

conclusion that a redemptive-historically sensitive interpretation of Scripture has reached, it is that eschatology is to be defined not only with reference to the intermediate state of individuals following death and to the second coming of Christ but as also inclusive of his first coming and the present existence of the church in the world.<sup>37</sup> This is an insight of a magnitude that requires recasting not only eschatology but also the other loci as traditionally conceived, especially Christology, soteriology, both accomplished and applied, and ecclesiology. Nor is this a matter of purely scholarly concern. At the present time large sectors of the church are in unrest, searching for a deeper understanding and a more satisfying experience of who they are in Christ. On many fronts the Reformed community vacillates between intellectualism and pietism in various unstable combinations with others rejecting these uneasy amalgams in search of an alternative that would be genuinely reformatory. In this situation nothing is to be so much desired as attitudes and life styles that are more authentically those of the New Testament. How many believers today understand themselves with the apostles as those "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Cor. 10:11)? How many experience that they are members of God's eschatological kingdom not only at hand but already present? How many grasp with some perception of its vast implications that in the interim between the resurrection and return of Christ the existence of the church in the world is determined by the overlapping tension between this age and the age to come? At stake here are concerns essential not only to theology but to the whole church in every aspect of its life.

37. It is to the credit of Vos and also a vindication of his approach that he anticipates along with very few others in his time what by mid-century had become an at least formal consensus over almost the entire spectrum of New Testament interpretation. Cf. esp. *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1903] 1958) and "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, by the Members of the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), pp. 209-259.

## Chapter 4

NORMAN SHEPHERD\*

### The Covenant Context for Evangelism

Reformed pastors continue to wrestle with the need to develop an evangelistic methodology consistent with the Calvinistic theology to which they are committed. Frequently their theological opponents set a zeal for evangelism in antithetical opposition to a zeal for the Reformed faith. Their argument is that one must be either a good evangelist or a good Calvinist, but he cannot be both. This thesis is supported statistically by reference to the fact that churches whose evangelistic methodology may be more or less broadly characterized as Arminian are large and fast-growing, while resolutely Calvinistic churches are small, illustrating the maxim, the purer the doctrine, the fewer the people. The accuracy and significance of the statistics may, of course, be disputed; but no Calvinist ought to derive comfort from the fact that on the judgment day the Arminians may turn out to have been less effective evangelists than they appeared to be in life. Even if this were to prove true, it is not glorifying to God, and the shortcomings of Arminian-style evangelism are no automatic commendation of Reformed methodologies.

Various reasons may be advanced to show why evangelistic zeal and the Reformed faith appear to be related antithetically. Some would argue that the particularism of the Reformed faith—election,

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limited atonement, irresistible grace, not to mention reprobation—makes it inherently impossible to present the gospel as good news to modern man. The gospel would hardly appear to be good news to the reprobate; and since no one knows who the elect are, no word can be addressed directly to them as such. The result is that the gospel tends to be spoken about in the third person in terms of what Christ has done for “his own.” But the question is, what good news can be given to this or that particular man?

A related problem has to do with the place of the law and the response of obedience in evangelism. Consistently Reformed pastors want nothing to do with “easy believism,” the methodology which separates the reception of Christ as Savior from his reception as Lord. They know that without sanctification, or holiness of life, no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). It is not enough to ask for a simple act of faith; one must also demand repentance. But the difficulty is that the opposite of “easy believism” often turns out to be virtually “hard work-ism,” and that is not very good news. In terms of Paul’s argument in Romans and Galatians, “hard work-ism” is destructive of the gospel.

But in any case, how is one to demand faith, or repentance, or obedience when it is also clear that the basic decision does not lie with the free will of man, but in the sovereign choice of God who elects whom he wills? And how is one to come into the assurance of being in a state of grace and glory without a direct knowledge of one’s election? The fruits of election and regeneration are indeed visible, but it is necessary to be reminded of the danger of self-deception and misunderstanding. Honest and searching self-examination seems to yield more reason for doubt than for assurance.

These questions are not new, and they have not remained unanswered in the history of Reformed theology. Those who have followed the lead provided by the theology of Karl Barth have responded by identifying all men with Christ as simultaneously reprobate and elect in him, but with the added assurance that God’s “yes” prevails over his “no.” This answer, which in effect identifies God and man, is unacceptable to anyone committed to the historic Reformed faith as the authentic expression of biblical Christianity.

Others have come to terms with the problems as inexplicable paradoxes. They are content with an intellectual commitment to the five points of Calvinism and a practical commitment to the five points of the Remonstrance. They teach like Calvinists and preach like Arminians.

Still others, not content to compromise, seek to show how in various ways the particularism of Calvinism does not conflict with the free offer of the gospel, how law is consistent with grace, and how regeneration does not lessen the demand for faith. This labor has not been entirely unfruitful. Nevertheless, the persistence of the questions may not be ascribed entirely to human perversity, but may well be indicative of the fact that not all of the resources of the Reformed faith have been brought to bear in seeking a resolution of them.

The five points formulated by the Synod of Dordt are biblical and are essential to full-orbed Calvinism, but they do not exhaust Calvinism. Just as biblical and just as essential is the doctrine of the covenant of grace. In what follows, an attempt will be made to demonstrate that precisely the covenant affords the perspective from which the evangelistic task of the church ought to be approached, not only with respect to the youth of the church, but also with respect to the church’s worldwide missionary calling. From this perspective it becomes clear that the gospel is good news without reservation and without embarrassment; and as good news, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

The theme will be unfolded in a series of three theses, the first of which seeks to understand the Great Commission in covenant perspective. The second and third theses seek to make this perspective fruitful for an understanding of election and regeneration in relation to evangelism. This will necessitate comparing and contrasting what may be called election-evangelism, or regeneration-evangelism, with what may be called covenant-evangelism. Not all of the elements that will be mentioned as characteristics of election-evangelism and regeneration-evangelism necessarily appear in the person of any one evangelist or pastor. They will, however, be generally recognized as features of much of Reformed evangelism broadly conceived.

If the evangelistic efforts of Reformed churches do not appear to have the obvious impact which they ought to have, given the conviction that the Reformed faith is the purest expression of biblical Christianity, it is precipitate to seek asylum in the secret purpose of God. The New Testament represents the present age as one of unprecedented and superabundant blessing. Reformed churches ought to be having a major "piece of the action." There is reason to ask whether the problem might not reside in the fact that the gospel has failed to come across from Reformed pulpits as the good news of the grace of God to all men everywhere.

*First thesis: The Great Commission arises out of and is patterned after the covenant made with Abraham.*

The church of Jesus Christ seeks to fulfill its evangelistic mandate according to the command of Jesus Christ to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." To this commission, Jesus attaches his promise, "I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. 28:19, 20).

This commission cannot be understood except on the background and in terms of the covenant which God made with Abraham as recorded in Genesis 17. The covenant entailed both privilege and responsibility, and both are set forth in circumcision, the sign and seal of the Abrahamic covenant.

Privilege comes to expression in the promises of the covenant. These include, first of all, a people. God promises to multiply Abraham exceedingly (vs. 2). Not simply one nation, but many nations will come from him. Abraham is the father of a *multitude* of nations (vs. 4). Secondly, there is the promise of a land. God promises to Abraham and to his seed the land of his sojournings for an everlasting possession (vs. 8). This is the land of Canaan, the land of promise. There is therefore to be not only a people, but also a place for them to live. But just as there is more than one nation in view, so also is there more than one land in view. Ultimately the land that is given to the multitude of nations as the people of God is the whole earth,

the new heavens and the new earth. Therefore the promise to Abraham also takes the form, "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

The heart of covenant privilege is given in the promise, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee" (Gen 17:7). The heart of covenant privilege and blessing is union and communion with God.

Only with the advent of Jesus Christ, *the* seed of Abraham, and in terms of the Great Commission do the covenant promises begin to be realized on the grand scale in terms of which they are enunciated. Jesus commands his followers to make disciples of "all the nations" so that in Christ Abraham becomes the father of a multitude of nations. The day of Pentecost marks the beginning of the worldwide spread of Christianity as the representatives of the different nations from various parts of the world hear the gospel, each in his own language, and respond positively to it. Because the promise to Abraham is to his children as well, Peter in obedience to the Great Commission promises the Holy Spirit to you "and to your children" (Acts 2:39). The promise of the Holy Spirit and the promise of Christ's presence with his people are the initial realization of the heart of covenant blessing, union and communion with God. When men of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation have become unto our God a kingdom and priests (Rev. 5:9), then God will, indeed, tabernacle with men. "God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). The Great Commission is pregnant with the fulfillment of promise. Indeed, Christ commissioned his church to see to it that the promises made to the fathers are realized, and the authority of the groom guarantees the fruitfulness of the bride.

But privilege entails responsibility. The covenant made with Abraham is to be kept, not only by him but also by his descendants to whom the promises are likewise made. The covenant keeper par excellence is Jesus Christ, himself, the seed of Abraham, obedient even unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8). It is just in the way of covenant-keeping, after the pattern of Jesus Christ, that

the promises of the covenant are to be realized. This evangelistic methodology is spelled out to Abraham in precise terms. "For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Jehovah, to do righteousness and justice; to the end that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him" (Gen. 18:19). Then will Abraham "become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (vs. 18).

Because the evangelistic methodology prescribed for Abraham and his descendants was to result in worldwide blessing, it is precisely the same methodology that Jesus prescribes for his church when he says that the nations of the earth are to be disciplined by "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." As the gospel of the Abrahamic covenant taught men to do righteousness and justice (Gen. 18:19), so the gospel of the new covenant teaches men to seek first the righteousness of the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33). The gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 4:23) is the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7).

The sign of covenant privilege and responsibility was circumcision, what Paul calls the seal of the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11). The righteousness of faith is the obedience of faith ("among all the nations," Rom. 1:5; cf. Rom. 16:26) and is therefore simultaneously covenant privilege and responsibility. Corresponding to this in the Great Commission is baptism, indicative at once of the grace of God and the response of faith, repentance, and obedience. As the Israel of the Old Covenant becomes the church of the new, the circumcised people of God must be baptised, as they were on the Day of Pentecost. At the same time the circumcision of the nations is accomplished in and through their baptism into Christ. Circumcision was never merely, or even principally, a sign of the national identity of the Jews. From the moment of its inception (Gen. 17) circumcision had preeminently *multinational* significance. Abraham and his children were to be circumcised because God promised that he would be the father not of one, but of many nations. No more powerful argument for the transition from circumcision to baptism can be advanced than the correspondence between the covenant with

Abraham with its command to circumcise, and the commission of Christ with its command to baptize.

It now becomes apparent why the New Testament opens with the repeated affirmation that what was long before promised to Abraham is at last being brought to pass (Luke 1:55; 1:73). After the resurrection of Jesus, Peter and John understand themselves to stand at the threshold of the realization of this promise (Acts 3:25); and Paul understands Abraham to be the father of the believers of the new covenant because their faith is of a piece with that of Abraham (Rom. 4). Just because Paul and the other apostles evangelize according to the Great Commission they see before their very eyes the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. Throughout the Gospels, Acts, the Epistles, and on into Revelation, it is abundantly clear that the Great Commission arises out of, is patterned after, and must be understood in terms of, the covenant structure of the Old Testament, and in particular, in terms of the covenant with Abraham. This means that a Reformed evangelistic methodology developed in accordance with the Great Commission must be covenantal methodology. As such it contrasts with methodologies oriented to the doctrines of election and regeneration.

*Second. thesis: Reformed evangelistic methodology must be consciously oriented to the covenant of grace rather than to the doctrine of election.*

Arminianism developed out of Calvinism and as a reaction to Calvinism. Its evangelistic methodology is oriented to the particularistic doctrines of election, definite atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints, but oriented in an entirely negative way. With an appeal to appropriate passages of Scripture, it is argued that God's election is based on the foresight of faith, that Christ has died for all men, and all men are free to accept or reject his offer of pardon, and to do so repeatedly and ultimately. At the same time the Calvinistic doctrine of universal total depravity is limited by the native ability of man to cooperate with the grace of God.

In this way, the Arminians are initially quite successful in letting the gospel come across to modern man as good news. It is addressed

to men individually and directly in the second person. Christ loves you and has died for you. What he has done for you is within your reach, not by much hard work, but by a simple act of faith. As long as you believe, you are forgiven and your decision is registered in the councils of eternity by God's election. This is good news, and it would be a mistake on the part of the Reformed to overlook the inference that the observable impact of Arminian evangelism may arise from the fact that the gospel is made to appeal just as good news.

A more thorough analysis of the Arminian gospel reveals, however, that the gospel is not as good as it can be, and for that reason is not good enough, or even good at all. What Christ has done for me needs to be supplemented by what I do for myself by way of faith and evangelical obedience. But salvation which is not wholly and exclusively of Christ is not salvation at all for totally depraved men. Therefore Calvinists reject Arminianism and its characteristic evangelistic methodology.

On their part, Calvinists, too, generally orient their evangelistic methodology to the particularistic doctrines which are the hallmark of the Reformed faith. The ultimate decision concerning a man's destiny is made by God in his sovereign election from before the foundation of the world. The more consistently this truth controls evangelism, the more consistently people are approached with the gospel both inside and outside of the church as either elect or non-elect (reprobate). Some would go so far as to say there is no good news in any sense for the reprobate. If the question is raised why the gospel is to be preached to all men in view of the fact that only the elect are effectually called, the usual answer is that "unfortunately" the evangelist does not know who the elect are, and in order to call the elect (effectually) all men must hear the gospel. Apparently, if the pastor had insight into the decree of God, he would not have to waste time with the reprobate.

Further, since Christ has died for particular persons only and the pastor does not know, nor does he ever *really* know, who they are, it is thought impossible and inconsistent with the Reformed faith to say to any man what Christ has done specifically for him. This is certainly the case with respect to men outside the church of Christ,

but it is also true to a large extent with respect to men inside the church. There is a hesitancy to cultivate the assurance of this or that believer because the pastor does not know for certain whether he is one of the elect and one for whom Christ died. His faith may be temporary and his works hypocritical. To cultivate assurance under those circumstances would lead him away from the cross of Christ.

Because the Arminian has an accomplished redemption which is universal but not thorough, he can make a particular application. Because the Calvinist has a particular but thorough redemption, he can make only a general application to men whom he cannot but must classify as either elect or reprobate. That is why Reformed sermons which focus on the "doctrines of sovereign grace" are often in the third person, in terms of what Christ has done for "his own" or for those who "truly believe." The exception is the exploration of the sin of man, which can be and often is very specific and in the second person, because of the universality of sin and depravity.

It is now understandable why Calvinists tend to be more successful at preaching sin, condemnation, and death than at preaching the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the established but dubious reputation which they enjoy. They can be very pointed and specific with respect to the former but not with respect to the latter. Unlike the Arminian—and this is the great salutary factor—they have grace which is really and truly grace, for salvation from beginning to end, from conception in eternity to consummation in glory, is all of God and is summed up in the name of Jesus Christ. But they are hampered in letting that gospel come across to particular persons in the pew or on the street as *grace*. The temptation is to compensate by accenting the personal application of the doctrines of sin, condemnation, and death with the hope that the Spirit will bring men to Christ, who is, in the context of preaching, held at a distance from them because of the doctrine of election. But the knowledge of sin is not *per se* good news; it comes between the Redeemer and the man, obscuring the sufficiency of the Savior.

In point of fact the *gospel* is that Jesus comes between a man and his sin and saves him from sin, condemnation, and death.

If the gospel does not come across to men as gospel, as genuinely

good news, we cannot legitimately expect that multitudes will be saved. May it not be the case that the cause of frustration and ineffectiveness in many Reformed ministries should be traced to precisely this point, that the gospel does not come across as genuinely good news. The gospel alone brings life and immortality to light (II Tim. 1:10) and is alone the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). In terms of an evangelistic methodology oriented to the doctrine of election, the Reformed pastor may at best wait, hope, and pray for occasional seasons of revival; but in terms of an evangelistic methodology consciously oriented to the Great Commission and the covenant of *grace*, he ought to expect permanent vitality in the steady expansion of the Church of Christ.

The answer to the dilemma is, therefore, not compromise with Arminianism, or with its more recent blood brother, neo-orthodoxy, but the answer is the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of grace.

The Bible itself, and the New Testament in particular, provides the data which give rise to the theological dilemma which has been a leading feature of doctrinal development in Reformed churches since the Reformation. Yet there is no consciousness of this dilemma in the Bible. The reason does not lie in the intellectual dullness and theological obtuseness of the prophets and apostles, nor in the intellectual acumen and theological brilliance of the post-Reformation theologians. *The reason rather lies in the fact that the prophets and apostles viewed election from the perspective of the covenant of grace, whereas Reformed theologians of a later day have tended to view the covenant of grace from the perspective of election.*

From the perspective of the covenant there is mystery because man is the creature and God is the Creator. Man cannot know God exhaustively; God remains incomprehensible. Man can never know the decree as God knows the decree, and for that reason man cannot *begin* to reflect on his salvation from the point of the decree although his salvation *originates* in the predestinating love and purpose of God. To look at covenant from the perspective of election is ultimately to yield to the primal temptation to be as God. The proper stance for Adam and for all men after him is a covenantal stance of faithful obedience—from which perspective alone election can be understood

as grace. Therefore, although from the perspective of covenant there is mystery, there is no dilemma and there is no paradox or antinomy.

Evangelism according to the Great Commission and patterned according to the covenant of grace does not address men *in the first place* as a mixed multitude of elect and reprobate with a view to separating the former from the latter. Evangelism addresses men as covenant breakers in rebellion against God and opens up to all men covenant life in union and communion with God. It points men to the finished work of Christ. In utter sincerity and without equivocation Reformed evangelism calls all men to life in the way of faith, repentance, and obedience, with the assurance that Jesus refuses none who cry out to him for mercy. The evangelist labors in the confidence that God really stands behind the message which he has authorized him to preach to all men. This is evident in the fact that God has wrought a finished and complete redemption in terms of which salvation, and not merely the possibility of salvation, is offered sincerely and without equivocation to all. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

With respect to this verse of Scripture, the essence of gospel, the Arminian finds it necessary to hedge on the absolute sufficiency of the atonement, and the Calvinist frequently hedges on the extent of the world because both look at the words in terms of the doctrine of election. From the perspective of the covenant all of the words mean exactly what they say.

The Reformed evangelist can and must say on the basis of John 3:16, Christ died to save you. The death of Christ is efficacious; otherwise it would not be gracious. The world is the world of men blinded and crippled by Satan, the prince of this world. Christ did not die for inanimate objects or preternatural beings, nor did he die for abstractions. He died for people, for you and for me.

If the proclamation, Christ died to save you, be construed from the perspective of election it is at best only possibly true, and may well be false. From this perspective Christ did, indeed, die only for the elect and not for the reprobate. But John 3:16 is embedded in the

covenant documents of the New Testament. As such it is not an elaboration of the doctrine of election as God views election or a commentary on the extent of the atonement in an absolute sense, but covenant truth. Its specific application—and this is what the proclamation of the gospel must be—in the declaration, Christ died for you, is a manifestation of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ opening the way to fellowship with God.

As such, it calls men, each and every man, to that fellowship, not on the assumption that they have the native ability to believe contrary to the doctrine of total depravity, but rather because God has brought his salvation near in the person of Jesus Christ and has made it accessible to us. The command is to believe, not because you *can* believe, but because by believing you will be saved and have eternal life. The gospel as gospel does not throw us back on our own resources but brings us eyeball to eyeball with Jesus Christ who alone is the way, the truth, and the life. By the grace of Jesus Christ men do receive and accept him. From the perspective of their covenant fellowship with God in Christ through the indwelling Spirit Christians confess that they are where they are wholly and exclusively by the electing grace of God. The order of the apostolic benediction is not without theological significance: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (II Cor. 13:14). The benediction begins with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ because it is only in terms of covenant grace that we can know the electing love of God *from* eternity and be assured of the communion of the Holy Spirit *unto* eternity.

This all-pervasive covenant perspective on the church and its work is evident on every page of Scripture. Two passages will serve to illuminate the perspective and also indicate how it is fruitful in coming to grips with what are sometimes called exegetical problems. Often what the passage says is clear enough so that the problem is not really exegetical; the problem arises when we try to incorporate what the passage obviously intends to say into our theology.

The first passage is Ephesians 1:1-14. The passage is suffused with covenantal language. The Ephesians are a congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, enjoying the spiritual blessings of sanctity of life, adop-

tion to sonship, the forgiveness of sins, and the seal of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, all of these blessings are traced back to the predestinating love of God. This accent comes through so strongly and so repeatedly at the very beginning of the epistle, that one is initially inclined to say that Paul is writing from the perspective of election and his letter must be understood from that perspective. That would mean that the covenant reality ought to be understood in the light of election.

Careful attention to the language of these verses makes clear, however, that precisely the reverse is the case. The election of God is reflected upon from the perspective of covenant and for that reason is not a theological puzzle but a cause for gratitude. When Paul says, "He chose us" (vs. 4), we must ask who the "us" are. One could say that they are the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus at Ephesus (vs. 1) and that Paul knew, as an organ of revelation, that each and every member of that congregation, together with himself, was eternally elect of God. Grammatically and even theoretically this is possible. But the utter artificiality of it in view of the problems Paul had to contend with in the churches he founded will satisfy few interpreters. One could argue that there were non-elect in the congregation but that they are not addressed by the letter. Again, this is grammatically and theoretically possible. But concretely, are we to think that Paul addressed only *some* of the members on the roll of the Ephesian church and had nothing to say to the rest? Any attempt to understand Paul's statement, "He chose us," as though Paul had direct insight into the eternal decree of God is bound to be both artificial and unique. No minister could use that language today.

Paul speaks from the perspective of observable covenant reality and concludes from the visible faith and sanctity of the Ephesians that they are the elect of God. He addresses them as such and encourages them to think of themselves as such. A Reformed pastor can and must do the same today. That is one of the great joys and delights of the gospel ministry, to acknowledge publicly the work which the Holy Spirit is doing. If "God is not unrighteous to forget your work and the love which ye showed toward his name, in that ye ministered unto the saints, and still do minister" (Heb. 6:10), the

Reformed pastor can indulge this unrighteousness only at the peril of losing the gospel. Unrighteousness is not good news.

It is true, some may fall away, and Paul warns against that possibility. Were some to fall away, he would no longer speak of them as the elect of God. However, he would not confess that "unfortunately" his initial judgment had been wrong. There is nothing "unfortunate" about the fact that we do not have an insight into the eternal decree and therefore cannot make infallible judgments. It would be most unfortunate if we could, for we would then have succeeded in destroying God. Paul is right to address the saints and faithful at Ephesus as elect, and he is right to warn them against apostasy. He has this freedom and senses no dilemma because he has evangelized the Ephesians using a covenant methodology according to the Great Commission. Only in terms of the same methodology can the Reformed pastor enjoy the Pauline freedom to speak grace and encouragement to the people seated before him in his congregation.

A second passage illustrative of covenant perspective on election is John 15:1-8. What Jesus is obviously saying in this passage is that his hearers are branches abiding in him as the vine. He exhorts them all to continue abiding in him by way of faith and obedience, that is, by bearing fruit. If they do, the Father will see to it that they bear even more fruit. They are at no point cast upon their own resources, because as branches they have their vitality at every point from the vine. If, on the other hand, the branches do not abide in Christ, but deny him and become disobedient, the Father will cut these branches off and destroy them. The passage is a grand exhortation to covenant faithfulness enveloped in the overflowing grace of Christ.

Frequently, however, the passage has created nothing but problems. Often the first question, and sometimes the only question asked, is how the passage is to be squared with the doctrines of election and the perseverance of the saints. The answer will begin with an explanation of what the passage cannot mean in the light of these doctrines. The question is then resolved in terms of a distinction between two kinds of branches. Some branches are not really in Christ in a saving way. They are in him only "outwardly," and whatever fruit there is, is not genuine. These branches are eventually cut

off and destroyed. Other branches truly are branches. They are in Christ "inwardly" or savingly. They bear more and more fruit as they are pruned and cultivated by the Father.

In terms of this distinction, it is difficult to see, however, what the point of the warning is: the outward branches cannot profit from it because, not being in Christ inwardly, they cannot in any case bear genuine fruit; the inward branches do not need the warning because, being vitalized by Christ, they cannot help but bear good fruit, thus guaranteeing cultivation by the Father with its attendant blessing.

The words "inward" and "outward" are often used in Reformed theology to describe the two sides of the covenant from the perspective of election. Indeed, the seeming indispensability of this formula is just indicative of the fact that the covenant is preëminently viewed from the perspective of election, rather than election from the perspective of the covenant. The formula is necessary to account for the fact that the covenant community appears to embrace both elect and non-elect. The non-elect are then said to be only "outwardly" "in" the covenant.

The pair of terms, outwardly-inwardly, are biblical, but when Paul uses them in Romans 2:28, 29, however, he does not employ them as virtual synonyms for elect and reprobate. They describe the difference between covenantally loyal Jews and disobedient transgressors of the law. The categories derive their meaning from the covenant, not from the decree.

Ephesians 1:1-14, John 15:1-8, and similar passages function as canon only within the context of the covenant. In Deuteronomy, the great covenant document of the Old Testament, Moses writes that "The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). These words mean more than that we do not know who the elect are. They mean that we cannot conduct our affairs as though we were God. The application of this principle to evangelism means that a Reformed methodology must be oriented to the covenant of grace rather than to the doctrine of election. From the covenant of grace we learn that the particularistic doctrines of Calvinism are pure grace and not a mixture of blessing and curse.



*Third thesis: Baptism rather than regeneration is the point of transition from lostness in death to salvation in life.*

When Reformed evangelism is oriented to the doctrine of election, it is only a logical and natural extension of this method to orient it also to regeneration. Regeneration is conceived of as the initial subjective transformation of man wrought by the Holy Spirit in the innermost core of his being enabling him to repent and believe the gospel. The word "conversion" is frequently used interchangeably with regeneration and with the same denotation, although in the Bible conversion has reference to repentance as flowing from regeneration. When conversion is used in the sense of regeneration, it may also carry with it, however, the connotation of repentance.

Regeneration as a secret operation of the Spirit is the way in which the Spirit begins to apply to the elect in their temporal experience what was granted to them in the secret counsel of God. The pattern of the relation between regeneration and covenant is therefore similar to the relation between election and covenant. Evangelism oriented to regeneration means that the covenant is viewed again from the perspective of a secret work of God, in this case, regeneration. The thesis being offered here is that regeneration should be viewed from the perspective of covenant. When this happens, baptism rather than regeneration marks the point of conversion, the point at which the transition is made from death to life and a man is saved.\*

When evangelism is oriented to regeneration as the point of transition it is necessary for the evangelist or for the Reformed pastor to begin by making some kind of judgment with respect to the regenerate state of those whom he is addressing. If they are thought of as regenerate, there is no need to take steps that would lead to regeneration and therefore they must be addressed differently from those who are yet to be regenerated and from whom the fruits of regeneration cannot be expected. Since most congregations are made up of both regenerate and unregenerate people, there is often a twofold application of the message, one to the converted and another to the unconverted. Some may argue that since a false sense of security is most

\*The position here advocated should not be confused with the sacramentalist doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

dangerous to the welfare of souls, it is best to assume that all hearers are in an unregenerate state. This would amount to a doctrine of presumptive nonregeneration, the no less erroneous opposite of presumptive regeneration, a doctrine rightly rejected by most Reformed theologians. In any case, whether the congregation be thought of as regenerate, or unregenerate, or mixed, the judgment is made either expressly or by implication.

With respect to a congregation as a whole, the judgment is of necessity more general, but in personal evangelism the judgment is quite specific. The character of the person-to-person encounter will be determined by whether the evangelist thinks of his conversation partner as regenerate or not. In counseling a church member who has fallen into some grievous sin, the pastor may suggest that the root problem lies in the fact that the counselee has not yet been regenerated. In informal conversation among Reformed Christians one often hears the opinion expressed that a certain person is, or is not, "really converted." These are judgments that are made, to be sure, usually with allowance for a margin of error. God is recognized to be the ultimate and only infallible judge. Therefore in the case of a brother who departs from the faith, it is recognized that the previous estimate has to be revised; in all probability the brother was not regenerate after all.

Problems with the method of regeneration-evangelism emerge right at the start. Judgments have to be made which belong properly and exclusively in the hands of God. No man can judge the heart of another man. To presume to do so is to yield again to the primal temptation to be as God. This objection is valid even where the judgments are hedged by the acknowledgment that judgment belongs unto God, and that what is attempted is only an approximation of God's judgment. Just because judgment belongs to God, the evangelist should not attempt even an approximation. To require of oneself or of others a diagnostic ability from which the Christian ought to refrain is bound to lead to frustration in ministry. There are doubtless numerous Reformed pastors who have been discouraged in evangelism because they thought of themselves as lacking a supposedly necessary psycho-analytic, or cardio-analytic ability. The operative principle here must

again be that the secret things belong unto Jehovah our God. When Jesus spoke of the new birth and compared the Spirit's operation to the wind (John 3:8), he made clear that regeneration is a secret work of God and therefore does not belong to us as a point of orientation for evangelism.

Once the judgment is made that a given person is unregenerate and therefore an object for evangelism, a procedure is adopted with the end in view of securing his regeneration. Regeneration is, of course, the immediate internal work of the Spirit. Therefore the evangelist does not actually regenerate his hearer. Nevertheless what he does do is intended to lead to the very threshold of regeneration. Evangelism becomes preparation for regeneration even where "preparationism" (a technical term describing a particular and consciously adopted method of preparation) as such is rejected.

One way in which to accomplish this preparation for conversion is to lay great emphasis upon the demands of the law. Over against methods which ask the hearer simply to believe the message or to believe in Jesus ("easy believism") Reformed evangelists will stress that what God requires is not simply faith in the narrow sense of an act of trust, but obedience to the law at every point. It becomes apparent sooner or later that although the evangelist asks for obedience, he does not really expect it; and indeed he would consider himself a failure if the obedience, or an attempt at it, were forthcoming. That would amount to an impossible salvation by works. The real intent of preaching the law (in distinction from Christ or the gospel) is to demonstrate that the hearer *cannot* obey it. In fact he is shown to be hopelessly entangled in innumerable transgressions of the law stemming from a heart which is at enmity against God and needs to be regenerated.

Simultaneous with this preaching of law, or in some cases after the law has done its work of convicting the sinner so that he is utterly humbled before the wrath of God, Jesus is held forth as the one who offers forgiveness on the ground of his death, and who will give repentance from sin as well as new obedience. Jesus can be grasped only by faith, and the listener is commanded to believe, and to repent, as he is commanded to obey. At the same time he is told that he

cannot believe or repent any more than he can obey. A new heart is necessary. The epitome of gospel appeal is reached when the hearer is urged to ask God for a new heart with which to lay hold of the grace of Christ.

If the Lord is pleased to regenerate the hearer, this fact of the new birth, which is in itself invisible, is registered at once in terms of faith, repentance, and obedience. Faith will usually be confessed publicly after a period of instruction, and the new convert may then be baptized if not already baptized, or if the previous baptism is regarded as invalid.

While there are obvious biblical motifs evidenced in this preparatory phase, there are also serious questions that have to be raised. For example, if the work of regeneration is of the Holy Spirit, does not a method of evangelism geared to the goal of regeneration and the evoking of a corresponding crisis experience in the life of a man begin to encroach upon the work of the Spirit? To labor for a specific result which is beyond the pastor's power to bring forth can be frustrating if not even paralyzing.

An even more serious question, however, concerns the effect on the hearer of the tension which is set up between the demand for faith and repentance as necessary for salvation on the one hand, and the denial of any ability to do what is demanded. The tension is all too familiar to any Reformed pastor who has sought to work out an evangelistic method consistent with his principles. Even the exhortation to ask for a new heart just does not square with insistence on total inability. There is *nothing* the unregenerate man can do or will do in the direction of his conversion. At the same time, although Christ is made visible, he is still at a distance and out of the reach of the sinner. The fact that God does regenerate and save men in terms of this methodology bears little or no relation to what is said in the evangelistic message as such. The message tells the sinner he cannot do what he must do, and describes what might happen in a given case. But it is difficult to see how a gospel which focuses on the inability of the sinner to respond, and therefore holds Christ at a distance, will come across to him as good news. At best it would appear to be a mixed blessing. It may not be far amiss to suggest that this unresolved

tension has led some otherwise able and conscientious ministers to abandon the ministry rather than live with it, or break the tension in either an Arminian or a hyper-Calvinist direction.

Once the crisis of regeneration is passed and begins to register itself in faith, repentance, and obedience, the law is once again at the center as the rule of obedience. If regeneration is seen as the work of grace preeminently and therefore the very essence of salvation, subsequent law keeping will tend to have the savor of works-righteousness supplementing the work of grace. This danger is avoided by reference to the presence of the indwelling Spirit as the source of the new obedience. Works done in faith often continue to be oriented to regeneration in that they are prized mainly for their evidential value. They prove that regeneration, and thus salvation, has really and truly taken place.

The difficulty here, however, is that the new obedience is often represented from the pulpit as being so minimal and sin so prevailing that one is compelled to ask whether there is all that much difference between the unregenerate man and the regenerate man in spite of the new heart. The work of grace has been done, the sinner has been regenerated, but the graciousness of it all will appear only at death and at the consummation. If the same passages of Scripture are used to describe the sinfulness of man both before and after his regeneration it is difficult to see wherein the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is gracious here and now. In addition, if the new obedience is minimal, so also is the assurance of faith and joy in salvation to be generated through self-examination. Indeed, even those works which are evidence of new life may themselves be deceptive and hypocritical. Therefore it becomes necessary to monitor one's assumed regeneration constantly.

It should also be observed that regeneration-evangelism tends in the nature of the case to focus on the man and his experience. This has sometimes led to elaborate descriptions of the steps leading to regeneration and the subsequent marks of regeneration in the attempt to ascertain the genuineness of the crisis experience itself. In line with this is the attention given to the experiences of other men as patterns for one's own, or as encouragement to think that what has happened

to others can happen to oneself as well. It is not altogether inconceivable that in the experiences of one's associates there is incarnated and brought near the Christ who is in terms of the preaching held at a distance. Probably for this reason some evangelists are able to think of what is really experience-centered preaching as Christ-centered preaching. Especially gifted evangelists run the risk of becoming Christ-figures. Even in Reformed circles it has not been superfluous to warn against attachment to the man, and to urge attachment to the message and to the Christ of whom the message speaks.

In contrast to regeneration-evangelism, a methodology oriented to the covenant structure of Scripture and to the Great Commission presents baptism as the point of transition from death to life. The specific terms of the Great Commission describe discipling in terms of baptism and instruction in the commands of Christ. This means that evangelism does not end with regeneration but continues as long as a man lives. Baptism marks the entrance into the kingdom of God and the beginning of life-long training as kingdom subjects. Conversion without baptism is an anomaly. A sinner is not "really converted" until he is baptized.

The orientation of evangelism to regeneration tends to discount the significance of baptism as the point of transition. Either it comes too early, as in the case of infant baptism, so that one cannot say for sure whether the child is regenerate; or it comes too late, as a kind of appendix to the crisis experience of conversion. Even in Reformed circles it is common to speak of the number of persons who are "really converted" or "truly Christian," though the Bible itself avoids this language and talks in terms of the number baptized. The three thousand souls added to the church on the day of Pentecost are described as having been baptized (Acts 2:41). The Philippian jailer and the members of his household are not said to have been regenerated or converted, but baptized (Acts 16:33). Paul's Damascus road experience is usually thought of as the time of his conversion. The Bible does not say when he was regenerated, but it does say when he was baptized (Acts 9:18) and indicates that this was when his sins were washed away (Acts 22:16). When Paul wishes to exhort the Romans to obedience, he does not remind them that they were

regenerated, or suggest that they might not be regenerate; he points to their baptism and calls them to live out of that experience (Rom. 6:1-11).

Just because regeneration is one of the secret things that belong to God, the evangelists in Scripture do not presume to have access to a knowledge of it in individual cases. They govern the church in terms of what is open and obvious to all. The Christians are those who have been baptized; the unbelievers are those who have not been baptized. Today, this pattern is more evident, usually, in foreign missions than in home missions. In areas where the church constitutes a minority and especially where its members suffer social alienation and ostracism, baptism is the moment of transition when a public stand for Christ is taken. There are no secret believers, but only baptized believers.

The minor role played by baptism in modern evangelistic methodology contrasts so strikingly with the major place it holds in the Great Commission that some accounting must be given for the phenomenon. The reason would appear to lie in the difference between regeneration-evangelism and covenant-evangelism. When regeneration is understood from the perspective of covenant, it becomes both clear and natural that the sign of the covenant, baptism, should mark the passage from death to life. It did in the experience of the Head of the covenant as well. Jesus' death and resurrection, his baptism (Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50), meant that old things had passed away and all things had become new, at least in principle, just as in the case of the baptized believer. The baptism of the believer marks his identification with Christ in death and resurrection, and therefore his own passage from death to life.

The covenantal focus on baptism does not mean that regeneration is discounted. It is rather put in proper perspective. The inter-relatedness of baptism and regeneration comes to vivid expression when Paul says that we are saved "through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). He also says that we are washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of God (I Cor. 6:11). A comparison of the Matthean and Lukan forms of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19

and Luke 24:47) shows the correlation of baptism, repentance, and remission of sins. Baptism is therefore to be understood as of a piece with the total transformation which is salvation. It is the sacramental side of a total renewal (regeneration in the broad sense) of both the inner and outer man.

What leads to baptism according to the Lukan Great Commission is precisely the proclamation of repentance and remission of sin. This follows the historical pattern set by John the Baptist, who also proclaimed repentance and remission leading to the Jordan baptisms, and even to the Jordan baptism of Jesus. His prophetic ministry viewed as a whole led to the baptism of Jesus on the cross. Evangelistic preaching teaches us that there is life only in fellowship with the living God and warns us that we are not only out of fellowship with God but in rebellion against him. Rebellion issues in destruction and death; but Jesus, the God of our salvation, has come to die for us so that we do not have to die, and he lives again so that we, too, can live in him. Because he has come, salvation is near. This is good news: Jesus calls us to follow him in faith, repentance, and obedience. Paul says, "We . . . bring you good news, that ye should turn from these vain things unto a living God" (Acts 14:15). To turn from sin in repentant obedience is to be free from sin. Jesus died not merely to save us from death at the end of history but to save us from sin now, and that is good news.

We *can* lay hold upon Christ and be saved. This good news is going to be misunderstood as it was by the Pharisees of Christ's day and by their cohorts ever since, in terms of native ability and meritorious works-righteousness. The attempt to counter the error by accenting total depravity and passive waiting upon regeneration only perpetuates the error by turning it inside out. Paul counters works with grace; he counters sinful inaction with divine action which requires response. "Not by works done in righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16).

It now becomes apparent why baptism in the Great Commission

is coupled directly with instruction in obedience to the commands of Christ. The sins which are washed away in baptism are supplanted by the righteousness of the kingdom of God. Sin is not only dethroned but destroyed. Instruction in righteousness binds men to Christ, who is their righteousness and sanctification (I Cor. 1:30). Christ, who obeyed the law for us, is obedient in us. The law is "no trifling matter for you; it is your life" (Deut. 32:47) because Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6).

It is both striking and significant that the Great Commission is not given in either Matthew or Luke in terms of calling upon men to believe. Faith is not mentioned specifically, but only by implication. What is explicitly asserted is the call to repentance and good works. When the call to faith is isolated from the call to obedience, as it frequently is, the effect is to make good works the supplement to salvation or simply the evidence of salvation. Some would even make them an optional supplement. In terms of the Great Commission they belong to the essence of salvation, which is freedom from sin and not simply from sin's consequences. Because the works are done in obedience to *all* that Christ has commanded, they are suffused and qualified by faith, without which no man can please God (Heb. 11:6).

All who have been baptized and are seeking to do the will of God are to be regarded as Christian brothers. There are those who are going to stumble along the way, but the goal is a people of God who do not stumble. When Israel went forth out of Egypt "there was none among his tribes who stumbled" (Ps. 105:37). Large portions of the New Testament epistles consist of instruction to the wayward and stumbling brethren. Discipline does not begin with mental excommunication—the brother is not regenerate and never was one of us—to be followed by verbal scolding and eventual neglect. Discipline, like discipling, is a matter of teaching and encouraging the brother to observe all that Christ has commanded in view of the hope that is laid up for all who love Christ and keep his commandments.

If the brother persists in sin, then he must be excommunicated, not by subtle innuendo from the pulpit, but by physical ejection from the congregation. Until discipline has been carried to that point the

brother must continue to be regarded and treated as a brother in Christ. This is not some condescending "judgment of charity," but a right the brother has on the ground of his baptism. The good news is that Christ heals the stumbling cripples and makes the helplessly blind to see.

Covenant evangelism guarantees that the gospel is and continues to be genuinely good news.