

**THE PROMISE OF THE COVENANT AND  
THE ENIGMA OF UNBELIEF:**

Reflections on Covenant Promise, with a Selection from  
Samuel Volbeda's "Catechetics," Offering a Critique of  
William Heyns' Doctrine of the Covenant and  
the Apostasy of Covenant Youth

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Introduction

THE BAPTISMAL WATER ran down the head of three-week old Matthew as the pastor joyfully announced that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was the God of little Matthew—in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Twenty-eight years (and several “live in” companions later) the consistory sadly informs the congregation that Matthew, now a grown man, educated and independent, has broken covenant with God, refuses to repent of his sin, and hereby is declared as one excommunicated from the church of Christ—that is, Matthew is to be reckoned, unless and until he repents, as one who is outside of Christ and the kingdom of God.

Regrettably, such situations are not altogether uncommon in Reformed and Presbyterian churches nowadays. Who can estimate the hours of fervent praying and urgent pleading in the numerous attempts to restore wayward covenant youth to the positive covenant relation they once had with their God? In this painful and tearful process our minds recall the words of the baptismal prayer:

Almighty God and merciful Father, we thank and praise Thee that Thou has forgiven us and our children all our sins, through the blood of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, and received us through Thy Holy Spirit as members of Thine only begotten Son, and so adopted us to

be Thy children, and sealed and confirmed the same unto us by holy baptism.<sup>1</sup>

What does this prayer mean? Was Matthew, and countless infants like him, once saved? Did he, and did they, subsequently *lose* their salvation? How do we solve the apparent discrepancy between the reality of the divine promise and our experience of human wilfulness and unbelief?<sup>2</sup>

We wish to explore such questions, particularly as they were addressed in the 1920s and subsequent decades within the Christian Reformed Church by two professors of Calvin Theological Seminary, namely, William Heyns (1856-1933) and Samuel Volbeda (1881-1953). Our specific interest is to present a selection of Volbeda's critique of Heyns' position, as well as his own analysis of this perplexing issue. First, by way of background, we will set forth some of the confessional materials pertaining to covenant and baptism in order to clarify what the Reformed position has traditionally been understood to involve. In that connection we will also consider the old Dutch liturgical form for the baptism of infants. Next we will briefly introduce Heyns' views on the covenant of grace and the nature of the promise of the covenant. This is followed by a selection taken from Volbeda's class notes on "Catechetics," wherein he offers an extended analysis of Heyns' view and his own proposal. Here we will present, *verbatim*, Volbeda's material as presented in his course notes. Last, we will offer some concluding observations in light of Volbeda's analysis.

### Confessional and Liturgical Materials on Covenant and Baptism

Our interest here is not to examine at length the various Reformed confessions on the topic of baptism and all the features and polemics surrounding baptism. Nor do we wish to examine the

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<sup>1</sup>"Baptism of Infants—Form Number 1" in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Board of Publications of the Christian Reformed Church, 1976), appended pages, 125.

<sup>2</sup>These opening paragraphs are adapted from an unpublished paper written by Randal S. Lankheet, "*In the Covenant But Not of the Covenant: Examination, Evaluation, and Extension of Reformed Opinion concerning the Covenant of Grace*," Calvin Theological Seminary, December 1, 1983.

rich liturgical heritage of baptism among the Reformed churches.<sup>3</sup> Rather, our interest is to consider how the Reformed confessions set forth the divine promise of the covenant as signified and sealed in baptism, and so we will limit ourselves to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession.<sup>4</sup> Following that we will treat in short fashion the old Dutch liturgical form for the baptism of infants inasmuch as this document has had a formative influence on the understanding of baptism in Dutch Reformed churches. This succinct survey is aimed at providing some background to the nature of the issues that concerned Heyns and Volbeda.

The Belgic Confession (1561) states that God ordained sacraments for his church in order “to seal his promises in us, to pledge his good will and grace toward us, and also to nourish and sustain our faith.” The confession is careful to note that sacraments “are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible,” so that “they are not empty and hollow signs to fool and deceive us, for their truth is Jesus Christ, without whom they would be nothing.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the sacrament of baptism, pointing to Christ’s blood shed to satisfy for sins, testifies to what God performs on behalf of sinners. Ministers administer what is visible, “but our Lord gives what the sacrament signifies—namely the invisible gifts and graces.” These blessings are “washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving us true assurance of his fatherly goodness; clothing us with the ‘new man’ and stripping off the ‘old,’ with all its works.” Moreover, “little children” of believers ought to be baptized, argues the Belgic Confession, inasmuch as the promises of the covenant belong to them, and “truly, Christ has shed his blood no less for washing the little children of believers than he did for adults.”

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<sup>3</sup>For a comprehensive and detailed study of the emergence and practice of the Reformed baptismal rite, see Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>It would be easy to expand this sort of analysis to numerous other Reformed confessions and catechisms. Since both Heyns and Volbeda subscribed to the Three Forms of Unity, we limit ourselves to these materials.

<sup>5</sup>The Belgic Confession, art. 33. The English translation followed here is taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), based upon the French text of 1619.

“Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them. . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Here we see something of the nature of the divine promise given in baptism. Baptism signifies and seals the washing away of our sins, regeneration or new birth, divine assurance, and sanctification, for the old is cast off and the new is put on. What is more, in the Belgic Confession Reformed believers confess that these promises, visibly portrayed, are not empty or hollow signs to fool us; there is no deception. We are to believe in God’s promise and therefore live a life that responds to that promise according to faith, for the promise itself is unto faith and calls its recipients to walk in faith.

When we turn to the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) we find something of the same accent. Sacraments enable believers, in their use of them, to understand “more clearly the promise of the gospel,” so that God “might put his seal on that promise.” And what is the divine promise of the gospel? God’s promise is “to forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.”<sup>7</sup> Through the sacraments God “assures us that our entire salvation rests on Christ’s one sacrifice for us on the cross.”<sup>8</sup> Thus the promise of baptism comes as a personal promise, so that by the outward sign of washing comes also the promise that “as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly his blood and his Spirit wash away my soul’s impurity, in other words, all my sins.”<sup>9</sup>

To further explicate and clarify this promise, the catechism next asks what it means to be washed with Christ’s blood and Spirit. The answer is bold and assuring: “To be washed with Christ’s blood means that God, by grace, has forgiven my sins because of Christ’s blood poured out for me in his sacrifice on the cross.” And “To be washed with Christ’s Spirit means that the Holy Spirit has renewed me and set me apart to be a member of Christ so that more and more I become dead to sin and increasingly live a holy and blameless life.”<sup>10</sup> That said, this does not mean that the outward

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<sup>6</sup>The Belgic Confession, art. 34.

<sup>7</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 66. The English translation used here is taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*.

<sup>8</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 67.

<sup>9</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 69.

<sup>10</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 70.

washing of water itself washes away sins, for only Christ's blood and Spirit cleanse us from our sins. However, rather than attenuate the nature of the divine promise, the Heidelberg Catechism wishes to urge believers in assurance in the way of their baptism. Thus, in responding to why Scripture refers to baptism in such robust terms, calling it "the washing of rebirth," and "the washing away of sins,"<sup>11</sup> the catechism states that God brings assurance by the "divine pledge" and "sign" of baptism, namely, "that the washing away of our sins spiritually is as real as physical washing with water."<sup>12</sup>

As for infants, the Heidelberg Catechism asserts that since they, with adults, are part of God's covenant people, they, no less than adults, "are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith."<sup>13</sup>

In both the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism we discover that the promise signified and sealed in the sacrament of baptism is rich and comforting. To its recipients God pledges himself as their God, and with that, all the blessings that are part of being engrafted into Christ, that is, all the blessings of union with him. The promise, then, is rich in salvific content. What is more, the promise is not set forth as conditioned upon a prior human response of repentance, obedience, or faithfulness. The promise of the covenant does not come in the form: if you believe, I will be your God. Rather, the promise is in the shape: I am your God, therefore believe, which is to say, the content of the promise includes the *gift* of faith.

Having considered the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism on this topic, we also make brief mention of the Form for the Baptism of Infants that has long been in use within Dutch Reformed churches.<sup>14</sup> This form, in expositing the "principal parts"

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<sup>11</sup>See Titus 3:5 and Acts 22:16.

<sup>12</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 72-73.

<sup>13</sup>The Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 74.

<sup>14</sup>This Form for the Baptism of Infants is one of the oldest in the liturgy of Dutch Reformed churches. The earliest Dutch version of 1566 is an abbreviation and translation of a German form used in Heidelberg. The translation used here was approved by the Synod of 1912 of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. For an extended analysis and commentary on the baptismal form, see B. Wielenga, *Ons Doopsformulier* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1906); also M. Borduin, *The Form of Baptism Explained* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1935).

of the doctrine of baptism, teaches believers to consider both their sinfulness and the divine remedy to it, as well as the responsibility enjoined with baptism. Believers are taught, then, that they, along with their children, are “conceived and born in sin,” and so are under God’s wrath and “cannot enter into the kingdom of God,” except they are “born again.” Or stated more personally, baptism teaches us to see ourselves as sinners, that we are spiritually dirty and need to be washed, and so baptism, by means of the dipping in or sprinkling of water, testifies to “the impurity of our souls,” and that we should “seek for our purification and salvation apart from ourselves.” But baptism teaches more than human depravity; it also teaches us about salvation, for it “witnesses and seals unto us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ,” and so we are baptized into the name of the Triune God. Being baptized into the name of the Father means that “God the Father witnesses and seals unto us that He makes an eternal covenant of grace with us and adopts us for His children and heirs. . . .” Being baptized into the name of the Son means that “the Son seals unto us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.” Being baptized into the name of the Holy Spirit means “the Holy Spirit assures us by this holy sacrament that He will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, imparting to us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.”

The Form also urges the recipients of the promises of baptism to live out baptism’s demands. For baptism brings the admonition to live a life of new obedience unto God, to cleave to him by faith, to love and trust him, to forsake the world, to crucify our old nature, and to walk in a godly life. With that admonition or exhortation—the call of baptism—comes a renewal of God’s gracious promise and provision: “And if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not therefore despair of God’s mercy, nor continue in sin, since baptism is a seal and indubitable testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God.”

The last noteworthy feature of the baptismal form we wish to mention is the first question addressed to the parents in presenting their child for baptism. This question not only affirms the depravity of the children of believers, it also announces their status as those

who participate in the divine promise and so are reckoned as members of Christ according to the promise. “Do you acknowledge that our children, though conceived and born in sin and therefore subject to all manner of misery, yea, to condemnation itself, are *sanctified in Christ*, and therefore *as members of His Church* ought to be baptized?”<sup>15</sup> This question, to which parents make an affirmative reply, supposes that to participate in the covenant is to participate in Christ, for Christ sanctifies covenant members inasmuch as they are members of Christ himself.

This exposition of baptism, so familiar to those nurtured in Dutch Reformed churches, follows the same trajectory as the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. The promise of baptism is not couched in the language of a condition: *If* the human party first fulfills certain responsibilities and obligations, *then* God will be favorable and gracious in response. Rather, it is God’s promise that calls for and undergirds—indeed, it is God’s action that enables and produces—the fruit of faith and repentance, as well as a godly life. Baptism remains “a seal” and “indubitable testimony”—that is, it is a totally reliable witness, having the character of God’s signature upon it, guaranteeing its validity. Hence it is a source of assurance, while it is also a sermon of sorts, calling us to faith, obedience, and loving service to God.

That said, it seems impossible that one who is baptized should ever fall away. And this brings us back to the enigma we sketched out in the introduction. How is it that those who are the recipients of God’s promises, signified and sealed in baptism, fall away? Or how is it that they never come to faith? Why do some who are baptized, whether as infants or adults, not follow the way of faith when they have received the sacrament testifying to their union with Christ, new birth, forgiveness of sins, and new life?

Questions like these prompted William Heyns to formulate the doctrine of the covenant in a way that seriously considers this conundrum, attempting to find a way through it. Thus we next turn to consider briefly Heyns’ idea of the covenant, after which we will present Volbeda’s critique and proposed solution to this issue.

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<sup>15</sup>“Baptism of Infants—Form Number 1” in *Psalter Hymnal*, appended pages, 123-124. Italics added.

## William Heyns on the Covenant of Grace

W. Heyns was the professor of Practical Theology at Calvin Seminary from 1902 to 1926. He produced numerous extended course notes on the various aspects of practical theology or ministerial studies, including a book on Catechetics, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*.<sup>16</sup> He also wrote a book on dogmatic theology, entitled *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*, which was later translated into English.<sup>17</sup> In both his dogmatic theology, and in his published work on Catechetics, Heyns took up the doctrine of the covenant with some care. His first concern, it appears, was to focus upon the promissory character of the covenant of grace. For example, in his *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, he offers this summary of his thoughts on the covenant: “Expressed very briefly, the Covenant of Grace is: the promise of salvation in the form of a covenant.”<sup>18</sup> And elsewhere, “every covenant of God with man is actually a promise given in the stronger, the more binding form of a covenant.”<sup>19</sup> He goes on to illustrate the promise with Adam, the promise with Noah, the promise mentioned by Joel (2:28-32; cf. Acts 2:39), and so on.

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<sup>16</sup>W. Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., n.d.). Other literature pertaining to Heyns’ conception of the covenant include: Anthony A. Hoekema, “The Christian Reformed Church and the Covenant,” in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*, eds. Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 190-191; Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, trans. Homer C. Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1971), 13ff., 20-33; idem, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 442, 665, 666, 696-699; J. Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* [published with *Extra-Scriptural Binding—A New Danger* by Klass Schilder] (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 1996), 38-41; idem, “William Heyns as Covenant Theologian,” in *Calvin’s Books: Festschrift for Peter De Klerk*, eds. Wilhelm H. Neuser, Herman J. Selderhuis, Willem van ’t Spijker (Heerenveen: Uitgeverij J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1997), 301-314.

<sup>17</sup>W. Heyns, *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer: voor de literarische klassen van de theologische school en Calvin College te Grand Rapids, Mich.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans-Sevensma Co., 1916); also published in English as *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1926).

<sup>18</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 125.

<sup>19</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 126.

Heyns emphasizes that the covenant of grace is “monopleuric” (or “one-sided”) for “the whole covenant transaction is made by the first party [God], and the second party [believers and their seed] is not permitted to take any part in it whatsoever, to make any stipulation or condition but only to accept the covenant as the first party with sovereign pleasure has made it.”<sup>20</sup>

For Heyns, one of the most important passages in formulating a doctrine of the covenant is John 15:1, 2 (“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every *branch* that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit”—AV). This passage is important since it refers to persons who are part of the vine, which is Christ, meaning they are in some sense engrafted or incorporated into him, yet they can also, because of their unfruitfulness, be taken away, cut off, or purged. Similarly, Romans 11:17-21 points to the reality of those who partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree, yet are broken off. Does this mean that the covenant of grace is a “breakable” arrangement? No, says Heyns. “It is an unbreakable Covenant because God has given it for an everlasting Covenant, so that, although it can be broken through sin, it never may be broken.”<sup>21</sup> That is, it is never permissibly or legitimately broken.

The covenant of grace is also “unconditional,” asserts Heyns, though we may speak of “conditions.” Heyns means to say that those with whom God covenants do not first have to meet certain conditions in order to “participate in the Covenant.” If that sort of conditionality applied, it would cease to be a covenant of grace and would become a covenant of works. “To be actually a Covenant of Grace it must be a covenant in which full salvation is granted, merely of grace, and without conditions.” Conditions only apply with respect to “keeping the Covenant and for gaining its reward.”<sup>22</sup>

Heyns also considers the promised benefits or blessings of the covenant of grace, appealing to the Form for the Administration of Baptism as offering a fine exposition of the content of the promise. However, since the promise is indicative of salvation by the blood of Christ alone, how can one who is not elect participate in the promise itself? Or stated differently, how can such a one participate in salvation? Heyns states that salvation is “given” (Heyns’ word)

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<sup>20</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 127.

<sup>21</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 130.

<sup>22</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 131.

“to the non-elect.” However, he qualifies what he means by that, noting that the giving of Christ does not necessarily mean becoming “actual possessors” of him, for to possess Christ the non-elect would also need the benefits of Christ applied to them. Thus, for Heyns, there is a twofold imparting of grace. The first is the offer of salvation; the second is that of “the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.” “The first may be called an objective, and the second a subjective imparting. The first is granted to all Covenant members, even to all those who hear the Gospel, and the second is granted only to the elect.” What this means is that all who are recipients of the promise of the covenant, signified and sealed in baptism, come into “objective possession” of the covenant promises—that is, baptism “places the Covenant member in a position that he has a claim to salvation, just as an heir has a claim on the heritage, but is not yet an actual possessor of it.” Such is the meaning of the locution “to give”—it doesn’t mean actual possession; rather, it means “to offer,” “to present.” He has the right to take hold of it if he chooses.<sup>23</sup>

As for the subjective imparting of the promise of the covenant, Heyns affirms that “there is Scriptural evidence unmistakably pointing to an actual bestowal on the Covenant members of a certain measure of subjective grace also. . . .” This means that covenant members are actually, in some sense, part of the Vine, which is Christ. Isaiah 5:4 demonstrates that some covenant members belong to God’s vineyard, yet are fruitless despite God’s mercy. Heyns does not want to take this in a Pelagian direction. Thus he admits that the subjective imparting of the promise of the covenant, like the objective, falls short of the grace that ensures salvation. “To be a branch in Christ is no guarantee against being taken away, Joh. 15:2.” Nonetheless, the grace of this “subjective imparting” suffices to take from covenant members every excuse for not being fruitful and faithful.<sup>24</sup>

Last, we mention Heyns’ concern that the doctrine of election not be allowed to shape or influence the doctrine of the covenant. Volbeda will address this below, so we will not present Heyns’ views at length here. We merely note that he rejects the classic distinctions made by Reformed theologians in speaking of the dual

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<sup>23</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 133, 134.

<sup>24</sup>Heyns, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 136, 137.

aspect of the covenant of grace, such as membership in the covenant internally versus mere external membership.<sup>25</sup>

No doubt, Heyns' exposition of the doctrine of the covenant deserves a more elaborate treatment, but this suffices to introduce us to the basic contours of his position. To be noted is that Heyns, while rejecting certain commonplace distinctions concerning covenant membership in Reformed theology, introduces some of his own. Volbeda addresses himself to these distinctions. In this connection, we also observe that Volbeda will interact primarily with the exposition of the covenant presented in Heyns' work on catechetics, though he refers to his dogmatic theology as well.

What follows next is a selection taken from Volbeda's unpublished course notes on "Catechetics."<sup>26</sup> These notes briefly treat the discipline of catechetics as to its concept, its encyclopaedic place within practical theology, the relation between paedology, psychology, and catechetics respectively, the confessional character of catechetics, the history of catechetics, as well as its divisions. He also treats the theory of catechesis, both its idea and character. It is in his discussion of "the Catechesal Object" that Volbeda takes up the topic of the covenant, wherein he interacts with the views of his predecessor in the department of practical theology, and considers the "covenant status of the catechumen." Thus it is within the context of catechesis and the practical ministry of teaching and catechization that Volbeda addresses this topic. That he focuses upon Heyns' views is probably due to the fact that Heynsian theology was fairly influential within the Christian Reformed churches of his day. Volbeda's own position becomes clear in his interaction with and critique of Heyns' view. As we shall see, the conundrum of unbelief in the face of divine promise drives the mechanics of Heyns' covenantal vision and Volbeda's proposed solution.

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<sup>25</sup>See Heyns' discussion, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, 143-146.

<sup>26</sup>S. Volbeda, *Catechetics*, Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, n.d. Since these notes are not dated, we can only surmise when they were written. After earning his doctorate in 1914, Volbeda came to teach at Calvin Seminary, where he first taught church history. However, upon Heyns' retirement in 1926, Volbeda took up the chair of practical theology, where he continued until his retirement in 1952. Obviously enough, the notes date somewhere within that timeframe. Likely, they were written in the late 1920s or early 1930s, though perhaps later.

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## An Analysis and Critique of W. Heyns on the Covenant *by Samuel Volbeda*<sup>27</sup>

### Heyns' Doctrine of the Covenant Stated

Heyns devotes considerable space in his *Catechetiek* to the covenant implications of Catechesis. Says he, "The catechumens are members of the covenant. Of this the catechete must be fully persuaded, for this fact is of *controlling* significance for Catechesis. Catechesis arises from the Covenant, is required by the Covenant, and must be Covenant instruction and Covenant nurture."<sup>28</sup> He devotes ten pages to the discussion of the Covenant Basis of Catechesis, and eight pages to the Catechumen as viewed in the light of the covenant.<sup>29</sup> Both sections are comprehended under Fundamental Catechesis, or to put it in Heyns' own words: "The Essence of Catechesis." His presentation is not as clear as one could wish. This is due, it seems, to his endeavor to construe a doctrine of the covenant that is not burdened with the practical difficulties arising from the fact that eventually some covenant

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<sup>27</sup>This selection is taken from Volbeda's *Catechetics*, pages 37-47. I have mildly edited this material throughout, mostly updating the punctuation and capitalization and smoothing out some sentences. In a few places I have also amended or updated a few archaic phrases. Volbeda's quotations of Heyns' Dutch writings have been translated by Dr. Nelson D. Kloosterman, though I have edited Kloosterman's translation in a number of places. I hereby express my thanks to him for assistance in this regard. Since Volbeda does not title this material, nor did he supply subheadings, I have inserted the title above and the subsequent subheadings.

<sup>28</sup>W. Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 139-140, italics added; cf. p. 102.

<sup>29</sup>See Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 95-105 and 139-147.

children betray “an evil heart of unbelief” and die in their sin (Heb. 3:12). The problem to whose solution he addressed himself is this: not all children of believers are saved. Were those not saved not in the covenant in a *real* sense? If not, what reason do we have to reckon any child of believing parents to be in the covenant, seeing we do not know in advance who will manifest faith and who will evidence its absence? This view tends in the Baptist direction. Or were those not saved in the covenant indeed?

But would this view not imply a denial of the perseverance of the saints? Or can children of believers *really* be in the covenant and *yet* eventually be lost? Heyns commits himself to the last alternative, and by so doing not only disowns what is virtually a Baptist position, but also decidedly repudiates the second alternative. The Baptist view manifestly has no ground in Scripture and must be summarily dismissed. But the second view necessarily involves the denial of undoubted Scriptural truth, as he sees it. Hence only the third alternative remains, viz., real covenant membership that does not imply real salvation, in his estimation.

He construes his covenant doctrine after the following fashion. Children of believers are heirs of the promise of the covenant, viz., that Jehovah is their God and they his people. This promise is given them unconditionally. They neither deserve it at birth, nor do they merit it in later life. In virtue of this promise, unconditionally given them, they are members of the covenant without possessing *de facto* the cardinal blessings of the covenant, or as Heyns puts it,

With that promise, in which, then, the young members of the congregation share, and which is sealed in baptism as a promise that comes to them personally and indubitably, and which contains everything necessary for life and salvation, *full salvation is accordingly bestowed upon them*. But this does not mean that thereby they are made to participate *subjectively* [emphasis added] in full salvation, such that someone baptized would never be lost, unless there can be a falling away of saints. Bestowal would include such a participation, unless in leading people to salvation the Lord deals

with them as with mere objects, but he does not deal thus with people.

So bestowal means indeed putting a person in objective possession, but in such a way that only through accepting and appropriating it becomes fully our possession, and apart from that it never really becomes our possession.<sup>30</sup>

This acceptance and appropriation (“aanneming en toe-eigening”) is exercised by faith and obedience (“geloof en gehoorzaamheid”). The latter are called “conditions of the covenant.” “Not that the promise was given on the condition of faith and obedience, in the sense that it would have been given only to those who believed and obeyed, that faith and obedience had to precede receiving the promise, for then young children could have no share in the promise.”<sup>31</sup> The promise was given *unconditionally* “but *the fulfillment* of the promise has faith and obedience as conditions. Only in the way of faith and obedience can covenant members ‘as heirs of the kingdom of God and his covenant’ enter into their inheritance.”<sup>32</sup>

It is further assumed in true Reformed style that man is by nature dead in sins and trespasses, and in consequence is utterly unable to comply with the conditions upon which God will *fulfill* the promise of the covenant. But have we not reached an impasse? If the covenant membership is truly real and not merely nominal, and if the grant of the promise be not tantalism, the children of believers being by nature dead in sins and trespasses must be endowed with *ability* to believe and obey and to accept and appropriate the promise of the covenant of faith. Common grace, though very real, is not adequate otherwise all people and their children would be included in the covenant, seeing common

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<sup>30</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 99; 98 bottom of page; 99-100. Volbeda blends quotes from Heyns here.

<sup>31</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 100.

<sup>32</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 100.

grace is common to all men as the name implies. Saving grace may not be assumed, so Heyns argues, otherwise we are under the necessity of admitting a falling away from grace, a perishing of those who had obtained eternal life.

To escape this embarrassing dilemma, Heyns posits a *third species* of grace, which is neither common grace nor saving grace.<sup>33</sup> Of this grace the following affirmations are made. It does not spring from God's eternal election to salvation, and those receiving it are liable to its loss.<sup>34</sup> To that degree this grace is akin to common grace, to which Heyns seems to relate it as an increase ("vermeerdering").<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that in his *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*, section 68, Heyns distinguishes only two kinds of grace, "God's grace . . . is distinguished as common grace, whose object is all men, and special (saving) grace, whose object is the elect." In section 248 he mentions "a kind of subjective grace," which he carefully distinguishes from the grace of regeneration. Furthermore, it is represented as "bringing forth adequate and *good* fruits" and as [functioning] "in such a way that the total insusceptibility of the natural man for the things belonging to the Spirit of God is so far removed that there exists in the covenant member an *initial susceptibility* for the operation of the covenant."<sup>36</sup> This grace is the result of God's "covenantal working" performed upon the children of believers, in virtue of which "covenantal working" they have received "*a susceptibility for impressions*."<sup>37</sup> This impressionability ("vatbaarheid") or susceptibility, however, goes beyond the capacity for religious and spiritual impressions, which results from the operation of common grace, for we are told that this "subjective grace is sufficient, in connection with the spiritual efficacy of the means of grace, for producing the good fruits of

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<sup>33</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 145.

<sup>34</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 144.

<sup>35</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 145, 146.

<sup>36</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 144, 145.

<sup>37</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 146.

faith and obedience,” though it “does not consist of a positive saving grace.”<sup>38</sup> The Catechete is also urged to cultivate and to nurture this grace “so that they (covenant children) may grow and increase ‘in the Lord Christ’ along the path of a Christian and religious nurture.”<sup>39</sup>

### Heyns’ Critique of Prior Reformed Formulations of the Covenant

Heyns seeks to fortify his own doctrinal construction of the covenant by subjecting the view he rejects to criticism. He treats the anti-paedobaptist position with hardly as much as passing mention. Neither does he pay any attention to the systems of soteriology and ecclesiology that neglect or ignore the covenant foundations of redemption. Criticism is directed only against a view respecting the subjective implications of the covenant which is very widely current in Reformed circles today, and which claims support of the earliest and best Reformed covenant theology. Without denying Heyns’ right to antagonize the latter view of the covenant, it may be remarked that a positive and constructive elaboration of the Scriptural doctrine of the covenant and its reasoned defense against those who in various ways repudiate it was necessary in *first* order. If catechesis is a postulate of the covenant of grace because it roots in this covenant, and if, in consequence, catechesis is covenantal in purpose and character, as Heyns rightly contends,<sup>40</sup> the scope of his discussions of the covenant should certainly have embraced more than an attempt at refuting an *intraconfessional* view of the covenant to which he takes exception.

The view that he seeks to refute and to supplant and against which

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<sup>38</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 144-45. Also see *Gereformeerde Geloofsleer*, section 248.

<sup>39</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 146.

<sup>40</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 139.

he takes up cudgels twice, first when he discusses “The Covenant Basis of Catechesis”<sup>41</sup> and again, when he treats of “The Catechumen in the Light of the Covenant,”<sup>42</sup> is represented as encumbered with the following objections. (1) It is alleged that this view, which is called Dr. Kuyper’s doctrine, is not taught in God’s Word nor confessed in our doctrinal standards.<sup>43</sup> (2) It is said to be a seventeenth-century creation

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<sup>41</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>42</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 142-143.

<sup>43</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 143. Editor’s note: Heyns also offers these sorts of objections in his *Manual*, pp. 143ff. As for Abraham Kuyper’s doctrine of the covenant, it can be culled from several places, including his *Dictaten Dogmatiek: collegedictaat van een der studenten*, vol 3, “Locus de Foedere” (Kampen: J. H. Kok, ca. [1902]): §§1-8; 1-154; and his *De Leer der Verbonden: Stichtelijke Bijbelstudien* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 177-192; idem, *E Voto Dordraceno*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1904-1905), especially sections in volumes II and III; also see Kuyper’s discussion of regeneration in *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (1900; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 293-337. In this regard, L. Praamsma’s comments should be noted: “In his days in the Dutch national church, Kuyper had seen how this ceremony [of infant baptism] had become a dead custom. He opposed the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptismal regeneration just as much the Baptist rejection of infant baptism. The common Reformed position, as expressed in the liturgical form used for infant baptism, was that children should be baptized because they are included in the covenant of grace and share in the promises of that covenant. But Kuyper explained the phrase ‘sanctified in Christ,’ which is used in the baptismal form, to mean that children are considered to be born again; in other words, it is presupposed that they are born again. They are so considered because it was not all Israel that was called Israel. Even so, they are born again because baptism is the ‘washing of regeneration’ ” (L. Praamsma, *Let Christ Be King: Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuyper* [Jordan Station, Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1985], 119). Kuyper’s views created controversy among the Dutch Reformed churches, bringing about the conclusions of Utrecht 1905, which made clear that children of believing parents should be baptized not on the basis of a presumption, but on the basis of God’s command and promise.

and scholastic contrivance. (3) It is further represented as confounding the Counsel of Peace, which was a transaction of the three persons of the Godhead, looking to the achievement of the salvation of God's people through the covenant of grace, which is designed to be the instrument of the realization of salvation in the sinner's heart and life. (4) Again, Heyns contends that, according to this view, the covenant of grace was raised up with Christ and not with Abraham and his seed, or the believers and their children. (5) Furthermore on this view, the church, Heyns argues, proceeds upon the assumption (takes for granted) that the children of believers are the recipients of saving grace instead of resting upon assured fact. Moreover, seeing that some covenant children turn out to be reprobates and that there is no falling away from grace, all covenant children cannot be consistently viewed in the same light and nothing certain can be held concerning any particular child—the less so since we do not know in advance who will prove apostate and who will not. Hence it is, generously and in the spirit of charity, assured that all are regenerate, though at the expense of consistency. (6) Finally, on the basis of presumptive regeneration, there is no room for apostasy and covenant breaking, unless it be on the supposition of the loss of saving grace, which, however, is contrary to Scripture.

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However, the promise itself testifies to regeneration, and so covenant children ought to be regarded as regenerate, and the church must preach to the youth to seriously examine themselves, for baptism calls one to faith. The Christian Reformed Church, at its synod 1908, also adopted these conclusions. See Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 639-640. Although Volbeda simply links Kuyper's views to classic Reformed theology, including seventeenth-century federalism, a case can be made that at least certain expressions of Kuyper are either a less than felicitous formulation or an unhelpful innovation for explaining covenant and baptism, though much of his teaching demonstrates continuity with Calvin and the federal theology of the seventeenth century.

## Weaknesses of Heyns' View

Now it is not difficult to meet those objections. It is not necessary, however, to reply to them in detail—it would also take us too far afield. It may be observed in passing that the view assailed is not a seventeenth-century scholastic invention but Reformation theology, and was developed by the fathers of Reformed theology in their controversy with anabaptism, as Kramer has demonstrated in his *Het verband van doop en wedergeboorte*.<sup>44</sup> It would require little effort to show that our doctrinal standards lend support to it and that it is not at all in conflict with Scripture. Dr. Kuyper was its *protagonist* in the nineteenth century, but he was by no means its father, nor did he ever claim to be such. It does not confound the Trinitarian counsel of peace and the covenant of grace, neither does it deny that the latter was raised up with Abraham and believers and their seed, though in harmony with Scripture (e.g., Rom. 5 and 1 Cor. 15), it does consider the Mediator, Jesus Christ, to be the successor to Adam, as the head of the covenant of grace. As to the assumption respecting the presence of saving grace in the hearts of covenant children, Heyns will have to grant that his “Subjective grace, which is sufficient to the bringing forth of good fruits of faith and obedience” has no more ground for being *assumed* than “the presumed regeneration” which he rejects. If anything, his view rests upon the *weaker* ground of the two. It is *inference* from the two promises that God could not reasonably expect faith and obedience if he did not grant enabling grace, and that not all covenant children prove to be believers. But the view which he regrets and combats is a direct deduction from the gospel of the covenant: I am the God of my people and of their seed,

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<sup>44</sup>Editor's note: The book to which Volbeda refers examines the relationship between baptism and regeneration, and consists of some 358 pages. See Geerhard Kramer, *Het verband van doop en wedergeboorte: nagelaten dogmenhistorische studie*, met een inleidend woord van A. Kuyper (Breukelen: “De Vecht,” 1897).

embraced in unquestioning faith and believing, utilized in the religious training of the covenant youth. Finally it is not incumbent upon the church to harmonize its faith built upon an unambiguous declaration, such as the covenant promise, with facts that may possibly eventuate in the future.

As to the substitute offered, the presumptive “subjective grace” (“subjectieve genade”) that is neither mere common grace nor full saving grace, it has all the earmarks of a hypothesis contrived to obviate the crucial difficulty of covenant breaking and covenantal apostasy. To mention only one serious objection: it is represented as “not a positive saving grace,” and yet it is sufficient (“genoegzaam”) to produce good fruits of faith and obedience such as are requisite to enter into the possession and enjoyment of everything that is necessary unto life and salvation and “to increase and grow up in the Lord Christ.”<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Heyns declares, and most correctly, that “coming to faith and obedience is the work of the *regenerating* grace of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>46</sup> This view, then, certainly does not possess the merit of consistency. It may also be noted that Heyns says, when stating the view he controverts, “we also do not deny that more often than we commonly think regeneration among the elect occurs in their youth, and *as a rule* we observe covenant children living in obedience, even in spiritual matters, being kept from public sins and the vanities of service to the world, and by and by positively choose to serve the Lord without a startling conversion.”<sup>47</sup> .

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<sup>45</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 145; 98.

<sup>46</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 140.

<sup>47</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 143. Italics added. Editor’s note: Literally Heyns writes that these covenant youth come to faith “without a perceptible conversion” (“zonder merkbare omzetting”). He does not mean that such youth are unconverted. He merely means that their decision to serve the Lord did not come after the fashion of a radical descent into sin, followed by a manifest and stunning conversion that is evident to all. Hence I have translated the phrase as “startling conversion.”

. . . [I]t would seem that on Heyns' own ground there is little call for his special brand of grace. For it does seem farfetched to posit a grace neither common nor saving in the interest of explaining exceptions to the rule and anomalies that from their very nature defy rational explanation.

Before addressing ourselves to the problem that troubled Heyns and motivates his *gratia tertia*, we must devote attention to the doctrine of the Reformed church that "godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy" (Canons of Dort, I. 17).<sup>48</sup> According to Heyns, the *objective* grant ("schenking") of "full salvation . . . really includes such an incorporation [i.e., making "full salvation" one's subjective possession] so far as it relates to covenant members whom the Lord takes away in their infancy, but *not* so far as it relates to those whom he permits to reach the age of discretion."<sup>49</sup> His reason for denying this "incorporation" subjectively to children who are not destined to die in infancy is that in doing so the Lord would treat them "as mere objects." It may be asked, however, whether the endowment of all covenant children with "a kind of subjective grace that is capable, in connection with spiritual cultivation through the means of grace, of producing good works in faith and obedience" and of enabling them "to increase and grow up in the Lord Christ" is not treating them "as mere objects" just as much as the bestowal of saving grace. Moreover, it may be asked, how it would be possible *on any score* to treat children otherwise than "as mere objects," if the ordinances of God for natural life are not to be suspended in the covenant of grace. Besides, the Canons of Dort I, 17 preface the declaration concerning children dying in infancy with the statement, "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 by virtue of the gracious

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<sup>48</sup>Editor's note: Quotations from the Canons of Dort have been updated from the translation Volbeda used, and are taken from *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*.

<sup>49</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 99. Italics added.

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.” The holiness predicated of covenant children without exception is plainly intended to be understood in the subjective sense, as appears from the negative reference to the nature of the covenant children, and as follows equally from the particular application made of the general fact in the case of covenant children dying in infancy. Heyns’ *gratia tertia*, not being positively saving (“not a positive saving grace”)<sup>50</sup> can hardly be conceived of as rendering its recipients holy in the sense of the Canons of Dort, I, 17, for this holiness supplies warrant for not doubting their election and salvation, while the *gratia tertia*, we are assured, does not derive from God’s election and hence is not guaranteed against loss.<sup>51</sup> In conclusion, the view that godly parents have reason to rest assured of the election and salvation of their children as long as death does not reach out its cold hand for them—and this is plainly the implication of the doctrine of the *gratia tertia*—does not commend itself and does not yield a solid basis for confident and consistent covenant training of the covenant child.

The “silver lining” of the *gratia tertia* view is that it demonstrates the impossibility of holding to the covenant membership of children in any real and true sense if the covenant child be conceived of as devoid of the grace of God in [his or her] heart, sustaining only a forensic, legal, relation to God. There is no other theological escape from the Baptist position than the acknowledgement of “subjective” as well as “objective” implications of the covenant of grace. Moreover, Heyns’ *gratia tertia* verges on saving grace, in spite of his strenuous endeavor to differentiate it sharply from elective and regenerative grace. For as remarked above, we are told that it is “sufficient for producing the good fruits of faith and obedience, and for removing the complete and natural

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<sup>50</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 145.

<sup>51</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 144.

incapacity of man for the things of the Spirit, and for effecting an initial capacity for these things.”<sup>52</sup> It is sufficient warrant for parents and the church “to sow their seed with good confidence, and to expect that seed to produce fruit, and to nourish and nurture that grace (*gratia tertia*, ‘a kind of subjective grace’) so that they (covenant children) ‘may grow and increase in the Lord Christ’ along the path of a Christian and religious upbringing.”<sup>53</sup>

In the same strain Heyns avows “that the baptism signifies being engrafted into, being baptized into, being placed in relationship and living fellowship with the Triune God and thus being engrafted into the body of Christ, into the congregation of believers, as a member.”<sup>54</sup> The statement that “the coming to faith and obedience [the ‘good fruits’ for which *gratia tertia* is said to be sufficient] is the work of the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit” points in the same direction<sup>55</sup>—that is, it plainly shows that, judging by its effects, there is no appreciable difference between Heyns’ *gratia tertia* and the saving grace of regeneration. And this *gratia tertia*, Heyns *assumes, posits, takes for granted*; and the initial susceptibility for covenant training *which he speaks of* is wholly presumptive. But he nominally, at least, denies its saving, regenerative, and elective quality in order to evade the difficulty which it involves, viz., the apostasy in adolescence of some children of believers. But the solution of this problem—and a *real* problem it is for those holding the view which Heyns combats—will not be solved in the form of another problem, for Heyns’ conception involves another stupendous quandary, proposing a grace that does not flow from election and is not positively saving (or in his words, is “not a positive saving grace”) and yet is said to have saving

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<sup>52</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 145. Volbeda conflates two passages from Heyns in this quotation.

<sup>53</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 146. This quotation is a conflation of two passages from Heyns.

<sup>54</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 143.

<sup>55</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 140.

effects. This is a greater and more baffling predicament than the problem Heyns set out to solve.<sup>56</sup> Heyns writes: “And now the power of sin is indeed restrained in them through God’s grace, not only through common grace, but even more through covenant grace, as that is described in Isaiah 5, and is shown in John 15:2, Romans 11:17, but that power is not put to death in them.”<sup>57</sup>

### The Problem of Covenantal Apostasy

The problem of covenantal apostasy must now engage our attention, insofar as it bears upon our conception of the covenant. We have seen that it is a determining factor in Heyns’ construction of the covenant.<sup>58</sup> His “covenant grace” as he calls it clearly has its *motif* in finding a *via media* between the Baptist position according to which children of believers do not differ in respect of the subjective condition from the children of heathens, and the so-called Kuyperian view, according to which the children of believers are deemed to be regenerate from youth on, insofar as they are elect.

#### *Approaches to the Enigma*

Now there can be no doubt whatsoever that some children of believers apostatize upon arriving at years of discretion or even later. It is as true of the New Testament Israel of God as of God’s Old Testament people that all are not Israel (i.e., true Israel) that are of (ἐξ) Israel—Israel’s seed: outward, official Israel (Rom. 9:6). And not only are there such as turn against God and disown his covenant upon attaining to

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<sup>56</sup>Editor’s note: I have significantly recast Volbeda’s lengthy sentence at this point, making it into two sentences, as well as changing and adding a few words in order to clarify his point.

<sup>57</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, p. 146; cf. also p. 145.

<sup>58</sup>Heyns, *Handboek voor de Catechetiek*, pp. 99-100; 140; 143-144.

psychological maturity, but there is a class of covenant breakers to whom the language of Heb. 6:4-8 applies: "For as touching those who were once enlightened (ἅπαξ φωτισθέντας) and tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the age to come, and *then* fell away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. For the land which hath drunk the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them for whose sake it is also tilled, receiveth blessing from God: but if it beareth thorns and thistles, it is rejected and nigh unto a curse; whose end is to be burned" (ASV). Experience adduces cases corresponding to these solemn and awful words. Men have been known to be not only Christian in their profession and conduct in a way that left nothing to be desired, but preeminently so, as attested by zeal for the faith and energetic leadership, who nevertheless afterward turned their back deliberately upon Christianity altogether.

It is not our present concern to attempt a dogmatical and psychological explanation of the unspeakably sad fact stated. The question that confronts us at this time is: should the doctrine of the covenant be construed with a view to such eventuality? Now it is true that the original Reformed view of the covenant projected by Calvin and others and incorporated in our Baptismal Formulary, to mention no other official ecclesiastical standards, is difficult to harmonize with the fact of covenant breaking and apostasy. But it should be borne in mind that this is by no means the only instance of seeming discrepancy between two positions equally well attested by Scripture, or between a conviction held and a fact that cannot be denied. As regards the latter category, hypocrites are esteemed holy and elect brethren; yet in the day of Christ it will appear that they were neither elect nor holy. Shall we, therefore, allow this eventuality to govern our estimate of the brethren in the direction of suspended judgment? Let it be remembered that if objection be taken to presumptive regeneration of covenant children, objection

must be taken equally against presumptive faith and good works of adult church members, if consistency is not to be sacrificed. For we know the adults' heart no more infallibly than we know the child's heart. In both instances their Christian subjective condition is and can only be presumptive; in the case of adults presumption is based upon *their* words and works; in the case of covenant children it rests upon *God's* testimony: I am their God and they belong to my people. In both instances the outcome may prove the antecedent presumption to be out of harmony with the realities of life. But we do not therefore refuse to own all persons of Christian profession and conduct as brethren. Why should we be required to abandon our presumption respecting covenant children, if it rests, as it does, on the better of the two grounds? In respect to doctrines, we do not abandon either the Scriptural teaching concerning God's absolute sovereignty because it is impossible for us, at least in the present dispensation, to harmonize it with the equally Scriptural dogma of the absolute responsibility of man, even of fallen man, or vice versa. In other words, we are agreed that seeming paradoxes and apparent discrepancies between two truths equally well attested, or between a truth well attested and a fact patently undeniable, do not crowd us into the corner of either/or. Now in the case at hand, it cannot be denied that Heyns' rejection of the so-called Kuyperian spiritual appraisal of covenant children is motivated by the attempt to evade the *crux mentis* which the eventuality of covenant breaking raised up. This fear of conflict is not a commendable attitude to assume.

But the matter may also be approached from another angle. Why should we not take *God at his Word* when he declares that our seed are his children and he is *their* God no less than ours? Certainly, at the time the declaration is made there is literally nothing that would inspire us with doubt and uncertainty beyond a *theoretical* possibility, and a possibility that is not at all probable according to the normal run of facts. For covenant breaking is admittedly an exception, and not the rule. If possibilities must be reckoned with, it should be remembered that the

preponderance of probability is in favor of presumptive salvation. However, the point made now is that, since God's declaration regarding our children is not stated conditionally at all, it is not dependent for its realization upon any contingencies. As such it addresses itself to *faith*, and demands that it be accepted as unquestionably as it was made unconditionally. If God had meant to speak conditionally, he would have done so; there are numerous pronouncements in Scripture which are unequivocally conditional, e.g., Exodus 19:5. But the promise of the covenant is manifestly unconditional and was plainly intended to be taken at its face value, viz., a statement of fact, not of possibility and contingency.

This does not imply that the *full* realization of the covenant and the *complete* actualization of the potentialities of the regenerate life do not move upon a *moral* plane, and that *full* salvation does not include, in the case of adults, that the person saved enter into the processes of redemption, as worked out in his life *by God, by an act of his own mind and will*. Salvation of moral creatures, such as we are, is certainly morally grounded and morally actualized. But if we must, when attaining to maturity, work out our own salvation as we are plainly required to do, we *can* only do so—and do as a matter of fact only perform this obligation—if and when God works in us both to *will* (i.e. the *moral* element) and to do according to his good pleasure. And precisely this good pleasure to work in his people to will and to do is an element of his covenant grace in Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace, and, as such, to be accepted in implicit faith, purely on the strength of God's unequivocal and unconditional declaration. It should not be forgotten that it shall be done unto us according to our faith (Matt. 9:29); and it is precisely of the nature of faith to expect great things from God.

The faith whereby we must live is not a matter of calculation and reckoning. This, however, is not the same as saying that the life of covenant, church, and kingdom on its human side is to be conceived of in absolutistic, naturalistic, mechanistic fashion. Spiritual life in all its

relationships is integrated in the *moral* world order. The future of a human person is not, insofar as he is concerned about it and actively involved in it, a foregone conclusion pure and simple. Heyns is by no means mistaken in refusing to believe that the future of the covenant youth is independent of all that may betide, whatever it be. Covenant redemption is not an immutably naturalistic process, as he rightly contends. But instead of bringing the consideration of the implications of the moral world order to bear upon the life of faith on its practical score, he mistakenly allows it to govern the content of faith as respects the spiritual estimate to be placed upon our children. His emphasis upon the moral corollaries of spiritual redemption is entirely opposite, but he puts the accent in the wrong place. In justice to Heyns as well as in the interest of a clear understanding of the truly vexing problem of covenant breaking, notable for those who interpret covenant membership in terms of saving grace and spiritual life, it is imperative that we seek to give answer to the question: how should the past fact and the future eventuality of covenant apostasy affect us?

There are three ways, conceivably, in which this problem may be met. First in total disregard of the moral character of redemption, the position may be taken that, since God owns the children of believers, it follows with the necessity of natural law that they must and will be saved, no matter what the spiritual condition of the parents be and the spiritual training the child receives. This view of infantile covenant grace does not have the sanction either of our ecclesiastical standards or of authoritative theology, but it has been held as a matter of fact and even advocated, though somewhat diffidently. It hardly admits of doubt that this false view and thoroughly unscriptural position has prejudiced earnest minded theologians and the common people very deeply against the covenant views of Calvin, Kuyper and our church. Those embracing this wholly untenable view have by their construction of the doctrine of the covenant impressed many serious and practical Christians as if this doctrine tends to "make men careless and profane."

Secondly, there are those who refuse to credit children of the covenant with regenerate life, either because they cannot conceive of spiritual life otherwise than as actualized in the life of adults (the Baptist, whether avowed or not) or because they are bent upon framing their covenant doctrine in such a way that it will fit in with future eventualities (Heyns). They rightly stress the moral element in salvation, but they wrongly stress it to the extent that it virtually neutralizes the explicit and plain meaning of the covenant promise.

Thirdly, the view must be mentioned according to which the subjective implications of the covenant membership of the children of believers must be derived not from contingencies but from the unambiguous and unequivocal declaration of our covenant God, viz., that our children are redemptively his no less than we. They who hold this view live by simple, childlike, unquestioning faith in the plain promises of God, and do not allow their faith to be disturbed and impaired by plausible calculations, based, somewhat after the manner of statistics, upon the records of the past regarding the possible eventuality of covenant breaking on the part of their now children. They boldly, though humbly, hold God to his Word and trust that what he has promised he is both able and minded to perform. In taking this position they remember that their children are by nature dead in sin and trespasses and could not possibly comply with the moral conditions upon which salvation turns if God did not, in covenant faithfulness, through his Holy Spirit enable them by means of saving grace to believe in Christ and walk obediently in the paths of righteousness and holiness. They take it that the covenant promise—that is, that he declares himself to be their God and themselves to belong to his people—comprehends the inauguration, the continuation, and the consummation of that glorious and blessed restoration that we call salvation. God, they judge, certainly cannot postpone implanting regenerate life in the hearts of the children of the covenant until they are adolescent as if they would be able, apart from really saving grace, to meet his requirements and to satisfy his

conditions before regeneration. True, in a sense they must satisfy the condition of salvation, viz., faith (better not to add obedience as a second condition, as is sometimes done, because obedience is the fruit and manifestation of faith and real faith is instinct with the potentiality of obedience); but seeing that it is impossible for them to come to God in true faith or themselves apart from the grace of regeneration, the plain logic of the whole situation would seem to point in the direction of the bestowal of saving grace upon the children of the covenant in early youth, in order that its potentialities may progressively be realized in their hearts on the basis of the laws of soul development until the time comes when in adolescence, alike of natural and spiritual life, they embrace Christ in faith, profess their faith before men, and exemplify their faith in obedience of life.

Those holding this third view do not yield *mere theoretical assent* to the teaching of God's Word, viz., that the *fruition* in adolescence of the regenerate life implanted in early youth is conditioned by *active*, i.e., conscious and volitional, faith. They take this plain testimony of Scripture no less serious than the covenant promise which it contains. Now the *implantation* of spiritual life is God's prerogative; he neither delegates it to others, nor makes use therein of human accessories, analogously to the creation of natural life, which similarly is an *exclusively divine* act. But in the *development* of this new and spiritual life he sovereignly engages the services of his people, that is, of the parents of the children in first order, and also of the ecclesiastical organization into which the children have been incorporated through baptism. Parental and ecclesiastical nurture and training of the nascent life of the covenant child therefore enter very deeply into the realization of the plan of God as laid down in principle in the saving grace bestowed upon the seed of his people. Covenant industry and loyalty have been taken up by God in his good pleasure into the very heart of the divine covenant economy.

The question that the Pauline statement, "all are not Israel that are of Israel," may gender in our hearts will not be: May I take God's promise

at its face value? but: Will we and will the church be true to our covenant duties and our baptismal vows as our children, the seed of believers and the hope of the church, pass through childhood and into adolescence? It may safely be said that the defection of the covenant youth on an extensive scale is always proof positive that the church, in respect alike of its membership and officers, of doctrinal purity and holiness of life, of pastoral care and disciplinary correction, has departed widely from its charter and commission, and has grown spiritually lethargic and moribund. Broadly speaking, when there is no valid reason to doubt that the parents belong to God's people, indeed, covenant apostasy will be the exception. To put it in the language of the covenant promise itself, as long as the words "I am your God" apply, the words "I am the God of your seed" also apply. When the first part of the promise becomes of doubtful application, we cannot be sure of the applicability of the second part. The gist of the matter, then, is that instead of attenuating the promise of the covenant as respects our children, we should as parents and adult members and as officers of the church scrutinize *ourselves* very closely, and be exacting in demanding that our own lives and our official ecclesiastical ministrations answer to God's covenant injunctions.

In conclusion, attention must be directed to the view of Heyns that covenant breaking implies at once that those guilty of it were not *savingly* in the covenant, and yet were in the covenant in a real sense, by virtue of the possession of the *gratia tertia* propounded. The solution of the problem, how those who never received saving grace can break the covenant whose spiritual realities they never obtained, must not be sought in the direction of the presumption of a grace that cannot save. For it goes without saying that in the absence of saving grace, presumptively, as on the *gratia tertia* view, the covenant is, strictly, no more than a purpose on God's part whose realization is contingent upon certain conditions to be fulfilled at a later time, and hence is not a *present* reality, that is, from the standpoint of the infancy of covenant youth. It is apparent that one cannot be said to have broken the cov-

enant of grace—and grace in this phrase certainly means saving grace—who, presumptively, never possessed the *distinctive* grace of this covenant.

*The Solution to the Enigma by*  
*The Biblical A Priori — A Posteriori*

The key to the solution of this problem is found in the application to the case at hand of the distinction of *a priori* and *a posteriori*. The *a priori* position is that those with whom the covenant of *grace* is raised up are the recipients of the grace of the covenant. This *a priori* position is based, objectively, on the unconditional and unequivocal promise of the covenant, and grounded, subjectively, in the unquestioning faith of God's people in the sure Word of God. In some cases, however, it appears *a posteriori* that the child of believers is not himself a believer. The thing to do when there is an unmistakable discrepancy between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* position is neither to attempt reduction of the conflict of the *a priori* and *a posteriori* positions by harmonistic manipulation, nor to assume the presence of an objective antinomy in the divine economy. Scripture itself points the way under these circumstances. It does not say: take the promise of the covenant in an attenuated, diluted sense as signifying something short of saving grace; nor does it say: continue to assume when the covenant child turns out to be an unbeliever that he is still a member of the covenant and must be sustained in his church membership. Neither does Scripture say with the Barthian school of theology: divine truth is inherently and essentially paradoxological and faith therein virtually a species of irrationalism. It simply suggests that we do as did St. Paul, who said: "All are not Israel that are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6), and as did St. John who said: "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would, no doubt, have continued with us, but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (1 John 2:19, AV). Those statements were

made both respecting children who grow up as unbelievers (Rom. 9:6 at least includes this aspect of the case), and respecting adult professors of Christianity who apostatize in the spirit of Antichrist which is manifestly apostatic as St. Paul teaches in 2 Thessalonians. But both St. Paul and St. John would refuse to confound or to harmonize the discrepant *a priori* and *a posteriori* view; and [they would also refuse] to deny that what is born of Israel, on the standpoint of Old Testament times, must be considered to be Israel as long as stubborn facts do not prove the contrary (Rom. 9:6), and that those who, though hypocrites, have professed faith in Christ to the satisfaction of the church should be accepted at their face value as long as their true identity remains concealed. In Romans 9, St. Paul relates the *a posteriori* position to the sovereign antemundane election of God, and in Romans 11:33 he exclaims in the admiration of the profundities of God's wisdom and knowledge: "How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out." But Scripture nowhere intimates that we should relate the *a priori* position to the pretemporal decrees of God and allow the consideration of the *then* still hidden will of God to govern our understanding of his gracious covenant truth, and to govern our practical attitude toward, and treatment of, the lambs of Jesus' flock which he, too, claims as his own and makes the objects of loving solicitude and tender shepherd care.

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Thus far the selection from Volbeda's notes on Catechetics.

### Concluding Observations

A number of features in Volbeda's presentation deserve comment and further reflection. We will consider them in sequence and follow with some final observations.

First, Volbeda is to be commended for accurately and helpfully pinpointing the issue at hand. He does this by asking whether

persons who have been baptized, yet die in unbelief, ever enjoyed *real* covenant membership. A negative reply to this query, he argues, undermines the assurance that ought to accompany being baptized, and believing parents are left wondering whether baptism is valid for their children. However, if baptism indeed testifies to salvation, to being washed in Jesus' blood and regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and we then assert that certain persons, though baptized, nonetheless die in unbelief, it appears that we deny the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints; and again the promissory character and assurance of baptism is compromised, since this position argues that for at least some covenant members, their participation in the covenant and in Christ is unto a *temporary* salvation. Volbeda's question is to the point: How can children of believers really be in the covenant and yet eventually prove to be lost? Heyns opts for an attenuated covenant promise in the face of this dilemma. Rather than assert that the baptized participate in full salvation, as signified and sealed in baptism, he argues that the children of believers have the promise of salvation *if* they appropriate the promise in the way of faith. Meanwhile, they are said to possess a kind of covenant grace that falls short of regenerating grace yet enables and disposes covenant children to faith and obedience. However, Heyns allows an exception in light of the affirmation of Canons of Dort I, 17, namely, the children of believers ordained to die in infancy are God's elect and come to regeneration as infants prior to their death. Volbeda rightly controverts Heyns' inconsistent approach, demonstrating that it is devised in order to escape the theological problem at hand. Heyns' view, however, also undermines the nature of the promise contained in baptism.

Meanwhile, Volbeda properly argues that covenant membership is not to be regarded as nominal but real. The divine promise contained in baptism is something its recipients can depend upon, believe in, and plead back to God's throne of mercy; it is not tantalistic—that is, God does not tease the recipients of baptism with a promise that is unobtainable. Since the children of believers are dead in their sin, they can live out their baptism only by divine grace and spiritual rebirth; they must be given the gift of faith in order to accept and appropriate the promise of the covenant and obey its demands. Heyns argues that a salvific grace is not promised or bestowed in baptism, for if it were, we would face the problem of those who fall away from grace and forfeit eternal life—the apostasy of the saints. Thus Heyns attenuates the promise given in

the covenant of grace in order to escape the problem. In so doing he compromises the assurance of baptism and weakens the confessional affirmation about the same.

Second, it should be observed that, according to Volbeda, the position he stakes out and defends is nothing other than the classic position of Reformed theology from its first codification to its subsequent formulation and defense by Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century. Volbeda is unmoved by Heyns' critique of Abraham's Kuyper's doctrine of the covenant (which Volbeda regards as classic Reformed theology), mostly because Heyns misrepresents it at every turn. It is not our interest to assess Kuyper's doctrine of the covenant and how it relates to earlier codifications of the Reformed position. We simply note that, for Kuyper, the church ought to baptize the children of believers on the presumption of their regeneration or, stated differently, on the presumption of their regeneration they ought to be baptized. It should also be added that Kuyper's doctrine of presumptive regeneration is not the Anglican or Lutheran doctrine of baptismal regeneration. In any case, Heyns sets forth a doctrine of neither presumptive regeneration nor presumptive non-regeneration; he treats the regenerative status of covenant youth before God with agnosticism, which is itself a violation of the nature of the covenantal promise and what is signified and sealed in baptism.

Volbeda moves in another direction. Rather than weaken or diminish the divine promise contained in baptism in order to make room for possible covenant apostasy, Volbeda, with Calvin and the confessional formulation, urges that recipients of baptism take God at his Word, embrace the covenant promises in unquestioning faith, and nurture covenant children according to the blessing of the gospel announced in the covenant: I am your God and the God of your seed. Thus, Volbeda reasserts the Reformed confessional tradition in maintaining a high view of the sacraments as a divine means of grace, and so reaffirms the gospel of grace contained in the covenant and signified and sealed in baptism—a gospel declaring God's promise and provision of rebirth and forgiveness and therefore calling covenant members to faith and obedience. Volbeda refuses to abandon the promissory character of the covenant, with its assuring benefits and robust assurance of the salvific content of those promises.

Third, Volbeda doesn't deny that covenantal apostasy is both a reality and an enigma. Therefore he refuses the route taken by some

to the effect: once baptized, always saved! But if the baptized can be lost or never come to redemption, are we to doubt or otherwise hang a question mark after the name of every covenant member, questioning their salvation? Volbeda argues that those who prove to be hypocrites and false brothers or sisters are, before their manifest unbelief, properly esteemed as holy and elect members of the body of Christ. Thus Volbeda refuses to allow the eventual outcome of covenantal apostasy, or the possibility of this eventuality in the lives of some covenant members, to govern how we view one another as members of the covenant of grace. In other words, we do not place a question mark next to each other's name—is so and so really saved? The presumption of regeneration and salvation—or better, a humble trust in God's promise regarding the same—must apply not only to the children of believers but also to the adult members of the church who profess faith in Christ and live accordingly. In fact, the divine promise given to covenant children is a more reliable basis for believing in their salvation than the profession made by adults.

Fourth, Volbeda does not forfeit the doctrine of election or place it on a shelf or otherwise negate or compromise it in an effort to harmonize the salvific promise of the covenant with the reality of covenantal apostasy. The difficulty is genuine, but the doctrine of predestination is not to be reinterpreted or diluted in order to make room for unbelief. Stated differently, we must reject every attempt to rescue us from the conundrum of covenantal apostasy by reintroducing a form of Remonstrant theology. We must remember that the kind of enigma we are here addressing evaporates and vanishes before any species of Pelagian or semi-Pelagian theology, since theology of that sort has a ready-made answer why those who receive the sign and seal of the covenant fail to come to faith or persevere in the same, namely human freedom (sufficiently restored by a non-salvific divine grace) and the responsibility attendant to it. The reason some baptized members of the church perish in their sin is no mystery, none at all. To be in the covenant, with all its salvific benefits, even its saving realities, does not necessarily amount to eternal life. For the promise excludes at least one thing: it excludes the blessing or divine gift of the perseverance of faith. Perseverance is left for the human party of the covenant to fulfill. Consequently, insofar as covenant members fail to persevere in faith, they prove themselves unfaithful to the covenant and by their covenantal unfaithfulness they lose what they once possessed and

so forfeit salvation itself. No mystery; nothing perplexing here. Similarly, but conversely, insofar as covenant members do persevere in faith, they show themselves to be faithful to the covenant, and by their covenantal faithfulness they retain what God has given them and, along that path, persist to the end. Through faith and obedience, then, in the way of their covenantal faithfulness, they persevere in their salvation. There is no enigma in the Remonstrant scheme, for perseverance and non-perseverance depends upon the human party of the covenant.

Fifth, Volbeda calls godly parents to put their faith in God and his Word, to trust in God's promises regarding their children, and to live by simple, childlike faith in God's promises. He urges us away from calculations and statistics and calls us to look to God, trusting that he is able to do what is promised. Meanwhile, believing parents, in humble dependence upon him, seek to provide their children the nurture and care consistent with and prescribed by the covenant itself. In saying this Volbeda also reminds us that, inasmuch as covenant members exercise faith and come to repentance, and so walk in obedience, the work belongs to God, for it is God who is at work in us to will and to do according to his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). In other words, Volbeda, with classic Reformed theology, refuses to revert to a Remonstrant doctrine of human ability as if being in the covenant meant that through prevenient grace God healed sinners enough to transform them into responsible moral agents, able to fail or succeed according to their strength and ability—saved but able to lose their salvation. The doctrine of the Spirit's gracious working is not circumscribed to mere prevenience; on the contrary, Volbeda unashamedly asserts that it is impossible for the children of the covenant to come to God in true faith, or know themselves as sinners needing salvation, *apart from* the grace of the Spirit unto regeneration and faith. The implantation of spiritual life is and remains entirely God's prerogative. However, he graciously calls parents and the church to nurture covenant youth in the way of faith, according to the demands stipulated in the covenant. Thus both believing parents and the church are called to be faithful, to fulfill their commission and charter respectively, and to repent of laziness and lethargy in the nurture of the youthful members of the covenant.

Sixth, Volbeda's affirmation of a biblical *a priori* and *a posteriori* approach to the enigma of covenantal apostasy serves to call believers to dependency upon God even as it charges them to live

for the Lord. From the standpoint of the biblical *a priori*, believers are called to plead God's promises on behalf of covenant members throughout their lives—unto the grave. Thus, from the perspective of faith and the call of the gospel, the biblical *a priori* calls believers to take God at his Word and to believe that he is able to do more than they ask or imagine. God promises to be our God and the God of our children. We are not to doubt that; and in promising that, God promises that we are not our own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. This is the biblical *a priori*. Only in the face of sustained unbelief, which is confirmed ultimately and finally in death—that is, dying in unbelief—can we speak according to the biblical *a posteriori*, which means only then may we conclude that they were never of us, for had they been of us, they would not have departed from us.

Last, related to the above is Volbeda's comment that the apostle Paul relates the *a posteriori* reality to God's sovereign purpose of election and reprobation. This is different than saying at the outset, some baptized members of the covenant are elect and some are reprobate, and so we may only speculate about the redemptive status of covenant members. Such an approach undermines the very purpose of the sacraments, which are to point us to Christ and his redemptive work in order to comfort us and call us to trust in him. For believers to speculate about their status (Am I elect? or Am I reprobate?) abuses and compromises baptism's purpose; as a consequence, they can no longer genuinely take comfort in their baptism.

To be sure, that the doctrine of election intersects with the doctrine of the covenant is unavoidable, for the way of salvation finds its fulfillment according to God's eternal purpose of election. Volbeda does not deny that *a posteriori* some baptized members of the covenant prove to be among the non-elect, that is, reprobate. About such (again, *a posteriori*) we may draw a theological conclusion—namely, that they were not finally incorporated into Christ and did not enjoy the forgiveness of sins or the Spirit's indwelling. Their participation in the covenant, though real in many respects, comes short of baptism's salvific signification and certification. What is sometimes called the dual aspect of the covenant, an idea implicit in Volbeda's discussion, comes into play here and is an attempt to reckon with the nature of the covenantal promise and the reality of unbelief among covenant members. However to speak of the covenant as having a "dual aspect" is an *a*

*posteriori* theological assessment; and from that perspective it is a legitimate analysis of the divine economy of salvation. It is not for us, however, *a priori* to treat covenant members according to this distinction. Thus, while the church comes to the sad acknowledgement that some of her covenant members have fallen away (seemingly permanently) and so must be regarded as those outside the church, this is an *a posteriori* judgment. This conclusion, as a final verdict, is made at the end—not the beginning or the middle point—of one's life. Only if a baptized member of the covenant persists in unbelief, dying in the same, may we conclude that he or she was not among God's elect, for baptism points us to the opposite conclusion.

In this connection we observe that it is evident that the promises of the covenant find fruition in the lives of the elect alone; they alone participate in the saving essence of the gospel promise, for God achieves his saving purpose in them alone, unless we wish to affirm the apostasy of the saints and deny the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This is a theological judgment that is legitimately pressed not *a priori* but *a posteriori*. That said, it must also be stated that it is not permissible to flatten out the divine promise of the covenant to apply to the elect and non-elect in precisely the same way. When this is attempted, the consequences are altogether sinister for the theology of grace. Consider the following: if no distinction is to be made between the elect and the non-elect within the covenant of grace (in the way of *a posteriori* theological assessment), so that every covenant member, head for head, in every respect, participates in the redemption signified and sealed in the sacrament of baptism, then the only recourse is either to dilute the meaning of the covenantal promise, as Heyns does, or to affirm the apostasy of the saints, or what amounts to the same thing, deny the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Neither notion is biblically defensible, not according to Reformed principles and the Reformed confessions. In other words, to argue the apostasy of the saints, or to deny the saints' perseverance, is to abandon the Reformed position.

This requires only a little reflection to be discerned. If salvation can be forfeited (and presumably one's election, too), so that one moves from the status of being saved (in the full sense of the word) to being not saved, then the teaching and theology expressed in Canons of Dort has been abandoned and the field has been yielded to the Remonstrant position. Indeed, every point of the Canons is

surrendered, for if the covenant members who permanently fall away from the faith (an *a posteriori* judgment) can be said to have been fully washed in Jesus' blood, enjoying rebirth and the Spirit's indwelling, then the doctrine of limited or definite atonement is forfeited, for Jesus' blood proves insufficient to save those for whom his blood was shed. Likewise, the doctrine of irresistible grace is abandoned, for the very one who is regenerated and saved (the not yet apostatized covenant saint), nonetheless can resist God's grace unto dying in unbelief and everlasting death. God's grace fails. Similarly, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is lost since the saints—those washed and forgiven, reborn and indwelt of the Spirit—do not persevere; they perish. The doctrine of unconditional election is also denied, for now two sorts of election are posited: temporary election and persevering election. On what basis is one reckoned elect in the way of perseverance? Obviously enough, on the condition of his or her faithfulness to the covenant, a faithfulness not determined by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, since that work is resistible unto unbelief and death. We observe that total depravity is forfeited, too, since covenantal faithfulness or one's being faithful to the demands of the covenant is marked not by the Spirit's operations of grace in the covenant member but by the covenant member's own efforts, for the Spirit's operations are not decisive but resistible.

Thus, to refuse to allow the doctrine of election a proper *a posteriori* place in relation to the doctrine of the covenant is finally to yield the Reformed confession and to subvert the doctrine of grace.

Meanwhile, *a priori*, the standpoint where the believer lives and trusts, striving to live in faith and obedience to God, the enigma of covenantal apostasy is genuine, for the divine promise of salvation is believed. Given that promise, unbelief is unexpected. Precisely because salvation is God's project, not a cooperative divine/human venture, the unbelief of covenant members disturbs and puzzles us. For the covenant of grace does not declare to sinners that, though salvation is in Christ and a divine gift, the obtainment of Christ as Savior is not God's work but their own—as though God leaves the reception of Christ and his benefits to sinners and their best efforts. On the contrary, salvation is a divine gift from first to last. Inasmuch as the promise of the covenant of grace declares salvation by divine grace alone through the work of Christ alone, all of which is signified and sealed in the sacrament of baptism, it is an enigma indeed, a puzzle, that among the baptized some fall away and perish

in unbelief. This presents a conundrum, for *a priori* there is no immediate explanation why a person who is the recipient of those promises should fail to embrace them and live according to them.

Volbeda however points us to the solution Scripture provides, for this is an issue that perplexed the apostle Paul in Romans 9-11. When the apostle Paul faced the riddle of Israel's unbelief, namely, the incongruity of *God's* covenant people rejecting *God's* Christ, an incongruity bringing Paul to such sorrow and unceasing anguish he could wish himself cursed and cut off from Christ for their sake, he did not (speaking anachronistically) opt for an Arminian solution to this problem. In other words, the apostle neither diminishes the nature of God's promises, nor does he depict God as helpless in the face of human unbelief and rebellion, unable to manage his covenant people. On the contrary, as Volbeda observes, the apostle denies that God's word has failed, "For they are not all Israel, that are of Israel" (οὐ γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἐξ Ἰσραὴλ οὖτοι Ἰσραήλ). The apostle asserts that there is a distinction between covenant people, that is, there are those who are not "Israel" though "of Israel." In other words, though circumcised and recipients of the covenantal promises, they are not to be counted among those who know salvation in Christ. Having made the distinction, Paul elaborates upon it and explains how those who are "of Israel" are not "Israel." This explanation is not *first of all* rooted in that fact that some covenant people are unfaithful and rebellious while other covenant members are faithful and obedient. That some covenant people are unfaithful while others are faithful is not to be denied, but that fact offers no explanation for the diversity, unless some form of Pelagianism is true. Rather, Paul explains the difference between those who are "of Israel" and those who are "Israel" by God's purpose of divine election (Rom. 9:11). Although the covenant of grace declares God's promise of salvation in Christ's blood as the only way of salvation, and that promise is addressed to every recipient of the covenantal sign and seal, God's sovereign choice is the first and decisive explanation why some remain in their sinful rebellion and perish, while others are delivered from it and are saved. The apostle defends God's justice in punishing those who perish, for mercy is God's sovereign right to bestow or withhold. He also argues that this is not a forfeiture of human responsibility—God justly condemns those who perish. But salvation, in any case, is not by human works but by God's call; it doesn't hinge on human desire or effort, or covenantal faithfulness, but on divine mercy

(Rom. 9:12, 16). In fact, covenantal faithfulness, in the biblical sense, is God's faithfulness worked in us, *so that* we believe, *so that* we repent, *so that* we obey—and even in all our failure, his mercy abides with us still, all according to his grace.

We further observe that two temptations are to be avoided in treating covenant and election. One temptation is to allow the doctrine of election to swallow up the doctrine of the covenant. When this is done, to belong to the covenant means to be elect, and more, it means that only the elect belong to the covenant. The non-elect, though receiving the sign and seal of the covenant, remain outside the covenant and may not be counted as part of it in any sense of the word. Consequently, the idea of “covenant breaking” or “breaking the covenant” ceases to be a meaningful category. Thus to be in the covenant means to be elect; and to be elect means, finally, to be in the covenant. This does not fully capture the biblical portrait.

Another temptation is to allow the doctrine of the covenant to circumscribe and engulf the doctrine of election, so that election comes to mean no more (and no less) than being *in the covenant*, a precarious position as it turns out. Being in the covenant is regarded as the mark of election; and election testifies to the same blessings of salvation that the sacraments of the covenant both portray and promise. However, just as the covenant can be broken by human willfulness and unbelief, likewise election can be forfeited. This means that one who was once counted as God's covenant child in the divine economy, elect and regenerated, cleansed and justified, can become one who is rejected and lost, dirty and dead—finally, damned.

Finally, with respect to the labor of catechesis and the nurture of covenant youth, the status assigned to the youthful members of the church, as either regenerate or unregenerate, has significant implications for how catechetical instruction is to be carried out and how covenant children ought to regard themselves, along with what covenant membership requires of them. If we follow Heyns, we may assume no more than a non-regenerative grace to be operative in the hearts of covenant children. Consequently, it is no longer possible to discern how a child of the covenant presumptively differs in reality from the children of unbelievers with respect to their subjective spiritual condition or how their covenant status contributes to their redemption. Covenant children, after all, are by nature dead in their sins and trespasses and cannot appropriate the

benefits of the covenant except they are regenerated and united to Christ. But the work of regeneration is the Spirit's gift, so that without the regenerating and saving grace of the Holy Spirit, they remain unregenerate and perish in their sins. Heyns thus subverts the meaning of the covenant promise and therefore the meaning of covenant membership. In his scheme, what God promises us does not imply the impartation of saving grace and so does not amount to union with Christ. As a result, catechumens may not be presumed washed in Jesus' blood or reborn of Jesus' Spirit—that is, they may not be presumed to have the gift of salvation and new life in them.

We have seen, then, that Volbeda, against Heyns, reintroduces us to the long established Reformed position on this topic. He also shows us how Heyns' attempt to rescue us from the enigma of unbelief and covenantal apostasy undermines the covenant promise. Without compromising the nature of the divine promise, nor casting aside the doctrine of divine election, Volbeda points us back to the scriptural solution to this question. If nothing else, he offers to Reformed pastors and theologians a treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of grace from which further discussion can proceed.