach warning to everybody, to the whole congregation, head for head. As we preach that way, nobody who is struggling in their faith should go away discouraged, because he has had the promise preached to him. Nobody who is complacent ought to go away complacent, because he has had the demand and the warning preached to him. When we preach covenantally, we don't try to analyze the congregation and gear this aspect of the sermon to that person and that aspect to this person. Instead, the entire congregation receives promise and warning, gets warned away from their sins, gets strengthened in their trust in God and their desire to serve Him.

3. *Counseling and Discipline*

Home missions also takes place through counseling and through discipline. When I was in seminary, I was working on a paper dealing with the assurance of salvation. In my previous year, I had written a paper dealing with how to counsel somebody who is struggling with homosexuality, a Christian who is struggling with these temptations, these failings. And I had that situation in the back of my mind as I thought about assurance.

When you read some books — even some Reformed books — about assurance, they will say something like this: “Anyone can have assurance provided he continues in godliness for a certain space of time.” But how long? Is five minutes good? Or should it be ten? Does it have to be a year or two of godliness before you can have any assurance?

I began to wonder: What do you do with somebody who struggles against sin but who falls into terrible sins, who wants to flee from them but who finds himself terribly attracted to them? Can a person like that have assurance of salvation or does that assurance have to wait until much later on, until after he has already conquered the terrible sins that he is struggling against?

But how do you conquer sin when you have no assurance? How do you battle against sin when you're not sure that God loves you, when you're not really sure that Christ died for you, when you're not really sure that you are one of His people? How could you ever fight against sin? What power would you have to fight with if you're not really sure that He's given you His Holy Spirit?

As we counsel people who struggle with sin, it's appropriate to remind them of who they are *objectively* as God's covenant people. Paul does something like that in Romans 6. Paul is responding there to people who say, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” But we can apply that response also to people who do struggle with sin.

As Paul responds to that question, he says, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3-4). And he goes on to speak about us being dead. The old man, that old self, is dead, he says. We have been raised with Christ.

That is something we can say to the man who comes into our office and confesses that he is struggling with terrible sins. It is appropriate to say, “Who are you as a Christian?” We are sometimes tempted to look at somebody like that and say, “What a loser. He's is struggling with

all these kinds of sins. Man, I just wish he'd get a grip." Sometimes you wonder if he's really a Christian after all. "Just stop that sin," we want to say. We're sometimes tempted to react that way, especially if it's a repeated sin

But we ought to say, "This man is a Christian. This man has been baptized into Jesus Christ. He is a member of God's covenant people. And he needs to learn to see himself as a member of God's covenant people, as somebody who has been baptized into Christ, as somebody who shares in Christ's death and in Christ's resurrection, as somebody who has been raised to live a new life, having died already to sins with Christ."

We can tell the man who's falling into terrible sin repeatedly and who struggles against it that he's not in this battle alone. We can remind him of what God has done for him in Christ, of how his sins have been forgiven, of how he has died to sin. He has been liberated from the slavery of sin. He is not a slave anymore, but he has been raised to new life with Christ. And now he is to live that new life.

It's not as if he first has to attain a certain level, and only then can he have the assurance that he has Christ. Rather, knowing — by God's promise — that he has Christ, he can begin to fight with confidence and with hope as he battles against sin. And though he falls, he need not be totally discouraged. He's also coming regularly to church to hear God say to him, "Your sins are forgiven, though you've fallen again and again." He can be encouraged week after week with that assurance as he looks at his relationship to Christ, as he looks at the objective things that God has given to him, at his baptism into Christ.

There are times when that kind of counseling and all of our work must lead to discipline. There are times when people do not turn from their sin but harden themselves in it.

But discipline doesn't start with some kind of mental excommunication. There's really no such thing as mental excommunication. But we try to practice it sometimes. We say to ourselves, "That guy is just not regenerate." Or: "I bet he never was one of us! He never really was a Christian after all." And then sometimes we follow that up with scolding and eventual neglect, because he was never really among us anyway. He was here, but he wasn't a Christian. All too often, that's how we view other people.

But discipline, which is closely related to the word "discipling," involves teaching and encouraging people — not people whom we simply *regard* as our brothers and sisters, but people who *are* covenantally our brothers and sisters. It involves teaching them to observe all that God has commanded in view of the hope that is laid up for those who love Christ. We teach them to respond to God's Word in faith. We teach them to do what the Lord tells them to do. And we warn them with the covenant warnings, lest they fall away. As Norman Shepherd says, "Discipline like discipling, is a matter of teaching and encouraging one's brother to observe all that God has commanded, in view of this hope that is laid up for those who love Christ and keep his commandments."¹⁷

¹⁷Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2000), p. 105.

But then, if the person persists in sin we don't ignore him. We don't then say, "Well, sure he's wandered away from the church. We don't see him in services very often. And he's living a wicked lifestyle. But you know, you get people like that sometimes, and we don't worry about that."

No, we need to go after him. We don't simply let him go. As he persists in sin he needs to be removed, publicly and authoritatively. He should be removed from the covenant community by public excommunication. At *that* point we regard him as an unbeliever. At *that* point we regard him officially as somebody who does not belong to Christ, who is not a Christian. Until then, in the New Testament sense of the term, he is a Christian.

4. *Raising Children*

Home missions also involves child-rearing. And I'm not going to say a whole lot about this because there's almost no end to what I could say about Christian education of our children. But briefly, I'd like to say that we need to raise our children to view themselves as those who are in Christ.

That's what God has said about them. And so we need to teach them to see themselves as Christians. Parents sometimes worry: "If I let my child think that he's a Christian, if I let him think that he's one of God's elect, then he's just going to go out and presume upon that and sin like crazy."

But nobody ever fell away from the faith because he was too assured of God's promises, because he believed them too strongly. Nobody ever said, "Because I believe what God says, because I trust in Him and I've been taught to regard myself as one of His people and I've been taught to love the Lord and to see myself as belonging to Him, therefore I'm going to go out and sin all I want."

People do sometimes fall away because they don't have assurance. They don't fall away because they have comfort and assurance. We need to teach our children, without fear, to see themselves as God's people, to view themselves as Christians, to know that their sins are forgiven in Christ — and then to live as Christians, confessing their sin, asking for forgiveness, serving the Lord, and keeping His commandments.

5. *Evangelizing People from Erring Churches*

At this point, I'm making a transition *toward* foreign missions. I'm not at foreign missions yet, but we're moving farther away now from our own local congregation to deal with the evangelism of those who are in erring churches and false churches. How do you evangelize people who are, for instance, Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox?

I think it's appropriate for us to view those who are in such churches as analogous to Northern Israel in the Old Covenant. We do something like this *in fact* because we recognize Roman Catholic baptism and Eastern Orthodox baptism as legitimate, valid baptism. We don't baptize a Roman Catholic when he joins the church. We don't baptize somebody who is Eastern Orthodox when he joins the church. But we *do* baptize Mormons when they join the church, because we don't recognize their Mormon baptism as a baptism into the name of the Triune God.

We don't recognize the baptism of a Jehovah's Witness as a baptism. Historically, however, we do recognize the baptism of a Roman Catholic as a genuine, valid baptism. So, in fact, by our practice we are recognizing their baptism as legitimate. And by our practice we are recognizing them therefore as covenant people, baptized into Christ.

Now does that that everything is okay, there's nothing wrong in those churches? Are we taking part in what Doug Wilson mentioned earlier, the ecumenical schmooze fest?

No. Northern Israel, we could say, was a false church. Here are God's covenant people worshipping idols. They are worshipping golden calves at Dan and Bethel. And yet they are circumcised. And God says about idolaters that they are offering up *His children* to Molech. He says in Ezekiel, "You take My children and offer them up" (cf. Ezek. 16:21).

We would look at that and say, "Yeah, but these Israelites are pretty much pagans." But God still regards them as Israelites. And we find that Hezekiah calls them and he invites them to Passover, of all things! What would it mean for somebody from Northern Israel to come to Passover? Part of what it would mean is repentance, rejecting the worship at Bethel and Dan and recognizing the legitimacy — and the sole legitimacy — of the worship in the temple in Jerusalem. Hezekiah called them to come into that fellowship.

And so, as we deal with those churches who practice valid baptism, those churches whose members *are* covenant members baptized into Christ but who are involved in idolatrous practices, in worship that is displeasing to God, we call them to live as God's covenant people, to be faithful to the covenant. That entails turning from idolatry. It entails turning from practices displeasing to the Lord and coming to worship Him in accord with His Word. We don't simply write them off or pretend that their baptism is invalid. But we call them in terms of their baptism — because Christ has a claim on them, because they have been brought into covenantal fellowship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit — to live in that covenantal fellowship, lest they be destroyed. We call them to faithfulness.

6. Evangelizing Covenant-Breakers

Something similar can be said also about evangelism to covenant-breakers, to those who have wandered from the faith. Some haven't been excommunicated, and we need to address them in terms of their status. We need to grab them by their baptisms, as I believe Doug said last night. We need to call them to live up to what God has given to them in baptism, what He has said about them in baptism. We need to call them to live as God's covenant people, lest they incur the wrath of the covenant, the wrath of the covenant God.

B. FOREIGN MISSIONS

Some covenant-breakers *have* been excommunicated. Now we are moving to foreign missions proper, missions outside the covenant community, missions outside God's Kingdom. When we deal with those who have been excommunicated, we need to deal with the seriousness and the reality of their apostasy.

In other words, we don't pretend that they were never Christians in the first place. They didn't fall from nowhere; they fell from privilege, from genuine privilege that God gave them.

They were once among God's people. They once received all the same promises we did, all the promises of the gospel. They were promised eternal life in Christ. They were promised fellowship with God. They were fed at His table. And they rejected it. The Lord spread out a banquet of all of His grace for them, and they rejected it. They rejected privilege, and they need to realize the seriousness of their apostasy.

It's amazing how many unbelievers you meet who have a church background. And it seems as if they've never been told what they did when they left the church or what happened to them when they left the church. They may know that they are unbelievers, although many of them think that they believe in God still. Sure they believe in God; they just don't attend church. They don't belong to any church, they say, and they don't see that as a problem. They don't think of themselves as having abandoned Christ. They don't see themselves as living under covenant wrath.

And we need desperately, especially in our North American evangelical situation, to treat excommunication seriously and to treat apostasy seriously. We need to call people who are apostate, who have abandoned their privilege in Christ, to see what they have left and to see what they have incurred and to speak to them seriously in terms of their baptism. God claimed them at some point in their lives and God does not simply let His people go. When God's covenant love is spurned, His love is a jealous love, and they need to be warned seriously about His jealousy..

As I said, most unbelievers in our society have some connection to the church. Many of them grew up in the church themselves, or their parents did, or their grandparents did. But there are others, of course, who have no connection historically to the church. Think of people with a Muslim background, for instance..

But that lack of a church background doesn't mean that the covenant now plays no role in our evangelism. We still evangelize in terms of the covenant because everybody in the world, ultimately, is a covenant-breaker in Adam and in Noah. Jewish unbelievers are also covenant-breakers in Abraham and in Moses. They have broken covenant with God, and they need to be dealt with as covenant-breakers, as those who once were related to God, who once had fellowship with God, but who have spurned that relationship and have turned away. So we preach the covenant warning to them

But we also preach good news to them. As I said earlier, Israel was placed in the world as, in a sense, the representative of the world. They were the priestly nation, the holy nation, the one nation out of all the nations who had access to God. God lived in Israel's presence, and good news for Israel is good news for the world.

And so when John the Baptist preaches, he preaches specifically to Jews, but he preaches about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the *world*. He calls Israel to be baptized in preparation for Him. But that message now goes out to the ends of the earth. And we preach that message as good news.

That may seem obvious: the gospel is good news. But let me say this: we preach that gospel as good news even for the reprobate. It's good news for them.

Charles Spurgeon is said to have made this remark once: “If the elect had a yellow stripe painted on their backs, then when I preached I would go around lifting up shirts. But they don’t, and so I preach the same good news to everybody.”¹⁸

What’s the problem with that remark? The problem is that it almost sounds as if it’s unfortunate that we don’t know who the elect are. It could have saved us a whole lot of trouble if they had yellow stripes painted on their backs or, more likely, on their foreheads. Then you would simply preach to the ones who had the mark — a big E for Elect, maybe.

But the implication of that statement seems to be that it’s unfortunate we don’t know who the elect are. If we did, it would save us a whole lot of time. But because we don’t, we have to spend our time going around preaching the gospel to people who may, in fact, turn out not to be elect — as if the gospel isn’t really good news for them, as if the gospel is somehow intended to go to the elect alone.

Now, I don’t know if that’s what Spurgeon had in mind. I’m using the statement that’s attributed to him simply as a foil here. But I want us to understand that the fact that we don’t know who the elect are isn’t a problem. It isn’t kind of an unfortunate thing. The fact that we have to preach to all kinds of people, whether they are elect or not, is not a kind of make-work project that God has given to us, bringing the gospel to people for whom it is not good news.

No, God *wants* the gospel to go to everybody. He doesn’t want us to preach to the elect only. If He wanted us to preach the gospel as good news to the elect only, He would have let us know who they are and He would have told us so in His Word. But the fact that God wants the gospel to go to everyone tells us something about God, about the kind of God we have, about the love of our God. And it tells us something also about the gospel itself. The gospel *is* good news for everyone in the world.

The goodness of that gospel is rooted in the promises of the covenant. >From the very beginning, when Adam and Eve fell into sin, God gave the human race a promise of the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. God overcomes man’s sin. He sets up the antithesis, breaking people free from following Satan, so that now there is constant war. He overcomes man’s sin and He rescues covenant-breakers — first through Noah in one sense. And then He rescues them again in Abraham in a sense, and now in Christ also.

And that is good news. God’s covenant doesn’t simply mean that those who have broken covenant are now under God’s covenant wrath. It does mean that. We speak of them as children of wrath, as Scripture does. But the Bible also tells us that God hasn’t simply let covenant-breakers go. He is the kind of God who hunts them down, who calls to them with good news, and who runs to meet them when they come home like the prodigal son.

Our God is a God who runs. He doesn’t stay cold and distant. He doesn’t stand back and wait for the prodigal to come home and make him do a little crawling, a little jumping through

¹⁸I have never been able to find the source for this quotation (which I’ve paraphrased from memory here), and the attribution of it to Spurgeon is only tentative at best.

hoops. He's a God who does something terribly undignified, especially in the culture of that time. When Jesus told that parable, grown men didn't run much. But this one does. This Father runs to welcome covenant-breakers back. And that's the good news that we can preach, not just to our congregations, but to the world as well.

And as we preach, we don't view our audience out in the world as a mixture of elect and reprobate, with the hope that somehow our preaching will distinguish the one from the other, so that we get the elect over here and the reprobate over there, and the elect will come in. We view the audience as what they are: covenant-breakers who are called seriously — all of them — by God. We long for all of them to turn from sin, to return to covenant life, to union and communion with Christ.

One other comment in that connection: Preach to the men. To quote a certain brother from Brooklyn: "If you preach to women and children, you get women and children in church. If you preach to men, you get men, women and children in church."

Preach to the men as heads of a covenantal household. That may mean — I throw this out for your consideration — that we ought to reevaluate certain methods that we use for evangelism. For instance, at the risk of stepping on toes all over the place here, it may mean reevaluating Vacation Bible School, where we aim at the children in the hope that maybe Mom and Dad will show up on Friday at the program and hear the gospel. Or maybe the kids will get converted and, somehow, through the kids' example, Mom and Dad will be converted. Maybe the kids will catechize Dad later on. That approach may be something that we need to reconsider so that we get back to preaching to the men who will then raise their children, not just with VBS two weeks in the year, but with fifty-two weeks in the year of hearing the gospel.

C. THE GOAL OF EVANGELISM

What is our goal as we evangelize in a covenantal way? Our goal is not to get people to believe in something called Christianity. I'm drawing here on a couple of essays, one by Mark Horne and another by Peter Leithart, called "Against 'Christianity'; For the Church."¹⁹

The Bible doesn't say anything about Christianity; it talks about the church. Here's the example that Mark gives. Suppose you, as an American, are coming up to visit me in Canada and you stop at a restaurant there in Canada. As you are talking, your waiter hears your accent and he comes rushing over to the table and says, "Are you an American?"

You say, "Well, yes, I am."

He says, "Well, it's been so long since I've talked to an American. It's so hard to find fellowship with Americans here."

¹⁹Mark Horne, "Of the Church" (http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/of_the_church.htm) and Peter J. Leithart, "Against 'Christianity'; For the Church," *Christendom Essays*, ed. James B. Jordan (Niceville: Transfiguration Press, 1997), pp. 29-50. A slightly different version of this essay appeared in *Premise* 4.2 (1997), which is available online at <http://capo.org/premise/97/june/p970604.html>.

You say, “Well, how long have you lived in Canada?”

“All my life.”

“So your parents were Americans?” you ask.

“No, no,” he says. “Sadly they remained Canadians all their lives.”

“Why do you call yourself an American then?”

“Well,” he says, “I’ve read through the Constitution. I’ve memorized parts of it and I believe it. I like the flag. I even read the Congressional Record. I believe in Americanism.”

And then you will need to tell him that there’s no such thing as Americanism. To be an American means to be part of this institution. You need to be a citizen of the United States of America. No matter how much you like Americans, you’re not an American if you’re born and raised in Canada and you’re a Canadian citizen. No matter how much you like the States; it doesn’t change things. And so you will tell that waiter that there’s no such thing as Americanism.

And so too there is no such thing as Christianity. The Bible never preaches it. The Bible never talks about it. What we mean sometimes by “Christianity” is a set of ideas, a set of doctrines. And we say, “Well, do you believe these ideas? Do you subscribe to all these doctrines? Then you are a Christian.”

But the Bible doesn’t talk that way. The Bible talks about joining *the church*, becoming a citizen of the Kingdom of God. And our evangelism is not complete until that happens. Even then it is not complete; there is still ongoing discipleship. But our goal is not simply to have the people that we are talking to adopt a set of doctrines, believe a set of things. Our goal is to have them be citizens in God’s Kingdom. Our goal is to have them enter the church. And that public entrance into the church is a rite, a ritual, we call baptism. That is what we have in mind as we evangelize.

If we evangelize covenantally, we don’t orient our evangelism toward something called regeneration, an experience that may or may not happen in this person as he hears these doctrines and claims to believe them. All too often, we’re trying to evaluate — with a complete lack of cardio-analytic ability — whether he really believes them or not. If we think he does, if he’s finally convinced us that he does, then we call him a Christian and send him on his way. But we can’t make those kinds of judgments. We don’t have cardio-analytic ability. We can’t read his heart. And it’s a waste of time to try. Instead, we go by what God has told us and what He shows us and what He does to us.

The Great Commission speaks about making disciples, but it talks in that connection about *baptizing* them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We want those who come to believe the gospel, who put their trust in Christ, not to be isolated on their own but to be baptized into a community. It’s a terrible abnormality to have an unbaptized Christian, a Christian who is not covenantally connected to the others in the body of Christ

And that leads to a possible thought question for us. Do we wait too long for baptisms for new converts? We sometimes put them through catechism for long periods of time. And yet, when we read the Bible, we find they're baptizing people very quickly. We sometimes seem as if we want them to jump through a number of hoops first before we baptize. But we need to baptize and then to teach. It's not as if new converts have to be fully taught. Jesus said, "Baptizing them and teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded." Some things need to be taught before baptism for a new convert. Many things need to be taught after.

And so we're back to home missions again, because there's ongoing lifelong discipleship. Our goal is to have people baptized. But we don't drop them after that. We want them to grow. We don't expect them to be fully mature Christians in order to be baptized into Christ, to become members of the church. We baptize them and then we want them to grow after that point.

"Evangelism," says Norman Shepherd, "does not end with regeneration, but continues as long as a person lives. Baptism marks the entrance into the Kingdom of God and the beginning of lifelong training as Kingdom subjects."²⁰

Our goal for home missions and foreign missions, then, is that people will be brought into the covenant, brought into the church through baptism. Some will be baptized as infants; others will be baptized later on as they come to believe the gospel. But all of them begin the Christian life as infants — even the man who is seventy years old and who has now come to understand the gospel and is baptized. There is a sense in which he too is beginning the Christian life as an infant, as a newborn. But our goal is that all of these people join the church, be taught, instructed, disciplined, trained — not only in mind, but also in body — to live and to talk and to act as Christians.

And we carry out that evangelistic task with great hope and expectation, with anticipation because of God's covenant promise. He has promised that Abraham will be the father of nations; He has promised that Sarah will be the mother of nations.

"Those nations will be circumcised," He said. Abraham was to circumcise all of his descendants, and he will be the father of nations. But how are the nations being circumcised? Paul tells us in Colossians that they have been circumcised and they are being circumcised in Christ. How do you know that? You've been baptized. Paul says, "You've been circumcised in Christ." And immediately he talks about baptism in that connection (Col. 2:11-12).

We can anticipate with great hope and great excitement that our evangelistic efforts are the fulfillment and will be the fulfillment of this promise that Sarah will be the mother of nations, that Abraham will be the father of nations, who will be circumcised, who will be brought to Christ, who will be baptized into Christ. The number will be like the sand on the seashore; it will be a multitude that no one can count.

And the ultimate end of our evangelistic efforts —our covenantal evangelistic efforts — will be that God's blessing will involve the whole of creation: Garden, Land and World. The

²⁰Shepherd, *Call of Grace*, p. 100.

whole of creation will be transformed because Christ is now on the throne as the glorified Lord. The Adamic covenants — which always ended in death, with Israel in slavery, Israel in exile — have been replaced now by a New Covenant, in which the indefectibility of the church is guaranteed, in which Christ's triumph is guaranteed because Christ has already passed through death into glorified resurrection life.

Christ has poured out His Spirit on the church. Yes, there will be those who will fall away. But there will be many, many more who are gathered in, because God, our covenant God, has made a promise. He intends to have a world, a whole new creation, that glorifies Him. And He is starting to bring that transformation about through us. He spreads His glory out into the world through our evangelistic efforts.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we are amazed as we look at the big picture of your plan for evangelism. We thank you that you have come to us in your Son by the Holy Spirit and you have swept us up into your plans and into your purposes. You have sent your gospel. You have transformed our own hearts and lives by your gospel. You have brought us into your church through baptism and now you have caught us up as your partners in this work of the gospel.

Whether we preach your Word, or whether we labor together with those who do, you have made us your partners, drawing others in, causing your Kingdom to come in this world. We thank you, Father, that your Kingdom comes in the lives of people who have been broken by sin and you don't first ask us to clean up our lives. You come to us and, by Your Holy Spirit, you cleanse us, renew us, cause us to live that new life. And you give us comfort and assurance every step of the way.

Cause us to grab hold of your promises, to believe them, and to go out into your world to proclaim Christ as Lord, so that every knee will bow before Him and every tongue confess that He is Lord to your glory.

Bless our labours. We thank you that, though our evangelistic efforts look so weak, though our missions efforts look so weak, though the preaching of your gospel looks like foolishness, your purposes can never be thwarted. You will indeed have a saved people, a saved world, in the end. Thank you, Father, for your gospel. Receive our praise, and equip us to serve you, through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

COVENANT AND ELECTION

John Barach

The relationship between covenant and election is a controversial topic today as you know. But it also has been controversial in the past. One of my great theological heroes, Klaas Schilder, discovered it to be somewhat controversial in his ministry.²¹

We have to recognize that, when we start talking about election, we are dealing with a subject that many people would rather not discuss. It is tempting not to talk about election. There are many evangelical churches where preachers just don't talk about election at all because they know that many people in their congregations have questions about it and throughout history people have held diverse views on it. So they shy away from getting into something so controversial.

Even in Reformed churches there are people who see election as a problem: "Am I elect? How do I know? Can I really be confident of these things?" Unfortunately there are also others in Reformed churches who treat election as an academic subject, a theological datum with little relevance for us today, something that can easily be set on the side.

It is tempting to avoid the subject of election and many churches do. But we must not give into that temptation. Scripture speaks and so we must speak.

The Canons of Dort, as many of you know, were one of the Reformed church's first great formulations of the doctrine of election. They were written largely in response to the Remonstrants, the Arminians.

The Canons talk about how to teach election properly. The First Head of Doctrine, Article 14, says,

Just as, by God's wise plan, this teaching concerning divine election has been proclaimed through the prophets, Christ Himself, and the apostles, in Old and New Testament times, and has subsequently been committed to writing in the Holy Scriptures, so also today in God's church, for which it was specifically intended, this teaching must be set forth — with a spirit of discretion, in a godly and holy manner, at the appropriate time and place, without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High. This must be done for the glory of God's most holy name, and for the lively comfort of His people.

In the very conclusion to the Canons of Dort something more is said about the way we teach election:

This Synod urges all fellow ministers in the gospel of Christ to deal with this teaching in a godly and reverent manner, in the academic institutions as well as in the churches; to do so, both in their speaking and writing, with a view to the glory of God's name, holiness of life, and the comfort of anxious souls; to think and also speak with Scripture according to the analogy of faith; and, finally, to refrain from all those ways of speaking which go beyond the bounds set for us by the genuine sense of the Holy Scriptures and which could

²¹For more information concerning Schilder and the debates on covenant and election in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the 1940s, see J. Geertsema, ed., *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995); Cornelis van Dam, ed., *The Liberation: Causes and Consequences: The Struggle in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the 1940s* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1995); J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, trans. G. van Rongen (Launceston, Australia: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985); and Rudolf van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, AB: Inheritance, 1990). See also Klaas Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding — A New Danger* (Neerlandia, AB: Inheritance, 1996).

give impertinent sophists a just occasion to scoff at the teaching of the Reformed churches or even to bring false accusations against it.

Notice that, in that last sentence about giving “impertinent sophists a just occasion to scoff” at the Reformed churches, the “sophists” referred to there are the Arminians. And the way in which the Synod of Dort was afraid that people would give them opportunity and occasion to scoff at the Reformed teachings was by Reformed pastors speaking in the way that the conclusion has earlier described, that is, in a way that would make God look stingy (“unjust, a tyrant”), or that would make people “carnally self-assured,” teaching them to ignore the warnings of Scripture, or that would suggest that God has predestined “the greater part of the world to sin and to eternal condemnation” or that “reprobation is the cause of unbelief and ungodliness” or “that many infant children of believers are snatched in their innocence from their mothers’ breasts and cruelly cast into hell so that neither the blood of Christ nor their baptism nor the prayers of the church at their baptism can be of any use to them.” The Canons of Dort identify these as “slandorous accusations ... which the Reformed churches not only disavow but even denounce with their whole heart.”

We have to take this caution to heart as we begin to think about election tonight. How are we to speak about God’s election? The Canons of Dort — these wise pastors — tell us that we are to speak *reverently* (to the glory of God), *pastorally* (focusing on holiness of life and on the comfort of God’s people), and *scripturally* (“without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High,” but rather speaking “with Scripture according to the analogy of faith”).

Perhaps you immediately think in this connection — as I do — of Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.”

We need to think about election and talk about it and preach it on the basis of what Scripture says. I would like to add that we also have to speak and talk and teach and preach about election on the basis of the *way* Scripture says it.

Before we get into the relationship between election and covenant proper, let me first say something about God’s predestination. The Bible tells us that God predestines all things that happen. We know that from Genesis 1:1 already. The first verse of the Bible tells us that all things happen by God’s will. God is the initiator.

We read in Ephesians 1:11 that God is the one “who works all things after the counsel of His will.” Everything that happens is the outworking of God’s will, God’s plan. Everything: your salvation, but also your birth and your baptism. All the events of your life, including your perseverance in faith and your final glorification with Christ.

The Bible teaches that all things happen according to God’s will, so that if anyone enters into final glory with Christ Jesus that is the outworking of God’s eternal plan. God has predestined some people who deserve eternal damnation to eternal glory with Christ instead, while not so predestining others.

This is the Bible's teaching from Genesis 1:1 on through the whole of Scripture. God didn't predestine anyone to glory because of something in that person, but simply out of His sheer love and grace in Christ. God initiates, not because He sees anything in us, but out of sheer grace.

That predestining choice is unchangeable. The number of people who will enter into final glory is the number of people God always *intended* to enter into final glory with Christ.

That predestining choice is also unthwartable. Apostasy, we are told in Romans 9, doesn't thwart God's plan. Yes, some people fall away. Yes, Israel has fallen away. Yes, Israel has been cut off. But that has not thwarted God's plan. God preserves a remnant. And even that apostasy happens in accord with God's will, we are told, to show His wrath, to make His power and His justice known.

It is *scriptural* to emphasize God's predestination as Scripture indeed does. It is also *pastoral* to underscore God's eternal predestination. It teaches us humility and gratitude. It teaches us to praise God for His sheer grace, the grace, which Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:9, "was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity." It also teaches us confidence. As we look at all the different events that happen in life, as we see that some people do fall away and apostatize, we can know that no matter what happens God's purposes cannot be frustrated.

What our confessions say about God's election — that is, about God's predestination of some people to eternal glory with Christ — is true. We need to glory in that truth and we need to teach it.

But if all that is revealed in Scripture is the *fact* of predestination, the fact that God has predestined some people to eternal glory, then we wouldn't get the *fruit* of God's election.

If God chose some people but I don't know if He chose *me* — and I certainly don't know if He chose *you* — then I am left with a kind of agnosticism. I don't know if God really predestined me to share in Christ's glory forever. I don't know if He predestined you. I don't know if He predestined anyone in this room then.

And so we take God's election — which was revealed for our comfort — and we move it up into some kind of numinal realm, out of our reach, so that we don't know about it. At best we can guess. At best we can make charitable judgments about other people in the church. But we don't know. That is the case, if all Scripture tells us is the *fact* of predestination. But thank God He has told us more than simply *that* He predestined some people.

We are bound to what Scripture says about election. But we are also bound, I said earlier, to the *way* Scripture speaks about election. We are bound, that is, to the *tone* of Scripture, to the manner in which Scripture presents all of its talk about God's predestination, about God's election.

When Scripture speaks about election it speaks about it as good and joyful news. Election is never to be presented — and it is never presented in Scripture — as some kind of terrible frightening mystery, something that should cause us qualms when we think about ourselves and

our relationship to God. Scripture does not present God as a stingy miser who is parsimonious with His grace.

The Canons of Dort, responding to all the charges and attacks on election being made by the Arminians, warned specifically against teaching things that justified those charges. They warned against teaching that God is “unjust, a tyrant.” Scripture doesn’t present God as a stingy miser. Scripture doesn’t present election with that tone..

You may say, “Aren’t you presenting a caricature here? Who preaches that way?” I wish it were a caricature. If you have never encountered the kind of teaching about election that makes God look stingy, you should be thankful. But there are ministers and churches that bear the name Reformed that do present God’s election in this way.

There are churches where perhaps twenty people out of seven hundred partake of the Lord’s Supper because they are taught that they need to wait to find out if they are *really* elect. They aren’t sure that they are in the covenant. All God’s promises are only for the covenant and the covenant, they say, is made with the elect only and they don’t know if they are elect. They are given the impression that they need to wait for some kind of experience of God’s grace and love to know that they are elect before they can even be confident that they were really baptized, that they are really God’s covenant people, that Jesus really died for them. They need to wait for some kind of experience apart from Scripture. That is not a caricature. I wish to God that it were.

But the Bible doesn’t present election as something to cause fear and trembling and worry. It presents election as something to be certain of and to rejoice in and to glory in. Election is good news. It’s encouragement. It’s comfort. It’s a declaration that God has given you a great privilege. God chose you out of the whole human race to belong to Him. He set His love on you. He wanted you . He made you special.

Now here is the big question. Who is that “you” who is elect? Who is that “you” who receives that comfort?

Scripture’s tone in talking about election drives us to realize that Scripture’s talk about election is not just general. It has an address on it. It is addressed to certain particular people. God in Scripture identifies people as His elect. He calls them His “chosen.” Who are those people whom God addresses in this way?

That question gets us into the relationship between election and covenant. That relationship has been viewed in several different ways.

There are some who say that God simply chooses a general category of people, a class of people (Israel, the church), but that God has not predestined any individual to eternal glory with Christ. That is the Arminian position.

We need to reject that position because the Bible tells us that God works out all things according to His will. And “all things” includes not only our entrance into God’s covenant

people in history but also who will persevere to the end. It includes who is going to enter into eternal glory with Christ. Those things also — we know from Ephesians 1 — God is working out according to His will.

That is one view: God just chooses a class of people — the church — and not individuals. We need to reject that view.

There is another view more popular in our circles. That view says that only the elect, that is, only those whom God has predestined to eternal glory with Christ, are really in the covenant. Others may be in the *sphere* of the covenant. They may be *externally* in the covenant. But only those predestined to eternal glory with Christ are *really* in the covenant or *internally* in the covenant. And God makes no promises, then, to those who are not predestined to eternal salvation.

That is one Reformed view. But it is only *one* Reformed view. There have been many Reformed views in history. This particular view is held by people in the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Netherlands Reformed Churches. It is held by Reformed Baptists. And it is held by many Presbyterians.

This view even appears to have some support from the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 31: “With whom was the covenant of grace made? The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed.” Some people see that answer as giving support to the view that only the elect, only those predestined to glory with Christ eternally, are really in the covenant. Others are only externally in the covenant or in the sphere of the covenant.²²

This view presents a number of pastoral problems. If we don’t know who is predestined to eternal glory with Christ and they are the only ones who are really in the covenant, then it follows that we don’t know who is really in the covenant. As a pastor, you cannot justify regarding everybody in your congregation as God’s covenant people because you don’t know that they really are. And so you find sometimes that ministers who hold this view will not address their congregation as the congregation of Jesus Christ because they don’t know whether they belong to Christ. Some of them might. But they don’t know who is predestined to glory with Christ.

On this view, if you baptize a child, has that child really been baptized? Or was that baptism just a sprinkling with water? Baptism is tied to God’s covenant. But we don’t know if this person is in the covenant.

And so writers such as Abraham Kuyper have taught that, just as there is sometimes a false labor that doesn’t result in birth, so sometimes there is what he calls *schijndoop*, an apparent baptism. It looks like baptism. The minister is there. He pours the water over the head of that

²²Notice, though, that the Westminster Larger Catechism says that the children of believers are also in the covenant (Q&A 166). Q&A 31 is not the only statement in the Catechism about who is in covenant with God. You can make a case that the Westminster Larger Catechism has a broader view of who is in the covenant than the view I am describing here.

child. He says the words. But it was only apparent baptism. It was not a real baptism because that child turns out later on not to have been elect. If the child is elect it was a real baptism. If the child was not elect then it wasn't.²³

On this view, then, we don't know then if our children are in the covenant. Can we teach our children to pray to God as their *Father* if we don't know if they have been predestined to eternal glory with Christ? Can we teach our children to sing "Jesus loves me, for the Bible tells me so" if we don't know if they are predestined to eternal glory with Christ? Can we teach our children any of the Psalms if we don't know that they have the right as God's people to sing those Psalms? And so we no longer treat our children as God's covenant people. We no longer treat the whole congregation as God's covenant people.

As we become consistent with this view we are inclined to preach in the third person — not *I* and *we* and *you*. We can talk about sin in the first and second person: "I have sinned; we have sinned; you have sinned." We can talk about our duty in the first and second person: "We must obey God's commandments. You must love the Lord." But when it comes to talking about salvation suddenly we switch to the third person: "Jesus died for *the elect*." We cannot say *we* or *you* to the congregation because we don't know if what we're saying is really for them. We don't know if they are in the covenant and if God's covenant promises are for them.

If we hold this view consistently, then, the covenant no longer functions in our thinking and our practice because we have made the covenant as invisible and as unknowable for us as God's eternal predestination. We end up trying to do theology and our pastoral work — and we end up trying to relate to other people in the congregation — in terms of the secret things which belong to the Lord instead of the things which He has revealed to us and to our sons for our comfort.

In fact, on this view we also end up with a problem that is even worse. We lose the ability to use the language of Scripture and to apply it directly to the flesh-and-blood people who are sitting in our pews.

In the Bible God makes His covenant with believers and their children. We see that in Genesis 17. God establishes His covenant with Abraham and what does He tell him? To include his children. To have his sons circumcised.

The covenant is with believers and their children, even though those children may later break covenant with God. That was true in the Old Covenant, and that is true in the New Covenant.

The Bible tells us that people can and do break the New Covenant. Hebrews 10:29: "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace."

²³Abraham Kuyper, *Voor een distel een mirt: Geestelijke overdenkingen bij den heiligen Doop, bij het doen van belijdenis en het toegaan tot het Heilig Avondmaal* (Amsterdam, 1891), p. 54 cited in J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, pp. 24-25.

Notice what Hebrews says. It says that this person has “trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was” — brought into the sphere of the covenant? No. “By which he was sanctified,” really and truly. And he “has insulted the Spirit of grace.”

The New Covenant can be broken. Jesus taught us that. He says in John 15, “I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch *in me* that does not bear fruit, He takes away.” He doesn’t say, “Every bit of tumbleweed that is stuck in my branches.” He says, “Every branch *in me*.”

These branches were not stuck to the tree with scotch tape. These branches were genuinely in Christ. That’s good Pauline language and it’s the language of Jesus. “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away.”

And that is not a reference to mere chastening. Jesus says, “If anyone does not abide in me” — that is, if anyone does not *stay* in me, where he really is — “he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.”

Some who are in Him, Jesus teaches us, get cut off and burned. They apostatize and they go to hell.

Scripture tells us that not all who are in the covenant have been predestined to eternal glory with Christ. They don’t end up in eternal glory. And they don’t end up there because they have not been predestined to end up there.

What, then, is the relationship between covenant and election? As we read Scripture we discover that the covenant includes believers and their children. Abraham and his seed are included. It includes all who profess their faith — even the hypocrites — and their children.

There are people in the covenant and in the church who will not be in the church on the last day but will have been cut off and burned. There are people in the covenant and in the church whom God has not predestined to persevere to the end and to inherit eternal glory with Christ forever.

I said the previous view was only one of the Reformed views. This view I have just presented is another strand of Reformed thought, and it has very good credentials. This happens to have been Calvin’s view.²⁴ Many of the other early reformers held a similar view. It is the view, I believe, which is taught in the Three Forms of Unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort.²⁵ It has been the view of many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians, as well.

²⁴Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

²⁵Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 74 (the infants of believers are “included in the covenant” and are “by baptism ... grafted into the Christian church”); Belgic Confession, Art. 34 (“Christ shed His blood ... for the washing of the children of believers”); Canons of Dort I.17 (God’s Word testifies that the children of believers are included in the covenant). Note also that the conclusion of the Canons of Dort rejects the view that when the infants of believers

Reformed theologians haven't always agreed on the relationship of covenant and election. We sometimes think that our view alone is the Reformed view: "Anybody who disagrees with me has disagreed with *the* Reformed view." Greg Bahnsen once said that we tend to calculate the mainstream by gerrymandering a canal right where we are standing so that we can say, "I am the mainstream. Everybody who diverts from this is not."²⁶

What I have just presented, then, is another strand of Reformed thought. But you will find all kinds of variations of thinking about the relationship between covenant and election all through history. We need to give each other some breathing room, as the church historically has, on the issue of covenant and election.

It seems clear to me, however, that the view I have just presented is biblical. I believe that the Bible teaches that God makes His covenant with believers and their children. But some in the covenant have not been predestined to eternal glory with Christ.

But is that all we can say about the relationship between covenant and election? There are people who take that approach. They have a radical form of this view which sharply distinguishes covenant from election. Election is over here and covenant is over there, and never the two shall meet. God predestined some people to glory with Christ. But that has nothing to do with who is in the covenant.

But that isn't the way Scripture speaks. So we are back to the question that we asked earlier: To whom does God address the statements in Scripture about His election? Whom does God call "elect"?

We discover in Scripture that God addresses His faithful covenant people that way, as His "chosen ones," as His "elect ones." Sometimes God applies that language to the whole of the covenant people: "You are my chosen nation." Sometimes He applies it, in particular, to a remnant which is faithful while the rest are apostate.

We find that language in particular in the Old Testament. Too many of our Reformed treatments of election deal almost strictly with the New Testament. But the Old Testament isn't silent on election, and we need to hear what it says.

In the Psalms, Israel is often referred to as God's chosen ones. We see the same thing many times in Deuteronomy. We find it in Deuteronomy 4:37: "Because He loved their fathers,

die they perish "so that neither ... their *baptism* nor the prayers of the church at their *baptism* can be of any use to them."

²⁶"I have spoken purposely of the history of respectable Reformed thought, not of a mythological 'mainstream of Reformed thought' because the latter is usually found by gerrymandering a canal under one's own feet." Greg L. Bahnsen, "God's Law and Gospel Prosperity: A Reply to the Editor of the Presbyterian Journal" (distributed by the Session of St. Paul Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, 1978, and available at www.cmfnow.com, #PE041), cited in Robert R. Booth, "Covenantal Antithesis," *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, ed. Steven M. Schlissel (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), p. 29.

therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power.” Notice the connection there between choosing and exodus.

We hear something similar in Deuteronomy 10:14-15: “Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it. Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day.”

The classic passage in this connection is Deuteronomy 7:6ff.:

You are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Again, notice the connection here between election and exodus. The Lord didn't *choose you* because you were great in number, Moses says. But He *brought you out of Egypt* because He set His love on you and kept the oath He had made some time in the past to your forefathers.

This close tie between election and exodus may appear to present a bit of a problem. It seems as if God's choice or election of Israel was made *in history*. God chose you, Moses says, because He was keeping an oath He made some time ago to the forefathers. This election happens in history and appears to be identical, in Deuteronomy 7, with the Exodus.

But the *historical* character of this choice shouldn't trouble us. We find the same thing more often in Scripture.²⁷ Think of the choice of a king for Israel. We read in Deuteronomy 17 that the Israelites are to choose for themselves a king whom the Lord chooses, or, as some translations put it, whom the Lord *will* choose.

When did God choose David? When each of Jesse's other sons passed Samuel, he said, “The LORD has not chosen these.” But when David was brought in, the LORD said, “This is he” (1 Sam. 16:6-13). That is when God chose David to be Israel's king.

Now this choice, which happens in history and which is visible and obvious to everyone present, reflects and is the outworking of — the historical manifestation of — God's eternal predestinating choice, as we said at the very beginning. All things, including what happened here with Samuel and David and what happened earlier with Israel at the Exodus happen according to God's will.

²⁷In what follows, I am indebted to B. Holwerda's “De verkiezing in de Schrift,” *Populair-wetenschappelijke bijdragen* (Goes: Oosterbaan & LeCointre, 1962), pp. 49-64. This article was written in 1942, during the controversy over the relationship between covenant and election in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. A few years later, Holwerda was appointed Professor of Old Testament at the Theological College of the Reformed Churches (liberated).

From eternity God chose David to be king of Israel. From eternity He chose Israel to be His people. But He enacted that choice when Samuel poured oil over David's head. And He enacted His choice of Israel out of all the nations in history at the Exodus. That is when God — in history, but according to His eternal plan — took Israel out of the nations for Himself.

God chose Israel to be in the covenant. And that is good news. That is unconditional election. Deuteronomy 7 is one of the passages that teach us unconditional election: "Not because you were great in number, but because God loved you and He is faithful to His oath."

In Deuteronomy 9:4-6 God goes further and says that He isn't blessing Israel because of her righteousness either. Her blessings weren't due to anything in Israel herself. It was entirely God's grace.

This election is a privilege. Israel, out of all the nations on the earth, is God's special people, a holy people. That is the whole point of Deuteronomy 7: you are a holy people because God chose you for Himself.

And this choice of Israel involves not just a group or a class, as many Arminians would like it to, but it involves the members as well. No Israelite had the right to say, "God chose the nation, the class as a whole, but He didn't choose me," because God chose each Israelite to belong to that nation. They couldn't take what God said to Israel here and say, "Well, this refers to the class, but *I* don't need to keep these laws because nothing God says here applies to me as an individual. It just applies to the whole class." No, of course they took what Moses said here to refer them personally, as members of God's covenant people.

Each Israelite was grafted into God's people as an act of God's electing love. And that election, that choice to belong to the people of God, that choice of Israel as a nation, involves a special calling, a special responsibility. God chose His people unconditionally, not because of anything that was true of them. He chose them to belong to Him. But their life in covenant with God was *conditional*. It involved faith and obedience and perseverance.

All through history we see that individual Israelites apostatize. Israel as a whole apostatizes, though God preserves a remnant. It is out of the whole of Israel that God selects some whom He preserves according to His eternal plan and predestination.

That is how God works out His eternal plan in the course of history. And though God declares Israel "my people" early in her history, we discover in Hosea that God later calls Israel "not my people" (Hos. 1:9). He made them His special people, and then He reprobated them in history: "Not my people." But then He promises in Hosea to call Israel "my people" again. He promises to preserve a remnant and to bring in the Gentiles as well. He promises to choose — to elect — Israel one more time.

That sounds strange to us, but it is scriptural language. We hear in Isaiah 14:1: "When the LORD will have compassion on Jacob, and *again choose Israel*, and settle them in their own land...."

God chooses Israel *again*. He *continues* to choose Israel as His people even though many of them apostatize.²⁸ He preserves a remnant and He adds the Gentiles, so that He can have a people as He always eternally intended to.

We might say, “Well, that’s why many Reformed theologies don’t deal with the Old Testament. The Old Testament election involved the whole body and it involved history. But that was the Old Testament. Election revealed in the New Testament is a different kind of election.”

But that isn’t what 1 Peter teaches us. In 1 Peter 2:9ff., Peter says to the church, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” — there is the exodus motif again — “for you once were not a people” — think of Hosea — “but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Peter teaches us to view the church and to view ourselves the way that Moses describes Israel. Our being God’s covenant people isn’t our doing. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that in the church there are “not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God.” We’re God’s chosen people, not because of anything in ourselves, not because of anything we have done, but because of His sheer grace.

Others stumble over Christ, Peter says, to which, he adds, “they were also appointed.” They were destined to stumble over Christ, Peter tells us. But we are God’s chosen people, sheerly by God’s grace. We are the people who have gone through the Exodus from darkness to light. We are the fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy: “You once were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”

And Peter doesn’t let us apply this statement simply to the church as a *class*. This statement applies to individuals in the church as well. It applies to all of us as members of the church.

Everything Peter says in this letter applies to his hearers personally. Peter teaches us at the very beginning of this letter to regard each of ourselves and every member of the church as God’s chosen: “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...” (1 Pet. 1:1-2a).

Peter writes to this group of people throughout Asia Minor and calls them God’s chosen and elect nation. He’s teaching them to see themselves — not just as a class, but as individuals, too — as chosen pilgrims, elect according to the foreknowledge of God.

That is a privilege we need to embrace. We belong to God. God has claimed us for Himself in history. He exodused us out of darkness into His marvelous light to belong to Him.

²⁸Holwerda, p. 59, points out that the phrase here in Isaiah 14:1 could be rendered “I will *still* choose Israel.”

And this great privilege is also our calling. Every gift in Scripture is a mandate. If that is who we are, Peter says, if we really are God's chosen people, then we need to live as God's chosen people, that is, as "aliens and strangers" in the world (1 Pet. 2:11).

Paul teaches us something similar. In Ephesians 1, he writes:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise and glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (1:1-6).

And he goes on: "In Him we have redemption ... in Him ... in Him ... in Him." All of these blessings that Paul names here have been lavished on us *in Christ*. That includes our election to be holy and blameless. It includes God's predestination of us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ and to enjoy an inheritance. All of that is *in Christ*.

Christ is the elect one. That's how the LORD describes Him in Isaiah 42:1: "My chosen one in whom my soul delights." Peter says in 1 Peter 2:6 that He is the "chosen cornerstone."²⁹ Christ is the elect one, and in Him we have been chosen.

But to whom does Paul say all of this? He says this to the "saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus."

Is Paul addressing only the elect ones in the congregation, only the ones who were predestined to eternal glory with Christ, whoever they may be? Does Paul have some special apostolic insight to know with absolute certainty that every last person in that congregation in Ephesus was predestined to eternal glory with Christ? No, he is writing to the whole church.

He distinguishes between "we" and "you" in this chapter. And the "we" there may be Jewish Christians. It may be the apostles. But it doesn't make any difference for our application here because what he says about "we" and "us" here, he goes on to apply to "you" later (1:13). Everything that "we" have "you" have, he is saying in this chapter.

Paul is writing here to the whole church. He is writing to husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters, as he goes on to say (5:22-6:9). Everything he says in this letter presupposes that he is not speaking to a few of the Ephesians but to all of them, head for head.

²⁹My own translation. The NASB translates this phrase "a choice stone, a precious cornerstone." The NKJV is more accurate: "A chief cornerstone, elect, precious." The same word (*eklekton*) is used for the stone in 2:4, 6 as for the race in 2:9. Cf. the discussion in P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1991), pp. 76-79; Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 98-99.

The whole church is in Christ. They have been baptized into Christ. They have clothed themselves with Christ (Gal. 3:27). And Paul wants them to know that all of these blessings he is praising God are theirs in Christ.

There is nothing missing in Christ Jesus. Everything you need is found in Him. And *you* are in Him. That's the good news Paul wants the Ephesians to know. Everything is in Christ and you're in Christ — and all of these blessings, then, are for you.

And then, having just referred to them as elect, Paul goes to warn them in chapter 5 about sin that would bring down God's eternal wrath on them. He says: Don't do these things because nobody who does them "has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph. 5:3-5).

Paul doesn't appear to see a conflict, a tension, an apparent contradiction, between what he says at the beginning of the letter and the warning he gives in chapter 5. Having called them "chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world," he goes on to say to the same people, "Don't do these things because nobody who does them has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." There is no conflict in Paul's letters between comfort and warning.

Think of Romans 8. Paul says there that nobody can bring a charge against God's elect (8:33). And the Romans were not supposed to say, "Well, wouldn't it be great to be one of those elect people, then. I just don't know if I am." No, they were to take this statement as applying to them. Paul is writing to comfort and encourage *them*: "Who can bring a charge against God's elect? And you Romans are God's elect," he is saying. They are supposed to see and know and be assured of their privileged status in Christ.

And again Paul isn't getting confused in his letter when later on he writes to them in chapter 11 and says, "If the natural branches were chopped off, don't boast, because you could be chopped off too" (cf. 11:20-21). Paul doesn't see a contradiction, or some kind of neo-orthodox tension, between the assurance of chapter 8 and the warning of chapter 11. Paul warns the very same people he comforts.

Paul talks about God's election in 2 Thessalonians 2:13, too. He says to the church, "But we should always give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth."

How can Paul speak that way? Does Paul have apostolic insight to know that every last person in the church there at Thessalonica is predestined to glory with Christ?

If that were the case — if Paul can address them the way he does because he has a special insight we don't have and he knows that everybody there in Thessalonica is predestined to glory in Christ — then that means that we can't learn from Paul how to talk to the church. We can't learn from the apostle Paul — who told us to imitate him — how to address our congregations.

But this *reductio ad absurdum* demonstrates that there is a problem with our argument. If we come to the conclusion that we can't learn from Paul how to address the church, then we

must admit that our premise is wrong, namely, the premise that Paul can address the church as God's chosen because he has an apostolic insight we don't have.

If Paul isn't speaking to the whole church this way because he knows that they are all going to end up in eternal glory with Christ, then is it possible that Paul is speaking to some only: "Brothers, beloved by the Lord, you subset of the church, we give thanks for you"?

No! If Paul were speaking only to some of the people in the church, to some of the people who heard this letter read to the church, but not to others, then that would rob the whole church of the very comfort Paul wants to give them. They'd all be asking, "Is Paul talking to *me*?" If Paul isn't writing to the whole church, then no one in the church would know if Paul is writing to him.

Is Paul making a good guess here, then: "It sure looks like they are all elect"? Is this wishful thinking? Is Paul just making a charitable judgment: "I will treat them as if they are elect even though they may not be"?

No. To whom is Paul speaking here in this verse? That is a burning question, not only for us tonight, but for every preacher who preaches 2 Thessalonians 2:13. You have to deal with this question. This isn't an academic question that you can leave in the study. It isn't a question that you can leave to the scholars and theologians. It isn't a question with implications for this text only. This question comes up, in one way or another, in every sermon.

To whom is Paul speaking here? Did he know to whom he was speaking? Did Paul have names and faces in mind? Yes, he did.

Did the Thessalonians have to wonder whether Paul was speaking about them or about the guy sitting on the other side of the room? Did they have to say to themselves, "I bet Paul means Bill and Bob, probably not Jack, *maybe* Steve. I hope he means *me*." Did they have to guess?

No, they *knew* to whom Paul was speaking because Paul is writing to the church. That is how he begins 1 Thessalonians: "Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the *church* of the Thessalonians" (1:1). No guesswork was necessary on Paul's part or on their part. Paul isn't making a charitable judgment here. He is writing to the whole church, the church that had received the word in faith, the church which was living in terms of that faith. And if they were members of that church, they could be confident in faith that Paul was addressing them and that he was addressing their fellow-members, too.

It wasn't as if they were living perfectly as God's people either. Paul goes on in this letter and says, "Some among you are busybodies and aren't doing any work" (cf. 3:6-12). Not everyone in Thessalonica was living a great Christian life.

But Paul addresses the church as "brethren beloved by the Lord" and tells them, "God has chosen you." And he says that this choice, with its goal of salvation — "God has chosen you *for salvation*" — is why God called them through the gospel into the church (2:13-14). Through the call of the gospel God's choice became a reality in history.

But what does Paul say next? “Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught” (2:15). “Don’t apostatize,” Paul says. The declaration that God chose you isn’t a LazyBoy. It isn’t an invitation to sit back and put your feet up. It’s a calling to stand firm and not to apostatize.

We need to hold three things together as we think about the relationship between covenant and election.

First, God has eternally predestined some people but not all — an unchanging number of people out of the whole world — to eternal glory with Christ. We know that from Genesis 1:1 on. We know that from Ephesians 1:11: God “works all things after the counsel of His will.”

Second, God’s covenant includes some who have been so predestined to eternal glory with Christ, but it also includes others who have not been predestined to eternal glory with Christ but who will apostatize.

Third, God addresses His people as a whole — and that includes each one in the covenant, head for head — as His chosen ones, as His elect. That is the big issue we need to think through. In the Bible God, through His prophets and apostles, addresses His people publicly as elect, as chosen.

And the big question is this: May we speak the language of Scripture? May we — do we — address our congregations the way Moses and the Psalms and Peter and Paul do, the way that God does?

Or maybe the bigger question is this: May we do anything but? Shall we not learn from Scripture how to address our congregations?

If we try to do our theologizing and our pastoring and our speaking to God’s people from the perspective of God’s eternal predestination we run into all kinds of difficulties with the way God speaks in Scripture. We start to think that God shouldn’t talk the way He does, and we don’t want to talk that way either.

We are uncomfortable sometimes saying to our churches or to members of our churches or to our children, “God chose *you*.” But *God* speaks that way.

We are uncomfortable sometimes saying to our church or to members thereof (think of someone who comes into your office for counseling) or to our children, “Jesus died for your sins.” We start to reason that Jesus died for the full and final salvation of those and those only whom God has predestined to eternal glory in Christ and we don’t know with infallible certainty that this child, this church member, this congregation has been so predestined.

If we try to work from the perspective of God’s eternal predestination, we have trouble saying things to the flesh-and-blood people in our churches that Peter and Paul and the other writers of Scripture had no trouble saying to the churches they addressed.

And if we try to do our theologizing, our pastoring, our preaching from the perspective of what God has hidden, on the basis of the secret things of His predestination, we discover that we have a hard time applying not only the *promises* but also the *warnings* of Scripture to the real flesh-and-blood people in our pews.

Who is being addressed by those warnings? The ones infallibly predestined to eternal glory with Christ? If that's the case, then what function does that warning play?

If we're thinking in terms of God's predestination, we're inclined to say, "Well, those people who are being warned can't fall away. They won't fall away. And therefore these warnings and threats doesn't really apply to them."

And so people have sometimes said that the warnings in Scripture are only *hypothetical* for the elect. They're warning against something that can't happen and won't happen anyway. What is a hypothetical warning?

Whatever it is, it's not found in Scripture. The Westminster Confession 14.2 isn't speaking of merely hypothetical warnings when it says that faith trembles — at things that are only hypothetical? No: faith trembles at the warnings — why? Because those warnings are real. That's why those warnings are frightening. *Unbelief* thinks the warnings are hypothetical and brushes them off. But *faith* knows better. Faith trembles.

The Canons of Dort aren't speaking of merely hypothetical warnings when they say that "God ... preserves, continues, and completes His work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, *threats*, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments." God causes people to persevere through the threats of the gospel. Those are real threats, real warnings.

But if we try to do all our thinking from the perspective of eternal predestination to glory with Christ, we have a hard time with those warnings. We have a hard time applying them to the elect. But we also have a hard time applying them to the reprobate. What good does the warning do him? He won't respond to it anyway!

When we preach from this perspective, we can't apply the promises effectively and we can't apply the warnings effectively. When you proclaim the promises, people aren't sure if those promises are really for them. And when you proclaim the warnings, people brush them off because they figure that if they're elect they can't incur God's wrath and if they aren't there's nothing they can do about it anyway.

But God calls us to think and to theologize and to pastor, not in terms of the secret things which belong to Him, but in terms of the things He has revealed for us and for our sons, that they may observe the way of the Lord and keep His law.

God calls us to think covenantally. And in doing so, let me affirm again, we are not denying that God predestines some to eternal glory with Christ. We are affirming that. But we want to affirm the rest of what Scripture says as well.

And even if we don't understand how all these things fit together, even if we don't all agree with each other about these things fit together, let us agree on this, that we *must* speak the language of Scripture to our people. We *may not* do otherwise.

We are not wiser than God. We are not better theologians than God. We must learn from Scripture, from God Himself, from His prophets and apostles, how to address God's people. We must follow the pattern of the prophets and apostles and call our congregations "God's chosen people" and assure them, as Peter and Paul and all the rest do, that Jesus died for them, that they are God's temple, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and so forth.

We don't have to understand all the connections perfectly. We don't have to have all of our theology worked out in exhaustive detail before we can do what Scripture teaches us to do.

But here is a possible objection: What if I say to the church "God chose you for salvation and Jesus died for you" and then some of those people fall away and apostatize and end up in hell. Haven't I lied to them?

No, you haven't. You have spoken the truth. In Scripture, truth is more than just conformity to the facts. It is trustworthiness, faithfulness.³⁰ And you have spoken to these people in a *trustworthy* manner. You have spoken to them in a faithful manner, a manner that they can bank their whole lives on, because you have spoken to them in accordance with God's revelation.

There is a tough, challenging, and surprising passage in Ezekiel 33:13ff.. The LORD says there,

When I say to the righteous, he will surely live, and he so trusts in his righteousness that he commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die. But when I say to the wicked, "You will surely die," and he turns from his sin and practices justice and righteousness, if a wicked man restores a pledge, pays back what he has taken by robbery, walks by the statutes of life [NASB margin] without committing iniquity, he will surely live; he shall not die. None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he will surely live.³¹

But we want to say to God, "You said to the righteous man, 'You will surely live' — *living you will live*, in the Hebrew idiom — but he died. And you said to the wicked man, 'You will

³⁰See the discussion in B. Holwerda, *Seminarie-Dictaat: Jozua en Richteren*, 4th ed. (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1978), p. 13. I am *not* saying that our speech here is out of conformity with the facts. It is in conformity to the fact that the people we are addressing are God's covenant people, in God's sight as much as in ours, and the fact that God teaches us how we are to address them in a way that is trustworthy and faithful to Him and to them.

³¹Note that this passage is not preaching works-righteousness. It is not telling us that this wicked man has earned his salvation by doing good works. But it is speaking about covenant faithfulness which flows out of faith in God's word — in this case, faith in the *warning* God has uttered, in particular.

surely die' — *dying you will die* — and he lived. You lied to them, didn't you? You didn't tell the truth to them."

But who are we to teach God how to speak the truth?

This is how God speaks. He says to people, "You will surely live," and then they die because they trust in their own righteousness instead of trusting in Him. But God was telling the *truth* when He says to them, "You will surely live." He was not lying to them. He was saying something *trustworthy*.

And when He says to the wicked man, "You will surely die," He's saying something *trustworthy* to that man. And the man takes heed to what God has said. He trusts what God has said. He believes that on the path on which he is going he will surely die. In faith he trembles at the warning and he will surely live.

God speaks this way. And we must learn from Him how to speak to our people.

God speaks to His people and He calls them elect, and therefore we also need to speak to God's people this way. We must. We have no other choice but to let God teach us how to address His people, even if we don't have it all worked out in our minds.

If we are not comfortable with biblical language — not only hearing it but also saying it — if biblical language sounds strange to us, and if our theology gets in the way of our speaking and receiving the language of Scripture, then what has become of us — we, who are to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord?

God's speech to us is *truthworthy* because it is God who is speaking. And He speaks to us in a *promissory* way. What do I mean by that? I mean that in speech God pledges Himself to us, to be our God.³²

We tend to think of a promise as a prediction: "This is going to happen no matter what." But that is not how God's promises work in Scripture. By *promise*, I mean that God is pledging and giving Himself to us in words.

We tend to think that promises relate to the future. But in our confessional and theological heritage that word *promise* can also refer to past events. Luther puts it this way: "This is my body" is a plain indicative statement which becomes promissory — it becomes a promise — by the addition of the words "For you."³³

³²In what follows, I am building on Cornelis Trimp's discussion of *promise* in "Preaching as the Public Means of Divine Redemption," trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 39-75 and in "The Promise of the Covenant: Some Observations," *Unity in Diversity: Studies Presented to Prof. Dr. Jelle Faber on the Occasion of His Retirement*, ed. Riemer Faber (Hamilton: Senate of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 1989), pp. 71-77.

³³Trimp sums up Luther's view: "The phrase '*for you*' grants the testament its typical characteristic of promise. Christ does not make a general declaration, but He addresses. He addresses the disciples and pledges to them that by His death He gives Himself for them ("Promise," p. 73).

So also, the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 7, says that Christians must believe all that is *promised* in the gospel. Those promises, it says, are summed up in the Apostles' Creed. But most of the Creed has to do with the past. How do those statements in the Creed become promises? Because those events happened *for us*.

When we hear that God is the maker of heaven and earth, that isn't simply a report on past history. It's a promise. God has created heaven and earth *for us*. Jesus died — that's a past event. He died *for us* — that's a promise.

God administers His salvation by speaking to us, by proclaiming it to us, by telling us who we are in Christ and all that we have in Christ. He addresses us with the promise of salvation, including the promise of His choice, the promise of His election. He doesn't simply say, "I chose some people." He says to us, "I chose you. You're mine. You're special. You belong to me." And that promise is good news.

God selected you out of the whole world to belong to Him, to belong to His covenant. Covenant membership is not just a bare legal relationship. The covenant is not just a means to an end, the goal of salvation. The covenant in history is the early form of that final goal. It is the early form of that end, that salvation. The covenant is a bond with the triune God of Scripture.

And God chose you to be in His covenant, to have that bond with Him in Christ. That choice, worked out in history when you were baptized, is grounded in God's eternal predestination. *He* had you baptized, according to His eternal plan.

God doesn't just predestine the ends. He predestines the means as well.

In eternity God chose to have you baptized, engrafted into the church, joined to Christ, the elect one, joined to Christ's body, the church, made a member of His chosen nation. That's glorious good news. That is privilege.

And it is your privilege as pastors to preach this good news to your congregation week after week so that they *know* that this privilege is for them: "God has selected you out of the whole human race to belong to God and to have Him say, 'I will be *your* God and you will be my people.'"

But in God's wisdom, He has decreed that some of those whom He has chosen to bring into a covenant relationship with Him will enjoy that relationship only for a time.

God truly brings those people into His covenant, into union with Christ. They are "in Him," to use Jesus' words in John 15. They share in His blessings — think of Hebrews 6. They experience His love.

But that covenant relationship is conditional. It calls for repentance and faith and new obedience. God's *choice* was not conditional. But life in the covenant is.

And God chooses not to work in these people so that they persevere. When they fall into sin, in His unsearchable wisdom, He allows them to harden themselves in sin. He even hardens them Himself.

They may have been believers in a sense (2:23-24). They had a privileged status, but they fell from privilege. They hardened their hearts. They rejected God's gifts. They grieved the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). They quenched the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19) — that is, that they put out the Spirit's fire. That is Scriptural language. And there comes a point when the Spirit will no longer strive with them and they apostatize.

Using our traditional theological and confessional language, we would say that these were non-elect members of the covenant. Using Calvin's terminology, these people were "generally elect" but not "specially elect."³⁴ Using the language of Scripture, they were among God's chosen people.

They were the people that God addresses as elect. They were joined covenantally to Christ, the elect cornerstone. But they have been cut off from Christ. They have stumbled and fallen, as Peter says, just as they were appointed to do (1 Pet. 2:8).

Affirming the reality of apostasy is not denying God's predestination. Even their apostasy is included in God's plan. Though He predestined these people to enter His covenant, He didn't predestine their perseverance. He didn't keep working in them — for whatever wise reason of His own. He didn't keep working in them to will and to do (Phil. 2:13).

On the last day, these apostates will look back and see God's grace and love which they rejected. The fault wasn't in Christ or the gospel or in God's covenant. God assured them, as He assures us, that everything we need for life and godliness is ours in Christ (2 Pet. 1:3). The fault was not in Christ or in God. The fault was in them.

But God in His grace causes others, whom He has chosen to belong to Him and to be His covenant people, to belong to Him forever. When they sin, He brings them back. He keeps working in them by His Spirit constantly and graciously so that they keep trusting Him, so that they get up when they fall, so that they persevere to the end.

Peter says in 2 Peter 2, "Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2:10-11, NKJV).³⁵

³⁴Cf. Lillback, pp. 214ff.

³⁵For the following exegesis of this passage, I am indebted to P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *2 Petrus en Judas: Testament in tweevoud*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1993), pp. 39-41. Van Houwelingen is Professor of New Testament at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated).

Peter doesn't say to them, "Find out if you are called and elect." He calls them "called and elect." He doesn't say, "Make yourselves sure about your call and election." He says, "Make your call and election sure." What does he mean?

The context here is not dealing with personal assurance. He is also not saying that we can somehow contribute to God's election or that God's election is based on something in ourselves or something we have done. But what he is saying is that by our lives we have to ratify and confirm God's calling and election. We have to work it out. We have to live it out. And as we do that, Peter assures us, we will not fall short of God's everlasting kingdom.³⁶

On the last day we will look back and we will see God's grace every inch of the way. God gave us life. God worked in all the details in our lives. God in grace united to us in Christ, the elect one, and He kept us in Him. He worked in us to will and to work (Phil. 2:13). He worked in us so that we responded to Him in faith and trust and we persevered. We owe it all to Him — to His choice, to His grace. And we will enter into final glory with Christ exactly according to God's eternal predestinating decree.

For those who do not persevere to the end, God's choice to have them belong to His covenant was His choice to show them grace and love for a time, and both their entrance into His covenant and their subsequent rejection of His grace and love — their apostasy — is the historic outworking of His predestinating decree.

And for those who do persevere to the end, God's choice to have them belong to His covenant *just is* His choice to have them belong to Him forever. Their entrance into His covenant, their perseverance in faith, and their rich entry into the everlasting kingdom of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:11) are the historic outworking of His predestinating decree.

In history, we are to view ourselves the way God teaches us to. We are God's covenant people. God has called us elect. We need to address our congregations that way. He tells us that He chose us. We must tell our congregations that He chose them. We must speak the language of Scripture, calling them to respond in faith.

But if apostasy is a real danger, can we ever have assurance? Not in ourselves, but in God and in His promises. Left to myself, I would most assuredly fall away. But in Christ I can be confident because no one who trusts in Him is ever put to shame (Isa. 28:16; Rom. 10:11). As we look to Christ in faith, as we trust God who speaks to us these words so rich with promise, the Spirit works in us so that we do persevere.

There is no room for presumption in God's covenant. The warnings apply to every covenantal member. But there is also no room — and no need — for worry: "Am I really elect?" We believe God's promise. And we live in terms of it.

APPENDIX

³⁶I don't deny that this passage can and should be applied for our assurance. But the focus of the passage is not on personal assurance of salvation. Nothing in the passage suggests that when Peter says that we should make our election sure he means that we should assure ourselves concerning our election.

One question which may arise in connection with my approach in this article is whether this approach has antecedents in the history of Reformed theology. I do not claim that anyone has expressed this view exactly as I have, though I am certainly indebted to many other Reformed writers, some of whom I have mentioned in the footnotes.

Among the early Reformers, Zwingli appears to have held a similar view. In speaking about God's relationship to the infants of believers, Zwingli says:

For when he includes us under Abraham's covenant this word makes us no less certain of their election than of the old Hebrews'. For the statement that they are in the covenant, testament and people of God assures us of their election until the Lord announces something different of some one.

He says later, "Indeed it is my opinion that all infants who are under the testament are doubtless of the elect by the laws of the testament." It appears that Zwingli is saying that God's covenant law teaches us that these children are elect. Lillback summarizes:

Zwingli's point seems to be that men will make errors in their attempts to judge if someone is elect or not. But God's Word or Law is absolutely reliable. If the law declares that the children of God's people belong to Him, one must receive it as the truth, until the law shows they do not belong to Him, as in the case of an adult unbeliever from a Christian family.

Zwingli applies this view to Esau:

What then of Esau, if he had died as an infant? Would your judgment place him among the elect? Yes. Then does election remain sure? It does. And rejection remains also. But listen. If Esau had died an infant he would doubtless have been elect. For if he had died then there would have been the seal of election, for the Lord would not have rejected him eternally. But since he lived and was of the non-elect, he so lived that we see in the fruit of his unfaith that he was rejected by the Lord.³⁷

Lillback discusses the difference between a man named Cellarius, who had no use for externals because only the elect were really in the covenant, and Zwingli, who emphasized the importance of baptism. Lillback summarizes it this way:

Zwingli believed that infant baptism was a sign of the covenant which brought a promise of salvation to the children. The very covenant sign for Zwingli was critical because it was an attestation of the decree of election for the parents and their child. One might later prove that he was not truly one of Christ's by not manifesting the faith that was the fruit of election. But to assume that of any infant, or even to remain in an uncertain state as taught by Cellarius, was to deny the law of God which undergirded the covenant sign.³⁸

We find a somewhat similar approach to the election of believers' infants, when those infants die in infancy, in the Canons of Dort. The First Head of Doctrine, Article 17, says

Since we must make judgments about God's will from His word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the gracious covenant, in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the *election* and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.

³⁷All quotations are from Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, pp. 104-105. I am not necessarily endorsing everything Zwingli says here, of course.

³⁸Lillback, p. 108.

“Godly parents ought not to doubt” — that is, they are forbidden to doubt, may not doubt, are not permitted to doubt — “the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy.” Why? Because, say the Canons of Dort, those children have been included in God’s covenant together with their parents. They have not grown up and apostatized, and their membership in the covenant is therefore sufficient to assure us that they were elect.

The historic Reformed Baptismal Form links baptism with the promise of election. The Form talks about the promises given to us by the Triune God when we’re baptized into His name. The Father promises to adopt us as His children. The Son promises to wash away our sins.³⁹ But that Form also talks about the Holy Spirit who promises to present us “without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.”⁴⁰ If the Spirit promises that you will be among the elect in life eternal, you can bank on it and trust that you are among the elect *now*.

Therefore, every member of the church can confess in faith the words the Heidelberg Catechism puts in the mouths of its students:

Q. 54 What do you believe concerning the “holy catholic church”?

A. I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community *chosen for eternal life* and united in true faith. And of this community *I am and always will be*, a living member (emphasis mine).

The Heidelberg Catechism links the doctrine of election here with the doctrine of the church. And in a warm and pastoral way, it teaches all the church’s children — who have been grafted into the church through baptism (Q&A 74) — to confess to confess together with the whole church: “The Son of God is gathering His elect church, and I am and always will be a living member of it.” That isn’t a wish or a boast; it’s a confession of faith, grounded on God’s grace in bringing us into His covenant.

³⁹Note that this promise is not a promise to wash away our sins in the future sometime. Rather, it is His pledge that He *does* wash away our sins, which fits with the prayer after baptism, which says, “We thank and praise Thee that Thou hast forgiven us and our children all our sins....”

⁴⁰I am quoting here from the version of the Form (Form # 1) in the Christian Reformed Church’s 1976 *Psalter Hymnal*. You can find this form online at <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/worship/infant.baptism.1.html>.

4 Covenant and Election (2?)

John Barach

The *Canons of Dort* (I.14 and Conclusion) urge Reformed pastors to speak about God's election *reverently* (to the glory of God), *pastorally* (focusing on holiness of life and on the comfort of God's people), and *scripturally* ("without inquisitive searching into the ways of the Most High," but speaking "with Scripture according to the analogy of faith"). God revealed His election to comfort us and to motivate us to live to the praise of His glorious grace (Deut. 29:29; Eph. 1:3ff.).

Already in Genesis 1:1, we learn that God is the initiator. God "works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). If anyone inherits eternal glory with Christ, it is the outworking of God's eternal plan. If anyone ends up in hell, that also is the outworking of God's eternal plan.

God didn't predestine anyone to glory because of anything in that person but simply out of His sheer love and grace in Christ. His predestination is unchangeable and unthwartable. Even apostasy happens in accord with God's plan (Rom. 9).

But what is the relationship between predestination and covenant? Some say that God chooses a general category or class (Israel, the church), but not individuals, for eternal glory with Christ. That is the Arminian position, and it is contrary to Scripture (e.g., Eph. 1:11).

A second view is that only those whom God has predestined to eternal glory with Christ are really (or internally) in the covenant. Others may be in the *sphere* of the covenant or *externally* in the covenant. God's covenant promises are for those predestined to eternal glory alone.⁴¹

⁴¹Some would argue that this is the view of *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q&A 31: "With whom was the covenant of grace made? The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as

There are some pastoral problems with this view. If we don't know who is predestined to eternal glory with Christ and they are the only ones who are really in the covenant, then it follows that we don't know who is really in the covenant. We may not even know if a person has really been baptized.⁴² Can we teach our children to call God "Father" or to sing "Jesus loves me" if we don't know if He has predestined them for eternal salvation?

The tendency, on this view, is for ministers to preach about salvation in the third person. We can talk about sin and about our calling in the first and second person ("You have sinned," "We must keep God's commandments"). But when we talk about salvation, we switch to the third person ("Jesus died for *the elect*"). We feel uncomfortable saying to the congregation — or to a member of it — "Jesus died for *you*," because we don't know if these people are in the covenant and predestined to eternal life through Christ's death.

Held consistently, this view prevents the covenant from functioning in our thinking and practice. The covenant becomes as invisible and unknowable as God's eternal predestination. We lose the ability to speak the language of Scripture, to apply it directly to the flesh-and-blood people who sit in our pews, and to give them the comfort God intended them to have.

There is another view of the relationship between God's covenant and God's predestination. In the Bible, we regularly see that God makes His covenant with believers and their households (e.g., Gen. 17).

Furthermore, the Bible tells us that people can and do break the New Covenant: "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of

His seed. Notice, though, that the *WLC* says that the children of believers are also in the covenant (Q&A 166). You can make a case, therefore, that the *Westminster Larger Catechism* has a broader view of who is in the covenant than the view I am describing here.

⁴²Abraham Kuyper, who held this view, taught that not every baptism is genuine. If the person is elect, it's a real baptism. But if the person isn't, it's *schijndoop*, an apparent baptism, a mere sprinkling with water. See Abraham Kuyper, *Voor een distel een mirt: Geestelijke overdenkingen bij den heiligen Doop, bij het doen van belijdenis en*

God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29). Hebrews doesn’t say that it was *as if* the person had been sanctified by the blood of the covenant. It says that he really *was* sanctified.

Jesus teaches that there are some who are united to Him covenantally but who do not abide in Him and therefore are cut off from Him. He says, “I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. Every branch *in me* that does not bear fruit, He takes away” (John 15:1ff.). He doesn’t say, “Every bit of tumbleweed stuck in my branches.” He says, “Every branch *in me*.”

These branches were not stuck to the tree with Scotch tape. They were genuinely in Christ, but they were taken away because they failed to abide in Christ. Jesus says, “If anyone does not abide [i.e., stay] in me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” Some who are in Him, Jesus says, get cut off and burned.

According to Scripture, not everyone who is in the covenant has been predestined to eternal glory with Christ. God establishes His covenant with believers and their households, including some who will later apostatize and be cut off from covenantal fellowship with Him. Put another way, all those who are baptized are genuinely baptized *into Christ* (Gal. 3:27), are brought into Christ’s body, the church (1 Cor. 12:13), and are members of God’s covenant, at least until they are cut off, whether by Christ’s church (excommunication) or directly by Christ (death as judgment).

Like the previous view, this view has been held by many Reformed people. You find it taught by Calvin,⁴³ the Three Forms of Unity,⁴⁴ and many Reformed and Presbyterian

het toegaan tot het Heilig Avondmaal (Amsterdam, 1891), 54 cited in J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, trans. G. van Rongen (Launceston, Australia: Free Reformed Churches of Australia, 1985), 24-25.

⁴³Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

theologians.⁴⁵ It is not the case that there has been only *one* accepted Reformed view on the relationship between covenant and election.

This third view is biblical: God does not make His covenant exclusively with those who have been predestined to eternal salvation. Rather, He establishes His covenant with all who have been baptized, with professing believers and their children. The whole church, head for head, is in covenant with God.

But is that all we can say about the relationship between covenant and election? Some people sharply distinguish covenant from election. God predestined some people to glory with Christ. But that has nothing to do with the covenant.

But that isn't the way Scripture speaks. God addresses His faithful covenant people as His "chosen ones" (e.g., the Psalms *passim*). Sometimes God applies that language to the whole of the covenant people. Other times He applies it to a faithful remnant.

Deuteronomy (4:37; 7:6ff.; 10:14-15) often links Israel's *election* and Israel's *Exodus* from Egypt. For instance, in Deuteronomy 7, God says that He didn't love and choose Israel because they were great in number; rather, He brought Israel out of Egypt because He loved them and kept the oath He had made to their fathers. God's *choice* of Israel here is parallel to His *redeeming* Israel from slavery. It appears that God made this choice in history. He chose Israel, He says, to keep the oath He made previously to her forefathers.

⁴⁴Cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q&A 74 (the infants of believers are "included in the covenant" and are "by baptism ... grafted into the Christian church"); *Belgic Confession*, Art. 34 ("Christ shed His blood ... for the washing of the children of believers"); *Canons of Dort* I.17 (God's Word testifies that the children of believers are included in the covenant). Note also that the conclusion of the Canons of Dort rejects the view that when the infants of believers die they perish "so that neither ... their *baptism* nor the prayers of the church at their *baptism* can be of any use to them."

⁴⁵Cf., e.g., Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* and Klaas Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding — A New Danger* (Neerlandia: Inheritance, 1996).

We find something similar elsewhere in Scripture.⁴⁶ In Deuteronomy 17, the LORD says that Israel is to choose a king whom the LORD chooses. But when did God choose David? When Samuel saw David (1 Sam. 16:6-13).

That choice in history is the outworking in history of God's eternal predestination (Eph. 1:11). From eternity, God chose David to be Israel's king. But He enacted that choice when Samuel anointed David.

Similarly, from eternity, God chose Israel to be His people. But He enacted that choice in history at the Exodus. That was when God — in history, but according to His eternal plan — took Israel out of the nations for Himself.

That choice was unconditional. It wasn't grounded on anything in Israel herself (Deut. 7:7; cf. 9:4-6). God didn't choose Israel *because* she was holy but to *be* holy. Israel is holy because God chose her to be His covenant people.

That was true for the nation and for the individuals in the nation. None of them could escape from his calling by saying that the calling to be holy applied only to the nation. God chose Israel for Himself, but that implies that He also chose each member of Israel to belong to Him. Each one had a special calling and responsibility.

That relationship was established unconditionally. But the covenant relationship itself had conditions. Each member of the covenant was obligated to respond to God in faith and obedience. Some persevered; others apostatized. But even the ones who apostatized were, for a time, among God's chosen people, though God did not predestine them to persevere and inherit eternal glory with Christ.

⁴⁶In what follows, I am indebted to B. Holwerda's "De verkiezing in de Schrift," *Populair-wetenschappelijke bijdragen* (Goes: Oosterbaan & LeCointre, 1962), 49-64. This article was written in 1942, during the controversy over the relationship between covenant and election in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. A few years

Election in the New Testament is presented in similar terms. In 1 Peter 2:9ff., Peter says to the church, “You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”.

Peter teaches us to view the church and ourselves the way that Moses describes Israel. Our being God’s covenant people isn’t our doing (cf. 1 Cor. 1:26ff.); it is God’s sheer grace. Others stumble over Christ “to which they also were appointed” (1 Pet. 2:8). But we are God’s covenant people, who have gone through the Exodus from darkness to light.

Peter’s statement doesn’t apply simply to the church as a *class*; it applies to the members of the church as well. In fact, Peter calls his readers “elect” (1 Pet. 1:2).

We belong to God. God has claimed us for Himself in history. He exodused us out of darkness into His marvelous light to belong to Him. And this great privilege is also our calling. If we really are God’s chosen people, then we must live as God’s chosen people, that is, as “sojourners and pilgrims” in the world (1 Pet. 2:11).

Similarly, in Ephesians 1, Paul lists the blessings we have in Christ, including the blessings of election to be holy and blameless and predestination to be adopted as sons and to enjoy an inheritance. Christ is the elect one (Isa. 42:1; 1 Pet. 2:6),⁴⁷ and in Him we have been chosen.

But to whom does Paul say all of this? “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1). Paul isn’t addressing only the ones who have been predestined to

later, Holwerda was appointed Professor of Old Testament at the Theological College of the Reformed Churches (liberated).

⁴⁷The same word (*eklekton*) is used for the stone in 2:4, 6 as for the race in 2:9. Cf. the discussion in P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *1 Petrus: Rondzendbrief uit Babylon*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1991), 76-79; Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 98-99. Van Houwelingen is Professor of New Testament at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated).

eternal glory with Christ. He doesn't have special apostolic insight to know that every last person in that congregation is predestined to eternal salvation. He is writing to the church — not just to a few members but to all (cf. 5:22-6:9).⁴⁸

And then, having called them *elect*, Paul warns them against living in a way that would exclude them from the kingdom of Christ (Eph. 5:3-5). Likewise, in Romans, Paul says that nobody can bring a charge against God's elect (8:33) and that nothing can separate them ("us") from God's love in Christ (8:38-39) and then warns his readers against pride lest they be chopped off from the tree (11:20-21). Election and warning go hand in hand.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul tells the church, "God ... chose you for salvation." Does Paul say that because he has an infallible apostolic knowledge that everyone in that church is predestined to eternal salvation? If so, then we can't learn from Paul how to address the church. But that *reductio ad absurdum* suggests that our premise must be wrong.

Is it possible that Paul is speaking to some members only? If that were the case, the readers wouldn't know whether Paul is addressing them and they wouldn't receive the comfort Paul intends them to have.

Paul isn't making a good guess or indulging in wishful thinking or even making a charitable judgment. He's addressing the church, which received the word in faith and was living by faith (cf. 1 Thess. 1:1). Each member could be confident in faith that Paul's words are for him and for his fellow members. And each member could then enjoy Paul's comfort and follow Paul's exhortation (2 Thess. 2:15).

We need, then, to hold three things together. First, God has eternally predestined an unchanging number of people (but not everyone) to eternal glory with Christ. Second, God's

⁴⁸Paul distinguishes between *we* and *you*. *We* may be Jewish Christians and *you* the Gentiles, or *we* may be the apostles and *you* the Ephesians. In any case, what the *we* group has the *you* group also has (1:13).

covenant includes some who have not been predestined to eternal salvation but who will apostatize. Third, God addresses His people — including each member personally — as His chosen ones.

May we speak the language of Scripture and address our congregations the way God does? How could we do anything but? We must let God teach us how to speak to His people.

We may wonder if we can say to our churches (or our children), “God chose *you*” or “Jesus died for *you*,” but God speaks that way. Some theologians may claim that the warnings of Scripture are only hypothetical for the elect, but God presents them as real warnings against real dangers. Unbelief views the warnings as hypothetical, but faith trembles (*WCF* 14:2), humbles itself, and therefore perseveres (*CD* V.14).

But what if we tell the church, “God chose you and Jesus died for you” and then some of those people fall away and end up in hell? Have we lied to them? No! We have spoken to them in a faithful and trustworthy manner in terms of their true covenantal relationship to God. God Himself speaks in this way to people (*Ezek.* 33:13ff.) and we must imitate Him.

God’s speech to us is *truthworthy* because it is God who is speaking. And He speaks to us in a *promissory* way. In speech God gives and pledges Himself to us, to be our God.⁴⁹ He assures us of all His blessings in Christ.⁵⁰

⁴⁹In what follows, I am building on Cornelis Trimp’s discussion of *promise* in “Preaching as the Public Means of Divine Redemption,” trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 10 (1999): 39-75 and in “The Promise of the Covenant: Some Observations,” *Unity in Diversity: Studies Presented to Prof. Dr. Jelle Faber on the Occasion of His Retirement*, ed. Riemer Faber (Hamilton: Senate of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 1989), 71-77.

⁵⁰Cf. the way the word “promised” is used in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, LD 7, where most of what it refers to is past. Trimp sums up Luther’s view: “The phrase ‘for you’ grants the testament its typical characteristic of promise. Christ does not make a general declaration, but He addresses. He addresses the disciples and pledges to them that by His death He gives Himself for them (“Promise,” 73).

God administers His salvation by speaking to us, telling us who we are in Christ and what we have in Christ. He doesn't simply say, "I chose some people." He says to us, "I chose you. You're mine. You're special. You belong to me." And that promise is good news.

God selected you out of the whole world to belong to Him, to enter His covenant. Covenant membership is not just a bare legal relationship. The covenant is not just a means to an end, the goal of salvation. The covenant in history is the early form of that final goal. It is a bond of love with the triune God of Scripture. God chose you to have that bond with Him in Christ.

That choice, worked out in history when you were baptized and brought into Christ's church, is grounded in God's eternal predestination. In eternity God chose to have you baptized into Christ, the elect one, and the church, His body, to be among His chosen people. God has selected you out of the whole human race to belong to God and to have Him say, "I will be *your* God and you will be my people."

But in God's wisdom, He has decreed that some of those whom He has chosen to bring into a covenant relationship with Him will enjoy that relationship only for a time. God brings those people into His covenant and unites them to Christ for a time (John 15; Heb. 6). They really experience His love, but they don't respond with repentance and faith and love.

God chooses not to work in these people so that they persevere. When they fall into sin, in His unsearchable wisdom, He allows them to harden themselves and He hardens them Himself. They have a privileged status, but they fall from privilege. They harden their hearts. They grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30) and quench Him (1 Thess. 5:19). And there comes a point when the Spirit will no longer strive with them and they apostatize.

Using our traditional theological language, we would say that these were non-elect members of the covenant. Using Calvin's terminology, these people were "generally elect" but not

“specially elect.”⁵¹ They were among God’s chosen people, joined covenantally to Christ, the elect cornerstone, but they have stumbled and fallen, as Peter says, just as they were appointed to do (1 Pet. 2:8), and they have been cut off from Christ.

Affirming the reality of apostasy is not denying God’s predestination. Even their apostasy is included in God’s plan. Though He predestined them to enter His covenant, He didn’t predestine their perseverance. He didn’t keep working in them to will and to do (Phil. 2:13).

On the last day, these apostates will look back and see God’s grace and love which they rejected. The fault wasn’t in Christ or the gospel or in God’s covenant (2 Pet. 1:3). The fault was in them.

But God in His grace causes others, whom He has chosen to belong to Him and to be His covenant people, to stay with Him forever. When they sin, He brings them back. He works in them by His Spirit so that they keep trusting Him, get up when they fall, and persevere to the end. In this way, they ratify (“make sure”) their calling and election (2 Pet. 2:10-11).⁵²

On the last day, we will look back and we will see God’s grace every inch of the way. God gave us life and worked in all the details of our lives. God united to us in Christ, the elect one, and kept us in Him. He worked in us to will and to work (Phil. 2:13), so that we responded to Him in faith and persevered. And we will enter into final glory with Christ exactly according to God’s eternal predestinating decree.

For those who do not persevere to the end, God’s choice to have them belong to His covenant was His choice to show them grace and love for a time. Both their entrance into His covenant and their subsequent rejection of His grace and love is the historic outworking of His predestinating decree.

⁵¹Cf. Lillback, *Binding*, 214ff.

For those who do persevere to the end, God's choice to have them belong to His covenant *just is* His choice to have them belong to Him forever. Their entrance into His covenant, their perseverance in faith, and their rich entry into the everlasting kingdom of Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:11) are the historic outworking of His predestinating decree.

But if apostasy is a real danger, can we ever have assurance? Not in ourselves, but in God and in His promises. Left to ourselves, we would most assuredly fall away. But in Christ we can be confident because no one who trusts in Him is ever put to shame (Rom. 10:11). As we look to Christ in faith, the Spirit works in us so that we do persevere. As we trust His promises, revealed in Scripture for our comfort, we have every assurance of God's electing love.

And so the historic Reformed baptismal form links baptism with election. When we are baptized into the name of the Spirit, He promises to present us "without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal."⁵³ If the Spirit promises that you will be among the elect in life eternal, you can bank on it and trust that you are among the elect *now*.

Therefore, every member of the church can confess in faith the words the *Heidelberg Catechism* puts in the mouths of its students:

Q. 54 *What do you believe concerning the "holy catholic church"?*

A. I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for Himself a community *chosen for eternal life* and united in true faith. And of this community *I am and always will be*, a living member (emphasis mine).

⁵²For the following exegesis of this passage, I am indebted to P. H. R. van Houwelingen, *2 Petrus en Judas: Testament in tweevoud*, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 39-41.

⁵³I am quoting here from the version of the Form (Form # 1) in the Christian Reformed Church's 1976 *Psalter Hymnal*. You can find this form online at <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/worship/infant.baptism.1.html>.

The doctrine of election goes hand in hand with the doctrine of the church here. And in a warm and pastoral way, the Catechism teaches all the church's children — who have been grafted into the church through baptism (Q&A 74) — not to worry about their election (“Am I elect?”) but to confess it together with the whole church: “The Son of God is gathering His elect church, and I am now and always will be a living member of it.”

That isn't a wish or a boast. It a confession of faith in response to God's grace in bringing us into His covenant and giving us His love.

Addendum

The paper I presented at the colloquium was an abridgment of my talk at the 2003 Auburn Avenue Pastors' Conference. I'm grateful to Carl Robbins for his gracious interaction both at that conference and at the recent colloquium.

Carl has reminded me to stress that election and holiness go hand in hand. “You are a holy people to the LORD your God,” Moses says. “The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself” (Deut. 7:6). Paul says that God “chose us ... that we should be holy and without blame before Him” (Eph. 1:4). Peter calls the church “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9).

God chose a people for Himself — and individuals to belong to that people — with holiness in view. He wants His people to serve as priests in His house, to be distinct from the nations around them, and to be dedicated to Him. God calls His people — all whom He has chosen to

belong to Him — to be holy and blameless. As preachers, we extend that call to the whole church, calling them to dress like “the elect of God, holy and beloved” (Col. 3:12ff.).

Not all do. Not all who are in the church respond in faith and live in a way that befits members of God’s holy nation. Fruitless branches and unholy people will be cut off from the church precisely because unholy living is incompatible with belonging to God.

But by God’s grace, all whom God has predestined to eternal glory with Christ will respond in faith and live lives worthy of the gospel. In the end, God’s purpose in election will be reached. His Son will have a holy and blameless bride (Eph. 5:27).

With Carl, then, I affirm that not all who are members of God’s covenant people *in history* will be among God’s covenant people *forever*. Some will not respond to God in faith, will not bear fruit, and will be cut off (John 15). God’s predestination cuts through the covenant community (Rom. 9-11).

But if one can be among God’s covenant people for a time and yet not be among those predestined to eternal glory with Christ, how can one have assurance of salvation? If one can belong to God for a time as a result of God’s choice and yet later fall away and perish, then how can one know that he will belong to God, not just temporarily but forever?

To answer that question, it may be helpful to think about a family which has just adopted (chosen) a child. How can that child be sure he will always be a member of the family? How does he know he will not one day be disinherited? He can have that assurance because he’s a member of the family now, because his parents feed him and hug him and tell him they love him, because he trusts his parents not to disinherit him without cause, and because he responds to them as a faithful child, making his adoption sure.

And so it is with us. Covenant-breakers will be cut off and they ought to tremble. But no one who trusts in God will be put to shame.

Those who are in covenant with God today don't need to doubt that they'll be in covenant with God tomorrow and forever. But they do need to respond to God in terms of the covenant. They need to trust in God, fix their eyes on Christ, repent of their sins, and respond to God as faithful sons and daughters, making their calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10).

Furthermore, just as a father strengthens his bond with his children by telling them again and again that he loves them, so God assures us repeatedly of His love. In particular, He does it through the divine service. He calls us to approach Him. He declares our sins forgiven. He proclaims His Word to us. He feeds us at His Table.

And when God speaks, He isn't simply giving us information to think about. When God says, "Your sins are forgiven," He doesn't want us to analyze that statement and wonder if it applies to *us*. He wants us to believe it and respond with joy. When God says, "I chose you" (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:13), He wants all of His people to respond by believing Him, rejoicing that they belong to God because He chose them, and living accordingly.

Biography

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