

Editorial: Keeping God's Covenant

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A Review of *Keeping God's Covenant*
Herman Hanko & David J. Engelsma
British Reformed Fellowship, 2006
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Introduction: In his brilliant "Introduction" to Witsius on the covenants, Jim Packer likens our situation to looking for a particular island on a map of the Pacific: "your eye will catch dozens of island names, however small they are printed, but the chances are you will never notice the large letters spelling PACIFIC OCEAN that straddle the map completely."¹ We may become experts on the study of specific doctrines: the Person of Christ, baptism, the Lord's Supper, etc., and simply miss the whole concept of the COVENANT OF GRACE. Recently on consulting the *Systematic Theology* of A. H. Strong the nineteenth-century Baptist theologian, apart from a dismissive reference to Adam and the covenant of works, it appears the whole subject is simply ignored!² Though it certainly warrants a section in both the *Westminster Confession* (1647) and *Baptist Confession* (1677).

Well, the British Reformed Fellowship have not ignored it! It was the subject of an early biennial conference in Bangor, Northern Ireland, in 1994, and three years ago in 2004 at High Leigh Conference Centre, Cambridgeshire, England. The six chapters of this book contain an edited version of the addresses there given by Professors Herman Hanko and David Engelsma.

In Chapter 1, Prof. Engelsma introduces the subject of "The Covenant We Are Called to Keep."

For some, the truth of the covenant is familiar; for some, it may be controversial; for others it may be virtually unknown.

¹J. I. Packer in his "Introduction" to Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, 2 vols. (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, repr. 1990), vol. 1. There is no pagination for Packer's "Introduction."

²A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (New York, 1893), pp. 322-325.

All should be convinced of the importance of the covenant. This cannot be taken for granted today on either side of the Atlantic. There is a loss of covenant consciousness among Christians. This is true even of Reformed and Presbyterian Christians among whom consciousness of the covenant once was lively. Where today do professing Christians think of their salvation as a matter of God's making His covenant with them? Rather, salvation is commonly thought of as their making a decision for Christ.

That covenant was made by God with Abraham: "And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly" (Gen. 17:2). It continues with Christ: "To perform the mercy promised to our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant; The oath which he swore to our father Abraham" (Luke 1:72-73), and concludes with "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). Throughout Scripture there runs, in slightly variant form, the covenant promise—"You shall be my people, and I will be your God."

In succeeding sections Engelsma discusses the covenant as "The Highest Good," "Established in Christ," "A Gracious Covenant," "The Idea of Keeping the Covenant," etc. Under "The Manner of Keeping the Covenant," he refers to worship, marriage, family, citizenship and work.

The covenant having been defined, the remaining chapters take up the main question: "How are we to keep it?" In chapter 2, Prof. Hanko takes up the theme of "Keeping God's Covenant in the Church." There is "the closest possible relationship between the truth of the covenant and the doctrine of the church ... The unity of Christ and His people in the church is also the realization of God's covenant with His people."

Since God is pleased to establish His covenant in the line of generations ("I will establish my covenant between me and thee *and thy seed after thee*"), several pages are devoted to practical considerations: "the elect children of believers are members of the church ... of course they have to be baptized, because they, as well as adults, *are* members of God's covenant and of the church of Jesus Christ." They are to be brought to church, instructed in the faith and catechised by the minister.

And in the church we have the solemn responsibility of “Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). The church must be at the heart and centre of our lives.

In Chapter 3, Prof. Engelsma treats “Keeping God’s Covenant in Marriage.” “God Himself emphasizes that right behaviour on the part of His people in marriage is an important aspect of our keeping the covenant.” This is seen in the Old Testament where God is seen as married to Israel/Judah. It is also seen in the New Testament in Eph. 5: 22ff. and in the usual result of marriage where the covenant promise is to us and our children. But there are powerful pressures to rebel against God in the shameless approval of fornication, divorce and remarriage. “There is such lawlessness in churches that most, including those with a name for orthodoxy and conservatism, tolerate, if they do not approve, divorce for any reason and subsequent remarriage.” In this moral darkness the call comes: “But fornication and all uncleanness ... let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints.” There is a clear recognition that “Single life is perfectly honourable ... Marriage for all its importance is of no permanent significance ... Nevertheless, marriage is the rule for Christians. The Creator said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone.’ God made the race male and female for marriage and God Himself instituted marriage for the human race.” Then follows much practical advice on “Faithfulness,” a section on “Divorce and Remarriage,” then on “Love and Submission” and “Seeking a Godly Seed.”

Quite logically, Prof. Hanko takes up next the issue of “Keeping God’s Covenant in the Home” in Chapter 4. “I am thankful that we have the Word of God.” It “is replete with information concerning what constitutes a covenant home.” We notice “that the home is the only institution of society that God established in connection with creation.” All the other institutions, i.e, church, civil government, school, etc., spring out of the home. “This means, of course, that the chaos that is present in *all* institutions of society today is to be traced back to the chaos that exists in the home.” Government spends money trying to correct the failure of the school but the “problem ... is simply the home.” The professor is deeply pessimistic about the ungodly world: “there are no solutions to the moral ills of society without establishing once again the home as Scripture defines it ... It will not happen, I guarantee you. It is impossible in America and the British Isles to stem the tide ... That means, however, that the Christian

must exert himself with all the effort at his disposal to build and establish a Christian home that is free from the influences and corruption of society.” Then, as the father of eight children, and whose eldest son also has eight, he offers practical advice: “Word of God at its centre,” “covenant instruction is fundamentally important,” “the establishment of Christian schools,” “destructive tendencies of television and the computer.” There is much wise advice here. May He “give to us grace that our homes may be shining lights in the darkness and evil of our present time.”

Chastisement is no fun! Some of us can look back over more than seventy years to our earliest reception of it. Often justified—sometimes quite unnecessarily brutal. And even in old age we experience our Father’s chastening and the reminder to “run with patience the race which is set before us.” It is this theme that Prof. Engelsma deal with in Chapter 5, “Keeping God’s Covenant and the Exercise of Discipline,” taking as his text Hebrews 12:1-17.

As the oldest of twelve children, and the father of nine, along with twenty five years in pastoral ministry before becoming a professor in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Prof. Engelsma brings to the task a wealth of experience in this thoughtful section.

In the final chapter, “Keeping God’s Covenant and the Antithetical Life,” Prof. Hanko takes up the theme of the antithesis. The word itself sounds strange to English ears! I do not recollect ever hearing it used in evangelical or Reformed circles in the UK. The nearest we get to it would be “worldly,” and it occurs to me now that I have not heard this common term in the evangelical community of my youth recently—which perhaps tells its own story and gives added force to the issues which Professor Hanko addresses. Here is his definition. “The idea, therefore, of the antithesis, as the term itself implies, is that the Christian life, as the Christian walks it as a member of God’s covenant, is set against the life of the world in the midst of which he is to live.” “God creates the antithesis” after the Fall: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” This “makes God’s people representatives of God’s kingdom and covenant in a world hostile to God.”

We are in a battle, a fierce battle, and we are attacked by false doctrine and persecution. But we are also pilgrims and strangers but this world

belongs to God. Ordinarily you must have a job; you will marry and your family must live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Discussion: Some three years ago my pastor started on the exposition of Genesis in the morning sermon—currently he has reached chapter 29. As he was going through the early chapters and came to Eve, he offered a considerable amount of practical information on the relative differences between man and woman, with particular application to marriage. As a 75-year-old widower I could wish that some preacher had given me that information fifty years earlier before I married! Fortunately, we have a good number of children and young adults in the congregation who can benefit.

I feel something the same about this book. Both the authors have been ministers then professors in the seminary and are technically retired or almost so. With this and with the inestimable inheritance of more than four centuries of Reformed thinking behind them, they have poured into this book a wealth of practical advice. Again, I wish I could have had this information earlier, but providence decreed differently!

But, if we are to make any significant progress on the Reformed scene “in these islands,” this is precisely the sort of material which needs to be circulated, “read, marked and inwardly digested” and applied! We bid it a warm welcome and pray that it has a widespread influence.²

²*Keeping God's Covenant* can be purchased for £5 (inc. P&P) from the CPRC Bookstore, 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, Co. Antrim, N. Ireland, BT42 3NR, tel. (028) 25891851, e-mail. bookstore@cprc.co.uk.