

The Unconditional Covenant in Contemporary Debate

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Table of Contents

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1 - The Unconditional Covenant](#)

[Chapter 2 - The Error of a Conditional Covenant](#)

[Chapter 3 - Denial of Justification by Faith Alone](#)

[Chapter 4 - Denial of All the Doctrines of Grace](#)

[Chapter 5 - Back to Rome](#)

[Chapter 6 - Contemporary Development of a Conditional Covenant](#)

[Chapter 7 - Contemporary Development of a Conditional Covenant \(concluded\)](#)

[Chapter 8 - Defense of the Faith](#)

[Appendix](#)

Preface

One of the gravest threats to the Reformed churches since the synod of Dordt is the contemporary denial of justification by faith alone within the reputedly conservative Reformed churches.

This error is very old. Virtually all the Reformation confessions mention, expose, refute, and condemn it.

What is new about the contemporary form of the ancient heresy is that it bases itself on the biblical doctrine of the covenant. The particular view of the covenant, however, that the present-day denial of justification by faith alone appeals to is that of a conditional covenant.

That makes the new error very dangerous indeed.

All Reformed and Presbyterian churches recognize the importance, even centrality, of the covenant of grace in Scripture.

But many Reformed and Presbyterian churches embrace the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Because the doctrine of a conditional covenant does, in fact, imply a conditional salvation -- salvation dependent upon the sinner -- these churches are hard pressed to resist the contemporary error of justification by faith and works, if indeed resistance is even possible for them.

This booklet examines the contemporary heresy of justification by faith and works in light of its claim that it is grounded in the truth of the covenant. The booklet rejects the heresy, and calls all Reformed Christians to reject it, on the basis of the unconditional covenant of grace.

Originally, the content of this work was an address on the occasion of the commencement exercises of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. The speech was then expanded and published as a series of editorials in the Standard Bearer.

At the request of the Evangelism Committee of the Trinity Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan, I have revised and further expanded the series of articles for publication as a booklet.

The month in which the booklet is ready for publication is the anniversary of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church. In its own way, addressing a false teaching of the present day, the booklet defends in our day the same gospel of sovereign grace recovered in that day.

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Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary
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Chapter 1

The Unconditional Covenant

For many years and from much of conservative Reformed Christianity, the Protestant Reformed Churches have heard that the issue whether God's covenant with the church is conditional or unconditional is of no fundamental importance. The issue is not fundamental for the truth of the covenant itself. It is not fundamental to the confessional Reformed faith. It is certainly not fundamental to the gospel of salvation by grace alone.

The Reformed and Presbyterian churches criticize the Protestant Reformed Churches for declaring the unconditionality of the covenant a confessional matter. The Protestant Reformed Churches did this in 1951 by adopting a document known as the "Declaration of Principles." For making this declaration, the Protestant Reformed Churches are charged with the fault of "extra-confessional binding."

There is something odd about the posture of the Reformed churches regarding the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant. At the same time that many Reformed churches insist that the issue of the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant is of no fundamental importance, they themselves put up the most vigorous defense of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. They accuse the doctrine of an unconditional covenant of grave weaknesses, bordering on heresy.

Nevertheless, the position of the Reformed churches has been that there is room for both views. Nothing serious is at stake in the difference.

At present, this position is used to put pressure on the Protestant Reformed Churches in ecumenical contacts. Among some of the reputedly more conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches there is a strong urge to unite. The Protestant Reformed Churches come up for consideration. And when it becomes evident that the Protestant Reformed Churches are committed to the truth of the unconditional covenant of grace as a doctrine required by the creeds, the other churches lament that the Protestant Reformed Churches raise illegitimate obstacles to the unity of the church. The churches profess sadness, not because the doctrine of an unconditional covenant is wrong, but because the issue, unconditional or conditional, is not fundamental.

Alarming Development of Covenant Doctrine

At the present time, there is a development of covenant doctrine that gives the lie to the notion that the issue of conditional or unconditional covenant is not fundamental. Reformed theologians are working out the implications of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. This development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant is widespread in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

Such is the development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant in our day that it overthrows the entire theological system of salvation by sovereign grace as confessed by the Reformed

faith in the Canons of Dordt and in the Westminster Standards. The doctrine of a conditional covenant is explained by its advocates as denying the heart of the gospel of grace, namely, justification by faith alone on the basis only of the life-long obedience and atoning death of Jesus Christ.

These are perilous times for Reformed saints.

These are demanding, but also exciting, times for those who love the Reformed faith. Today, the old Arminianism is developing into a denial that God knows beforehand what people will decide. God is not permitted to know beforehand what humans will decide because this foreknowledge would impinge on men's freedom. An ignorant God must react to human decisions as best He can, rolling with the punches and scrambling to salvage from human history what He can. God does not know the future, much less decide it. Men decide the future. This is the "openness of God" movement. The "openness of God" movement simply carries out to its logical conclusion the basic Arminian teaching, that God is dependent on the will of the sinner in the matter of salvation.

This development of the old Arminianism exposes Arminian theology for what it is: the proclamation of a god dependent on man, another god than the God of the Bible and of the Christian religion. In light of this development, the Protestant Reformed Churches and other true, Reformed churches must renew their resolve faithfully to proclaim the sovereign God of the Reformed faith. Our God knows the future because He ordained it. In the crucial matter of salvation, the wills of sinners are dependent upon the predestinating will of God.

The times are demanding particularly for the Protestant Reformed Churches also on account of the ongoing development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. This development exposes the grievous error that is inherent in that covenant doctrine. The response of the Protestant Reformed Churches must be an even more zealous confession, defense, explanation, and development of the truth of the unconditional covenant of grace.

Unconditionality

The significant contemporary development of covenant doctrine to which I refer concerns the issue whether the covenant of God with His people in Jesus Christ is unconditional or conditional. The new teaching that troubles the Reformed churches, and threatens to carry them away, is the natural, indeed inevitable, development of the doctrine that the covenant is conditional. It is necessary, therefore, that we have the issue of the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant clearly in mind. In considering the controversy, we must remember that the covenant of God with His people is central to the revelation of God in Scripture and to the redemption that is at the heart of biblical revelation. No one in the debate questions the importance of the covenant.

That the covenant is unconditional means that the establishing, maintaining, and perfecting of that blessed relationship of love and communion between God and a man do not depend on the sinful man; that the blessings which the covenant brings to the man do not depend upon him; and that the final, everlasting salvation enjoyed by one with whom God makes His covenant

does not depend upon that man.

There is no work of the sinner that is a condition he must fulfill in order to have the covenant, or to enjoy its blessings.

Unconditionality rules out merit, or earning. It also rules out all effort by the sinner, even though not meritorious, upon which the covenant and its blessings are supposed to depend, or which cooperates with God in establishing and maintaining the covenant and in bestowing the benefits of the covenant. Unconditionality certainly rules out merit. We do not earn, and thus deserve, the covenant. But unconditionality also rules out all works that distinguish one man from another, or that are the reason why the covenant is given to one and not to another, or that obtain the covenant, which God merely makes available to one. The reason why all such works are excluded, along with meritorious works, is that these works, as much as meritorious works, would make the sinner his own savior and rob God of the glory of salvation.

What difference is there between a rich man's paying someone a large sum of money for work he did and a rich man's giving someone money because that person somehow pleased and benefited the rich man? In both cases, the reason for the "gift" of money is in the one to whom the money is "given."

Similarly, what difference is there between God's making His covenant with me because I worked to earn it and God's making His covenant with me because there is something in me that appealed to Him, or because I did something that distinguished me from others?

Neither do we earn the covenant, nor do we get it, or its blessings, because of anything we are or do, even though what we are or do does not earn the covenant or the blessings of the covenant.

According to Hebrews 9:15ff., the making of the new covenant with us is like a man's willing his estate to someone as an inheritance: reception depends only on the testator, only on the covenant-making God. And the divine testator appoints the covenant, its blessings, and salvation to a person according to His own good pleasure, not because of anything in the one to whom the will is made out.

Faith as a Gift

The teaching that the covenant is unconditional does not overlook, or minimize, faith. The doctrine of the unconditional covenant recognizes full well that faith is necessary for the covenant and its enjoyment. But the doctrine of the unconditional covenant views faith as the means by which God establishes His covenant with the elect sinner and the means by which the elect sinner enjoys the covenant and its blessings, not as a condition. And the doctrine of the unconditional covenant confesses that faith is a gift of God to the sinner, like the covenant itself. By His death on the cross, Christ not only confirmed the new covenant with His elect people, but also purchased faith for them. His Holy Spirit then confers faith upon all the elect.

It was the will of God that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby He confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language all those,

and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father; that He should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, He purchased for them by His death ... (Canons of Dordt, II/8; emphasis added).

Good Works as Fruits of the Covenant

Likewise, the doctrine of the unconditional covenant teaches that good works are necessary in the covenant. But they are fruits of the covenant in the life of the friend and servant of God, not conditions unto the establishing or maintaining of the covenant. The power in the child of God to produce good works is not any natural goodness of his own, but the sanctifying Spirit of Jesus Christ. The motive of the child of God in performing good works is not to earn or to obtain a salvation that he does not have, nor to keep a salvation he might lose. But his motive is thankfulness to God for a salvation graciously given.

Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?), nay, we are beholden to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He that worketh in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. Let us therefore attend to what is written: When ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do.... Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable.

Genuinely good works are not done "out of self-love or fear of damnation," but "out of love to God" (Belgic Confession, Art. 24, "Man's Sanctification and Good Works").

A Gracious Covenant

"Unconditional" is negative. The positive truth about the covenant confessed by means of the word "unconditional" is that the covenant is gracious. An unconditional covenant is a gracious covenant. This is how the Reformed confessions describe the covenant. The Canons of Dordt, II, Rejection of Errors/2 calls the covenant "the new covenant of grace." The Reformed form for the administration of the Lord's Supper speaks of our firmly believing that we "belong to this covenant of grace." The form continues: "Christ confirmed with His death and shedding of His blood the new and eternal testament, that covenant of grace and reconciliation."

The covenant is a covenant of grace, or a gracious covenant, inasmuch as God gives the blessings of the covenant to His covenant friends out of His own free favor, and only out of free favor. Also, God establishes and maintains the covenant with a man by His own saving power -- the Holy Spirit -- and only by His saving power. The covenant is not, and cannot be, a covenant of grace if, although it freely bestows the blessings of salvation, the establishment or maintenance of the covenant with a man is due to the man's own worthiness, or is partially the man's own accomplishment.

The doctrine of the unconditional, gracious covenant defends the biblical gospel of unconditional, gracious salvation, which salvation has its source in unconditional, gracious election. No one can deny, or does deny, that the covenant aims at the salvation--the spiritual, everlasting salvation -- of men and women and that its blessings are the forgiveness of sins,

holiness, and eternal life. As salvation is gracious, so is the covenant gracious.

With specific reference to salvation, Ephesians 2:8, 9 teaches: "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast."

With specific reference to the promise of the covenant and, therefore, to the covenant itself, Romans 4:13-16 teaches that the promise is not through the law, that is, the works of men, but "of faith, that it might be by grace."

Opposed to this doctrine of the unconditional covenant is the teaching that the covenant of God is conditional. This teaching now prevails in Reformed churches. It is this teaching that Reformed theologians are currently developing so as to repudiate justification by faith alone and, thus, the gospel of grace.

Chapter 2

The Error of a Conditional Covenant

One of the worst threats to the true church of Christ in the world since the time of the Reformation is the present development of covenant doctrine that denies justification by faith alone. Theologians are working out the implications of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. They are demonstrating that the doctrine of a conditional covenant implies conditional justification. The conditions are faith as a work of man and, therefore, also the good works that faith performs. Thus is destroyed the whole system of doctrine of salvation by the sovereign, particular grace of God, contained in the Reformed and Presbyterian confessions.

This development of covenant doctrine has advocates in many reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian denominations in North America. These advocates are prominent men: ministers, ruling elders, and professors of theology. They are vocal. Unchecked by discipline, the movement is spreading.

Since the movement is the natural, necessary development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant, it is necessary that concerned Reformed Christians know something of the longstanding controversy in the Reformed churches between the doctrine of an unconditional covenant and the teaching of a conditional covenant. The previous chapter sketched the doctrine of the unconditional covenant.

The Conditional Covenant

Opposed to the teaching of the unconditional covenant is the doctrine of a conditional covenant. This is the doctrine that has come to prevail in most Reformed and Presbyterian churches today. Reformed churches and theologians promote this doctrine aggressively. The last few years have seen a veritable spate of books, articles, and conferences defending the conditional covenant.

That the covenant is conditional means that the effectual and lasting establishment of the covenant with a man, a man's enjoyment of the saving intention, power, and blessings of the covenant, and a man's finally receiving everlasting salvation in and by the covenant depend on something he himself must do. The covenant depends on a condition. Traditionally, those who have argued for this covenant doctrine have identified the condition as faith. The modern defenders of a conditional covenant agree, but add, as another condition, the good works that faith performs.

According to the conditional covenant, God on His part initially establishes His covenant with many more than only those who are finally saved. He establishes it by a gracious, but conditional, promise to all. Whether the covenant actually avails to the salvation of anyone, whether anyone receives the covenant's blessings, whether the covenant continues with anyone, whether the covenant has its intended end in the everlasting salvation of anyone depend squarely upon his fulfilling the conditions of believing the promise and performing the good works of faith.

The reference in Reformed circles is especially to baptized children. The teaching of a conditional covenant maintains that God makes His covenant with all the children of godly parents alike, graciously promising His covenant and its salvation to them all. But promise, covenant, and covenant salvation are conditional. The child must perform the works of believing and obeying. On this basis, the promise becomes effectual and the covenant is established in a saving way.

The "Declaration of Principles"

The Protestant Reformed Churches have formulated and adopted the doctrine that the covenant of God with His people in Jesus Christ is unconditional. In 1951, they adopted the doctrinal statement known as the "Declaration of Principles." Surprisingly, the "Declaration" does not contain the explicit statement that the covenant is unconditional, although this was the issue in drawing up the document and the intent and force of the content of the document. The "Declaration" declares the covenant to be unconditional by stating that the covenant promise is unconditionally for the elect children of believers only.

This article [Canons of Dordt, II/8] very clearly teaches: 1. That all the covenant blessings are for the elect alone. 2. That God's promise is unconditionally for them only: for God cannot promise what was not objectively merited by Christ. 3. That the promise of God bestows the objective right of salvation not upon all the children that are born under the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, not upon all that are baptized, but only upon the spiritual seed.

The "Declaration of Principles" goes on to strike a fatal blow against the teaching that is fundamental to the doctrine of a conditional covenant, namely, the teaching that faith is a condition: "Faith is not a prerequisite or condition unto salvation but a gift of God, and a God-given instrument whereby we appropriate the salvation in Christ."

That the covenant of grace is unconditional has been the stand of the Protestant Reformed Churches from the beginning of their history, although they did not make the doctrine official church dogma by synodical decision until 1951. Already in 1927, Herman Hoeksema wrote a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer* (later published as *Believers and Their Seed*, RFPA, repr. 1997) explaining and defending the doctrine of the unconditional covenant. The truth of the unconditional covenant, Hoeksema insisted, is fundamental to the gospel of grace. Adherence to and development of this doctrine are fundamental to the existence of the Protestant Reformed Churches. It was the teaching of a conditional covenant that lay behind the Christian Reformed Church's adoption of the doctrine of universal, saving, resistible grace in the preaching of the gospel--the "well-meant offer of the gospel"--in the first point of common grace of 1924.

Because the "Declaration of Principles" continues to draw sharp criticism from Reformed churches and theologians and because 2003 is the fiftieth anniversary of the schism in the Protestant Reformed Churches over the doctrine of the unconditional covenant, I want, in passing, to speak a deliberate word in defense of the "Declaration."

First, a denomination of churches has every right, indeed a solemn duty, to decide doctrinal controversy by binding synodical decision. The only stipulation is that the churches decide the controversy on the basis of the Reformed creeds. That the "Declaration" is synodical appeal to the confessions is plain on the very face of it. The document is hardly more than an exposition of the "Three Forms of Unity" and the Reformed form for baptism with regard to the conditionality or unconditionality of the covenant.

The refusal of Reformed and Presbyterian churches today to decide doctrinal controversy over creation, eschatology, marriage, and, of late, justification is not a virtue. This refusal does not preserve the truth of the Word of God in those churches, nor does it serve the unity of the churches.

Second, contrary to the repeated charge that the "Declaration of Principles" adds a new creedal document to the "Three Forms of Unity"--a fourth confession--the "Declaration" only derives the truth of the unconditional covenant from the Reformed confessions. The "Declaration of Principles" applies the theology of the Canons of Dordt to the doctrine of the covenant.

Third, insofar as the "Declaration" does make explicit what is implicit in the "Three Forms of Unity," does apply to the doctrine of the covenant truths that the "Three Forms of Unity" apply to the gospel of salvation, and does formulate and systematize concerning the covenant that which is scattered unsystematically throughout the "Three Forms of Unity," it develops the biblical and Reformed doctrine of the covenant.

There is legitimate place in the life of Reformed churches for the development of dogma. Development of dogma is healthy. The Protestant Reformed Churches do not hesitate to claim that the Spirit of truth has significantly developed the important doctrine of the covenant in the theological work of the Protestant Reformed Churches and in the life of the members of these churches.

Fourth, to the critics who always complain that the "Declaration" is "extra-confessional binding," I put the question: "What about the content of the Declaration"? Is the "Declaration" right in its argument, regardless whether it is "extra-confessional binding"? Is it right when it contends and claims to demonstrate that the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, and the Reformed baptism formula teach the unconditional covenant? If the "Declaration" is wrong about this, show the error. This should not be difficult. And then demonstrate that the creeds teach a conditional covenant (the "Declaration of Principles" is included in "The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches").

Denial of Grace

By the adopted "Declaration," the Protestant Reformed Churches officially condemn the teaching of a conditional covenant. They condemn it as nothing less than the denial of the gospel of grace. The Protestant Reformed Churches charge that the doctrine of a conditional covenant is the introduction of the Arminian heresy into the theology of the covenant: conditional salvation; salvation dependent upon the sinner.

The Protestant Reformed Churches make this charge against the doctrine of a conditional covenant even though the proponents seek to escape the force of the charge by responding that God must enable the children and others to fulfill the conditions. Even though it is God who gives men the ability to fulfill the conditions, the fact remains that, according to the defenders of the conditional covenant, the covenant with its blessings and salvation depends upon an act of man. Granted that God gives the power to believe and to perform good works, the teaching is still that one gets or keeps the covenant, or renders it effectual, because he believes and because he performs good works. Man's faith and obedience are now the cause of the covenant, not the instrument and fruit.

What makes the charge of the Protestant Reformed Churches against the conditional covenant even more convincing is that the conditional covenant teaches that God gives the gracious promise of the covenant to all alike. The explanation why some enjoy the blessings of the covenant, and are saved, is not the promise, for the promise is given to all alike. The explanation is rather that some fulfill the conditions, without which the promise fails, whereas others do not fulfill the conditions. The explanation of the realization of the covenant with a man and of his enjoying the covenant unto life eternal is not the promising God, but the working man.

The doctrine of a conditional covenant is the teaching of universal, conditional, resistible, losable grace -- universal, conditional, resistible, losable, saving grace.

The charge of the Protestant Reformed Churches against the conditional covenant is that it is, in principle, the denial of all the doctrines of grace. It militates against the entire system of doctrine contained in the "Three Forms of Unity" and in the Westminster Standards.

And this is the doctrinal development that is taking place today. This is the "contemporary debate" regarding the issue whether the covenant is conditional or unconditional. Prominent theologians in many of the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America are attacking the cardinal truths of salvation by grace alone -- all of them -- on

the basis of the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Chapter 3

Denial of Justification by Faith Alone

Prominent, influential ministers, professors of theology, and ruling elders in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America are openly attacking the cardinal truths of salvation by grace alone -- all of the cardinal truths of salvation by grace alone -- on the basis of the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Central in the contemporary debate is biblical justification. This is as it should be. Justification, or the forgiveness of the guilty sinner, is the heart of the gospel of grace. It is to be expected that enemies of grace will assault the heart. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is, as Luther taught the churches of the Reformation, the article of a standing or falling church. It follows that the churches of the Reformation that now fall do so by denying the very article in which once in the mercy of Christ they stood.

Justification by the Works of Faith

The distinct, powerful movement now deeply troubling the true churches of Christ and the saints of God in North America teaches that justification is by faith and by the good works faith performs. It appeals to James 2:21 and James 2:25, which teach that Abraham and Rahab were justified by works and not by faith only. The movement harmonizes these passages with Paul's denial in Romans 3 and 4 that we are justified by the deeds of the law by explaining that Paul and James have two different kinds of works in view. When Paul denies that we are righteous by good works, he refers exclusively to works done apart from faith and works intended to merit. James, on the other hand, affirming justification by good works, refers to the good works that flow from faith. The truth, therefore, according to this movement, is that we are in fact righteous before God partly on the basis of our own good works -- our good works that are the fruits of faith.

The righteousness of the guilty sinner, the righteousness of his justification, the righteousness of his standing before God in judgment, is, and must be, in part, his own good works!

Insofar as the movement still practices caution in its teaching of justification by faith and works (and it behooves a movement that intends to deny justification by faith alone in churches holding Lord's Days 23 and 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism and Articles 21-24 of the Belgic Confession to be as vague, ambiguous, and slippery, that is, deceptive, as possible, even in our doctrinally ignorant and apathetic time), the movement is exposed, unmistakably, by its harmonizing of Paul and James. The movement immediately raises suspicion by its quick and emphatic appeal to James in the matter of justification. Every teenage catechumen in a Reformed church that teaches its youth the essentials of Reformed doctrine knows that in the great controversy of the Reformation over justification Rome sat in James 2.

Nevertheless, James 2 is inspired Scripture, not apocrypha, nor a "right strawy epistle." Appeal to James 2, therefore, does not in itself expose a teacher, or a movement, as heretical.

Harmonizing Paul and James

What exposes the movement under discussion as heretical in the article of justification is its harmonizing of James and Paul by affirming two kinds of works. The orthodox harmonizing of Romans 3:28 and James 2:20-26 affirms two kinds of justification. As is evident in the Romans passage itself, justification in Paul is God's (legal) reckoning of the obedience of Jesus Christ to the account of the guilty sinner, the man or woman who in this judgment appears only as one who is ungodly. Justification in Romans is the forgiveness of sins. This justification is by means of (not: because of, or on the basis of!) faith only. The sinner's own works, whether works before salvation or after salvation, whether works apart from faith or works produced by faith, whether works done to merit or works done out of thankfulness, have nothing whatever to do with his justification, except that all of them need to be forgiven.

Justification in James 2, by contrast, is the justified sinner's exhibition of the truth of his faith and of the reality of his justification by this true faith alone, both to himself and to others, by the good works that true faith always performs in obedience to the command of God. The James passage itself makes plain that it is speaking of justification in a different sense from that which justification has in Romans. The passage in James begins this way: "Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works" (v. 18).

By insisting that Romans and James both speak of justification in the same sense, but that they have different kinds of works in view, the advocates of the movement now disturbing the Reformed churches "let the cat out of the bag." For them, justification--justification in the sense of one's becoming righteous before God, justification in the sense of the forgiveness of sins--is partly by and because of the good works of the sinner himself. The sinner's righteousness with God is in part his own good works. The stipulation is that these good works be those that proceed from faith, not those done apart from faith and in order to merit.

Writing in the Spring 2002 issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal*, Norman Shepherd, a leading proponent of the movement in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches that overthrows the system of salvation by grace alone contained in the "Three Forms of Unity" and in the Westminster Standards, says this about justification in Romans and James:

As evangelicals we often try to dodge this attack [of Rome against the Reformation's confession of justification by faith alone] by saying that these verses [in James 2] are not talking about justification by faith in the forensic, soteric sense that Paul talks about it in Romans and Galatians. The Westminster Confession, however, does not use this dodge. Instead, the Confession acknowledges that James is talking about faith and justification in the same sense that Paul uses these terms when he denies that justification is by works (p. 80, emphasis added).

This harmonizing of Romans and James commits Shepherd and his disciples to the doctrine of justification by faith and works. Shepherd expresses this doctrine as his own in his recent book, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (P&R, 2000). With reference to the obedience that God required of Israel in the Mosaic covenant, obedience consisting of doing God's commandments, obedience that Shepherd describes as Israel's "obligation," Shepherd writes: "Obedience is simply faithfulness to the Lord; it is the righteousness of faith (compare Rom. 9:32)" (p. 39, emphasis added). Later, Shepherd repeats this gross false doctrine: "The righteousness of faith is the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26), and is therefore simultaneously covenant privilege and responsibility" (p. 76).

The Obedience of Christ Alone

The truth about the righteousness of faith is that it is the obedience of Jesus Christ in our stead and on our behalf, and the obedience of Jesus Christ alone. The truth about the righteousness of faith is that it is this obedience of Christ imputed to the account of the guilty sinner through faith alone. The truth about the righteousness of faith is that it does not consist of any work of the sinner himself, not his works apart from faith, not his works of faith, and not his faith itself as a work. The truth about the righteousness of faith is that as soon as one work of the sinner himself is added to it, be that work never so small and insignificant, even a weak sigh of sorrow over sin, the righteousness is no longer the righteousness of faith, but the sinner's own righteousness. And both it and he are damned.

"We Heartily Believe ... [the] Doctrine ... in the ... Catechism"

There is no excuse for Shepherd. He is a Reformed minister, bound by Lord's Days 23 and 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism. By signing the "Formula of Subscription," he has vowed that he "heartily believe[s] and [is] persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the ... Catechism of the Reformed Churches ... do fully agree with the Word of God." There is no excuse for Reformed people deceived by Shepherd and his allies. They know, or ought to know, Lord's Days 23 and 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Q. 59. But what doth it profit thee now that thou believest all this?

A. That I am righteous in Christ, before God, and an heir of eternal life.

Q. 60. How art thou righteous before God?

A. Only by a true faith in Jesus Christ; so that, though my conscience accuse me that I have grossly transgressed all the commandments of God, and kept none of them, and am still inclined to all evil; notwithstanding, God, without any merit of mine, but only of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ; even so, as if I never had had nor committed any sin: yea, as if I had fully accomplished all that obedience which Christ has accomplished for me; inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart.

Q. 61. Why sayest thou that thou art righteous by faith only?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, is my righteousness before God; and that I cannot receive and apply the same to myself any other way than by faith only.

Q. 62. But why cannot our good works be the whole or part of our righteousness before God?

A. Because that the righteousness which can be approved of before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect, and in all respects conformable to the divine law; and also, that our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Justification by faith alone -- heart of the gospel, article of the standing or falling church, precious comfort of poor sinners in the daily judgment of this life and regarding the final judgment to come, grand testimony to the worth of the life and death of the Savior, doctrine that glorifies the triune God, who worked out His own righteousness in the obedience of Jesus Christ and who magnifies His marvelous mercy in imputing this righteousness to His own for Christ's sake!

Attacked and denied today in Reformed and Presbyterian churches!

On the basis of a conditional covenant!

Chapter 4

Denial of All the Doctrines of Grace

Those developing the doctrine of a conditional covenant in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches today are not content to attack only the truth of justification. This would be impossible. Justification by faith alone is the heart of the gospel of salvation by the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ. Destruction of the heart is the death of the whole body of the truth. Justification by faith alone is the central element of the Reformed system of theology as expressed in the "Three Forms of Unity" and in the Westminster Standards. Denial of justification by faith alone is necessarily rejection of the entire system of salvation by grace. This becomes evident in the contemporary development of a conditional covenant that denies justification by faith alone. Young as the movement is, it already lays unholy hands on every one of the confessional doctrines of sovereign grace.

Atonement

The doctrine of the atonement of Christ is corrupted. This is necessarily the case. Such is the relation of justification and the cross that if justification is not God's saving act imputing to the believer the obedience of Christ, neither was the cross God's imputation to Christ of the disobedience of the elect. Those who are attacking the confessional teaching of justification by faith alone are also denying that the death of Christ was satisfaction by the substitute to the justice of God.

N. T. Wright, who, although not himself Reformed, is extremely influential with those in the reputedly conservative Reformed churches attacking justification by faith alone, has stated his opposition to the creedal doctrine of the death of Christ as satisfaction. To teach that God punished Jesus Christ in the place of His guilty people is a "crude theory."

It is therefore true to Paul to speak of the punishment which all have deserved being enacted, instead, on the cross. But Paul has here nuanced this view in two ways which distance it from the cruder theories made familiar in some branches of theology. First, he is careful to say that on the cross God punished (not Jesus, but) "sin." ...Second, his argument functions within the whole matrix of thought according to which the death of Jesus can be interpreted in this way because he represents Israel and Israel represents humankind as a whole (N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Fortress Press, 1991, p. 213).

There is a second way in which the movement within the Reformed churches attacking justification by faith alone corrupts the creedal doctrine of the atonement. The movement is teaching universal atonement. The reader will have noted in the citation from N. T. Wright that the Anglican theologian, in addition to rejecting the doctrine of satisfaction, teaches that Christ died for all "humankind." Earlier, Wright was even clearer in his advocacy of Christ's death for all without exception:

God has deliberately given the Torah [Law] to be the means of concentrating the sin of humankind in one place, namely, in his people, Israel--in order that it might then be concentrated yet further, drawn together on to Israel's representative, the Messiah--in order that it might there be dealt with once and for all.

This doctrine of the death of Christ somehow dealing with the sin of all men is, says Wright, "one of Paul's central themes" and "the most significant point to be made about Paul and the law in current debate" (*The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 196).

The Reformed theologians who are calling the doctrine of justification by faith alone into question likewise proclaim universal atonement. Having criticized the "Calvinist" interpretation of John 3:16 that insists the "saving love of God revealed in the atonement is only for the elect," Shepherd boldly declares, "The Reformed evangelist can and must preach to everyone on the basis of John 3:16, 'Christ died to save you'" (*The Call of Grace*, pp. 84, 85).

Presbyterian theologian John M. Frame confirms this analysis of Shepherd's teaching. In his recent book, *The Doctrine of God*, Frame criticizes "some Calvinists" who hesitate to say to all unbelievers "God loves you, for they think that God loves only the elect." (These Calvinists are so very few in number that I am surprised Frame takes up space in criticizing them. No doubt their error is grievous, a radical departure from the Reformed standards. Nevertheless, I notice Frame does not so much as refer to a single article in the creeds that these erring Calvinists violate. Surely the offense of this handful of Calvinists is not that they stray from the canons of Frame rather than from the Canons of Dordt?)

Frame announces that the reprobates "experience the love of God--real love." "On the basis of John 3:16 [and here we move in the sphere of the doctrine of the atonement of Christ: 'God so

loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son'--DJE], we can also say, 'God loves you'" to unbelieving reprobates. Especially did God love all without distinction in Old Testament Israel. By implication, especially does God love all without distinction in the visible church of the New Testament.

In Deuteronomy 7, Moses tells the people of Israel that God "set his affection on" them (v. 7) and "loved" them (v. 8; cf. 4:37; 10:15; 23:5; 33:3; Ps. 44:3; Jer. 31:3; Hos. 11:1; Mal. 1:2), even though there have been, are, and will be unbelievers within Israel. His covenant with them is a "covenant of love" (v. 12). The prophets tell the people about God's love in order to motivate their faithfulness.

The force of Frame's doctrine of the covenant love of God for all without exception in Israel and in the visible church can be appreciated only by reading all of the texts he adduces and applying them to every single Israelite and to every single member of the visible church. God loved, elected, kept His covenant oath to, redeemed, blessed, saved, showed His favor to, drew to Himself in lovingkindness, and called out of Egypt all Israelites without exception. All of this rich, saving covenant love, God now lavishes on every member of the visible church without exception. But on Frame's own admission some perish, God's love and Christ's death notwithstanding.

We cannot refrain: What does this teaching do to the doctrines of grace? What is left of a certain election unto glory; of an effectual redemption; of an irresistible, effectual grace; of the perseverance of saints? What of Paul's ringing affirmation in Romans 9:6 precisely with regard to the perishing of many Israelites: "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect"?

But where did Frame learn this universal covenant love of God with its death of Christ for all who are born in the sphere of the covenant? He tells us in a footnote: "Thanks to Norman Shepherd for suggesting this point to me" (John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R, 2002, pp. 418, 419).

The reason for universal atonement in the case of Shepherd and his supporters is their doctrine of a conditional covenant. According to them, God makes the covenant with many more than those who are finally saved in and by it. It may even prove to be their doctrine that God has established His covenant, conditionally, with all men without exception. We shall see. The movement is disclosing itself and developing as we write and read. But the covenant is grounded in and confirmed by the death of Christ. As the Canons of Dordt teach, "Christ by the blood of the cross ... confirmed the new covenant" (II/8). If now, as Shepherd and those who share his doctrine of the covenant hold, God makes His covenant of grace with many more than only the elect, Christ must have died for many more than only the elect. And this is what they are openly teaching.

There is a special instance of the necessary connection between a universal, conditional covenant and the teaching of universal atonement in the case of the baptized children of believing parents. Both the Heidelberg Catechism, in Question and Answer 74, and the Reformed "Form for the Administration of Baptism" affirm that God's making of the covenant of grace with someone, and thus his inclusion in this covenant, which is the meaning of baptism,

is based on the redemption of the cross. If at baptism the covenant is established with all the children of believers alike, conditionally of course, Christ must have died for all the physical children alike, those who eventually perish as well as those who are finally saved. And this is what the conditional covenant people are openly teaching.

Election

The enemies of justification by faith alone in reputedly Reformed churches assail election. Especially do they assail election. The intimate relation between justification by faith alone and election is evident in Romans 8:33: "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth." God's justifying of a sinner by faith alone, which faith is God's gift to the sinner, is purely gracious salvation. It has, and can only have, its source and explanation in God's election of that sinner. The justified sinner may and must know himself, not only forgiven and saved, but also elected in eternity.

But if, on the contrary, justification depends squarely upon the sinner's own work of faith, as a condition he must fulfill, and upon the good works the sinner performs by his faith, election-- biblical, creedal election--is an embarrassment.

The teaching about election that prevails among those presently attacking justification by faith alone is that election must be buried in oblivion. Election is the great irrelevancy. It is irrelevant to the covenant. It is irrelevant to evangelism (that is, the preaching of the gospel). It is irrelevant to the Christian life (regeneration). It is the main purpose of Norman Shepherd's *The Call of Grace* to cut the covenant, evangelism, and regeneration loose from election. For all practical purposes, there is no eternal, sovereign election. Election is buried in the tomb of the first head of the Canons of Dordt. Not only is election useless, it is highly dangerous and detrimental. Among other problems it has caused for the Reformed over the past four hundred years, according to Shepherd, the doctrine of election is the cause of the failure of Reformed missions to gather multitudes into the church.

As though election accompanied by an equally eternal, sovereign reprobation is not the apostle's explanation in Romans 9-11 of the saving of only the remnant in Old Testament Israel!

As though Christ's evangelistic message in John 6 is not "oriented" to election (see vv. 37, 39)!

As though the Canons of Dordt in heads three and four do not relate regeneration to election!

At the same time that the doctrine of a sovereign decree cutting through the sphere of the covenant and controlling evangelism is consigned to oblivion, the advocates of a conditional covenant are explaining the outstanding texts on election, for example, Ephesians 1:4, as teaching a choice of God that depends on the sacrament of baptism, on men's faith, and on men's obedience and that includes both those who are finally saved and those who will eventually perish. This is the meaning of their urgent admonition that the Reformed henceforth view election in the light of the covenant.

Perseverance

This view of election points to yet another assault on the doctrines of sovereign grace by those advocating a conditional covenant and denying justification by faith alone. They reject the doctrine of the perseverance of saints. One can lose his justification. One can lose his election. One can go lost even though he has been incorporated into Christ. At the public 2002 Pastors' Conference at the Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Monroe, Louisiana, John Barach, minister in the United Reformed Churches, said:

God gave them [those in the sphere of the covenant who fall away and perish everlastingly--reprobates] genuine promises that are just as real, just as dependable, and just as trustworthy as the promises He gave to people who do persevere to the end. He gave them real promises of salvation. He united them to Christ in whom alone there is salvation, and they themselves really rejected it because they didn't receive the promises mixed with faith.

Total Depravity

Implied in the teaching of justification by faith and works is the rejection of the Reformed doctrines of sin and total depravity. If our good works are part of our righteousness with God, they cannot be defiled with sin, as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches they are, in Question and Answer 62: "Our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin." In the words of the Catechism, "The righteousness which can be approved of before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and in all respects conformable to the divine law." We can expect that the contemporary defenders of justification by faith and works will deny that the good works of Christians are "defiled with sin." The alternative is to deny the perfection of God.

But total depravity itself must go by the board. Making justification dependent on faith and faith's works as conditions requires that the sinner produce faith of himself, by his own free will. The sinner must do something of himself, not only to earn in the theology of Rome, but also to make the general promise effectual, keep himself in the universal covenant, and obtain for himself the offered salvation in the theology of a conditional covenant. What the sinner must do of himself is believe, and he must believe with a faith that works.

Norman Shepherd shows, with perfect clarity, that this monstrous error is the heart of his covenant doctrine: "These are the two parts of the covenant: grace and faith, promise and obligation" (The Call of Grace, p. 63). Faith lines up with obligation; grace lines up with promise. Faith is not of grace: "grace and faith." Faith is man's work--"obligation," a condition. And God's gracious promise depends squarely upon the sinner's work of faith.

"Vilifying the Doctrine of the Reformed Churches"

So far has the opposition to the gospel of salvation by sovereign grace alone gone in reputedly Reformed circles that Steven M. Schlissel, for many years a favorite of the United Reformed men, long-time columnist for Christian Renewal, and prominent representative of the contemporary movement attacking justification by faith alone, rails against the Reformed confession of the five great truths that constitute the essence of the gospel of grace, that is, the Christian religion: Scripture alone; Christ alone; grace alone; faith alone; the glory of God alone. Christian Renewal reported that Schlissel told a large audience commemorating Reformation

Day at Redeemer College, "Christ is the issue in the New Testament, not some abstract doctrine, or abstract solas [Latin for "only" as in "by faith only"--DJE], but Christ Himself" (Nov. 12, 2001, p. 9).

Defending his railing against the doctrines of the gospel of grace, Schlissel savaged the Reformed confession and demeaned the grand doctrines (for which scores of thousands of my Dutch ancestors gave their life's blood): "Does the Lord delight in the solas as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the systems of men [sic!]. 'Do not trust in deceptive words and say, "The solas of the Reformation, The solas of the Reformation, The solas of the Reformation.'" Rather, God says, 'Change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly' (cf. Jeremiah 7)" (Christian Renewal, Jan. 28, 2002, pp. 4-6).

Schlissel is guilty of what the "Conclusion" of the Canons of Dordt calls "violently assailing, or even vilifying, the doctrine of the Reformed churches."

This wholesale assault on the doctrines of sovereign grace presents itself as a development of covenant doctrine. The men responsible like to call their movement one of "covenant consciousness."

And this is what it is.

The consciousness and development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Chapter 5

Back to Rome

The movement in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches that teaches justification by faith and faith's works leads back to the Roman Catholic Church. The gospel-truth of justification by faith alone as the core of the body of doctrines that teach salvation by the grace of God alone is the fundamental difference between the true church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. For Protestant theologians and churches to give up justification by faith alone is to make the eventual return to Rome a certainty, indeed, a necessity.

Wright and Rome

Already at this early stage of the development of the movement, there are clear signals that the end of the movement is Roman Catholicism. N. T. Wright, whose influence on the movement in conservative Reformed churches should not be underestimated, makes no secret of it, that the main implication of the new understanding of justification is ecumenicity and that this ecumenicity embraces Rome.

Paul's doctrine of justification by faith impels the churches, in their current fragmented state, into the ecumenical task. It cannot be right that the very doctrine which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong at the same table (Galatians 2) should be used as a way of saying that

some, who define the doctrine of justification differently, belong at a different table. The doctrine of justification, in other words, is not merely a doctrine which Catholic and Protestant might just be able to agree on, as a result of hard ecumenical endeavour. It is itself the ecumenical doctrine, the doctrine that rebukes all our petty and often culture-bound church groupings, and which declares that all who believe in Jesus belong together in the one family.... The doctrine of justification is in fact the great ecumenical doctrine (What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity? Eerdmans, 1997, p. 158).

The doctrine of justification that Wright has in mind, however, is not the teaching of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the guilty sinner by means of faith alone, as confessed by the churches of the Reformation in their creeds.

Shepherd and Rome

The same distinct leaning towards Rome appears in the defenders of the doctrine of justification by faith and the works of faith in conservative Reformed circles. Norman Shepherd laments that there are "unresolved questions" remaining "that are really the legacy of the Protestant Reformation" (The Call of Grace, p. 4). These unresolved questions have to do with the doctrine of justification and include Reformed weaknesses regarding man's responsibility and the importance of works.

Ominously, Shepherd states that his doctrine of a conditional covenant, with its essential element of justification by faith and faith's works, offers "hope for a common understanding between Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism regarding the way of salvation" (The Call of Grace, p. 59). Although Rome is called to give up its notion of merit, that false church is not required to repent of its doctrine of justification by faith and works as denial of the gospel of grace. Nor is she rebuked for her heretical explanation of Romans 3, 4 and James 2.

Rome in Their Heart

Even though these defenders of justification by faith and faith's works are still in Reformed churches, Rome is in their heart. Shepherd takes Rome's side against Luther's translation of Romans 3:28 by means of the word "alone":

Luther inserted the word "alone" into his translation of Romans 3:28 to make it read "For we hold that one is justified by faith alone apart from works of the law." This is the origin of the dogmatic formula, justification by faith alone. However, his insertion actually distorts Paul's meaning ("Justification by Faith Alone," in Reformation & Revival Journal, Spring 2002, p. 87).

The clear and necessary implication of Shepherd's rejection of Luther's "only," of course, is that one is not justified by faith alone. Rather, as Rome has always taught, one is justified by faith and by works of some sort, though not "works of the law."

Shepherd fears, no doubt sincerely, that the Reformation's proclamation of justification by faith alone, without any reference to any works of the justified sinner, risks, if it does not imply, antinomism (The Call of Grace, pp. 6-9, 61, 62). The gospel of salvation by grace alone makes men careless and profane! The way to guard against this antinomian carelessness of life,

according to Shepherd, is by teaching that justification also depends upon the sinner's own works, by bringing the sinner's own obedience to the law into the doctrine of justification, and by stressing that the covenant is indeed conditional, depending upon the sinner's own faith, works of faith, and perseverance in faith and its works. That is, the way to promote a holy life is by compromising the gospel of grace.

Do these men not remember that the charge of carelessness and profanity of life, that is, antinomism, was always Rome's slander against the Reformation gospel of grace? Rome raised the slander especially against the doctrine of justification by faith alone. (In light of Rome's foul life, clergy and people, then and today, the slander is as ludicrous as it is wicked, but this was Rome's charge, nevertheless.) Having confessed justification by faith alone (accepting and confirming Luther's "alone" in Romans 3:28!) in Questions and Answers 59-63, the Heidelberg Catechism confronts Rome's slander--and Norman Shepherd's fear--head-on in Question and Answer 64: "But doth not this doctrine make men careless and profane? By no means; for it is impossible that those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness."

The Catechism does not respond to the charge--and fear--of antinomism by qualifying, hedging on, pulling back from, or weakening in any way, that is, denying, the truth of justification by faith alone. In view of the charge--and real danger--of antinomism, the Catechism does not speak of "unresolved questions" concerning justification and good works that are "the legacy of the Protestant Reformation." The Catechism does not safeguard good works by making them partly the basis of God's act of justifying and partly the righteousness of the justified sinner.

The Catechism's response to the charge of antinomism is radically different from that of Norman Shepherd and his fellow critics of justification by faith alone in conservative Reformed churches today. The Catechism flatly denies the charge and dismisses the fear. "By no means!" The doctrine of justification by faith alone does not make men careless and profane. It has never made one human being careless and profane. It never will. Careless and profane men have abused the doctrine to serve their licentious lives. But the doctrine is blameless.

The truth of justification by faith alone cannot make anyone careless and profane. "It is impossible" that it should do so. Reformed men and women, who do not have Rome's theology in their hearts, have this robust confidence concerning the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Justification by faith alone cannot produce antinomism because the true faith that alone justifies, as sole instrument of receiving the imputed righteousness of Christ, is union with Christ. Union with Christ must produce a holy life of good works in every one who is united with Christ, as a branch of a living tree must bring forth fruit.

These good works are "fruits of thankfulness." In light of the charge by the foes of justification by faith alone that the doctrine makes men careless and profane, the Catechism's description of the good works of the believer is extraordinarily significant. The charge, of course, is intended to force the Reformed churches to make good works the basis, in part, of justification, and part of a sinner's righteousness with God.

The Catechism will have nothing of this, antinomism or no antinomism. The good works of the believer are not conditions required for justification. They are "fruits" produced by and following justification. The good works of the believer are not the basis of justification, nor are they the believer's righteousness with God. They are expressions of "thankfulness" for the gift of justification. The sole basis of justification is Christ's obedience in His life and death. The only obedience to the law that constitutes the righteousness of the elect, believing sinner is the obedience of Christ in his stead.

The charge against the doctrine of justification by faith alone that it is antinomian exposes those making the charge as enemies of the gospel of grace. Always the confession of salvation by grace alone is met with the charge that this doctrine denies man's responsibility and leads to carelessness of life.

Having taught that our unrighteousness commends the righteousness of God, the apostle takes note of the slanderous charge against him, that he taught "Let us do evil, that good may come" (Rom. 3:5, 8).

Having taught righteousness by faith alone, apart from works of obedience to the law, Paul asks, "Do we then make void the law through faith?" evidently referring to the charge against his doctrine (Rom. 3:31).

At the end of the great section in Romans in which he has taught justification by faith alone and its basis in the obedience of Christ, the apostle confronts the common objection to his teaching of grace: "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1)

It is an unmistakable mark of the true gospel of grace that it draws the charge of antinomism. The charge itself assures the church that she is preaching the gospel of grace. If the charge of antinomism is not leveled against a church's teaching, the reason is that the church is not preaching grace.

How many churches today, Reformed in name and formal confession, are ever charged with doctrinal antinomism?

Who would ever think of charging the justification-doctrine of Norman Shepherd and his allies with antinomism? So full is their doctrine of conditions, law, and human works that it is simply inconceivable that anyone would ever think of saying, "You make void the law through faith! It is the implication of your doctrine that justified sinners continue in sin that grace may abound!"

A Hindrance to Evangelistic Preaching

Just as the proponents of justification by faith and faith's works in conservative Reformed circles today share Rome's antipathy to justification by faith alone as a licentious doctrine, so do they also agree with Rome and Arminianism that the "five points of Calvinism" make evangelistic preaching impossible. The theology of the Canons of Dordt is a hindrance, not only to evangelism and missions, but also to assuring members of the congregation of their salvation.

Norman Shepherd charges that election stands in the way of bringing the good news to all and sundry. "Because the Calvinist has an accomplished redemption that is particular in scope though always effective for the elect, he cannot apply it to particular persons." Believing limited atonement, the Calvinistic pastor is not even able to "cultivate a hearty assurance in this or that believer, because he does not know for certain whether that person is one of the elect."

The result of the theology of Dordt, according to Shepherd, is the horrendous evil that "Calvinists tend to be more successful at preaching sin, condemnation, and death than at preaching the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" (The Call of Grace, pp. 79-82).

Why these men remain in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, which have this theology as their official, confessional understanding of the gospel in the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Confession, is a mystery. For my part, the day I was convinced that the doctrines of grace in the Canons of Dordt cannot be preached, restrict me to preaching "sin, condemnation, and death" rather than "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," and make it impossible for me to apply the gospel personally to everyone whom I address, on that day I would renounce the Reformed faith and take my leave of the Reformed churches. With trumpets blaring, to warn all that the Reformed faith is a false gospel!

Shepherd's solution to the problem of the woeful insufficiency of the "five points of Calvinism" for evangelism and personal application of the gospel is universal, conditional election; universal, conditional atonement; and universal, conditional regeneration. All in the name of a conditional covenant! (The Call of Grace, pp. 79-105). Never mind that the Canons expressly reject all of these teachings as grievous false doctrine! The doctrine of a conditional covenant trumps the Canons of Dordt.

Back into Bondage

The teaching of justification by faith and faith's works by these prominent, influential Reformed and Presbyterian professors and ministers has practical consequences. It leads impressionable Presbyterian and Reformed souls back to the bondage of the Roman Catholic Church. That this is no idle fear, but grim reality, has been testified by one such impressionable former Presbyterian, Scott Hahn.

Hahn fell away to the Roman Catholic Church, for which he is now an apologist to other Presbyterians. In his and his wife's book recounting their apostasy, Hahn tells the world how Norman Shepherd encouraged him in his conversion to Rome. By his own studies, Hahn discovered that the Protestant and Presbyterian doctrine of justification by faith alone was wrong. "Sola fide [by faith alone--DJE] was unscriptural!" Hahn continues:

I was so excited about this discovery. I shared it with some friends, who were amazed at how much sense it [Hahn's belief of justification by faith and works--DJE] made. Then one friend stopped me and asked if I knew who else was teaching this way on justification. When I responded that I didn't, he told me that Dr. Norman Shepherd, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary ... was about to undergo a heresy trial for teaching the same view of justification that I was expounding. So I called Professor Shepherd and talked with him. He said

he was accused of teaching something contrary to the teachings of Scripture, Luther and Calvin. As I heard him describe what he was teaching, I thought, Hey, that is what I'm saying. Now this might not seem like much of a crisis to many, but for somebody steeped in Protestantism and convinced that Christianity turned on the hinge of sola fide, it meant the world (Scott and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism*, Ignatius, 1993, p. 31).

Yes, and it meant the souls of Scott and Kimberly Hahn.

Rejection of justification by faith alone, criticism of all the doctrines of grace, and a turning toward the Roman Catholic Church -- this is the movement now firmly embedded, and spreading, in many of the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America.

Its basis is the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

Chapter 6

Contemporary Development of a Conditional Covenant

What is truly significant about the movement we are considering is not that there is widespread denial of justification by faith alone in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Neither is it that those denying justification by faith alone openly align themselves with the Roman Catholic Church. Such apostasy from the faith, gross as it is, has occurred before.

The significance of the movement presently corrupting the gospel of grace in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, in an open, deliberate manner, is that it presents itself as a consistent development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. The movement attacks the system of doctrine contained in the Canons of Dordt and in the Westminster Standards--Calvinism--on the basis of a conditional covenant.

A New Emphasis on the Covenant

The movement emphasizes the biblical covenant. The men who spearhead the movement charge both Rome and evangelicalism with ignoring the covenant in their theology. But Presbyterian and Reformed churches, they allege, have also failed to do justice to the covenant in their doctrine of salvation and in their work of evangelism. This emphasis on the covenant makes the movement attractive to Reformed and Presbyterian church members, who are generally aware of the importance of the covenant in Reformed thinking.

The sub-title of Norman Shepherd's defense of justification by faith and works, and assault on all the doctrines of grace, *The Call of Grace, is: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism*. The content of the book is a reexamination of the entire way of salvation and of the message and method of evangelism in light of the biblical doctrine of the covenant. Shepherd exhorts the Reformed community, "We need to learn to think covenantally" (p. 63).

There very definitely is relation between the movement now devastating the gospel of grace in conservative Reformed circles and the "new perspective on Paul" associated with E.

P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright. For Wright at any rate, who is the most influential of these men on evangelical and Reformed theologians, covenant is the basic truth. Wright justifies his rejection of the Reformation's understanding of righteousness in Paul and his own new understanding of righteousness by appeal to the doctrine of the covenant: "Though it is unfashionable to use covenantal categories in interpreting Paul, I believe ... that they are actually central" (The Climax of the Covenant, p. 203).

Development of a Conditional Covenant

But the doctrine of the covenant that spawns the teaching of justification by faith and works in reputedly conservative Reformed churches today is that of a conditional covenant. According to Norman Shepherd the biblical covenant, which is fundamental to the entire way of salvation and to the message and method of evangelism, is conditional. It was conditional in the form it had as the covenant with Abraham.

We ought to ask whether the covenant that God made with Abraham really was, in fact, unconditional. Would the promises be fulfilled irrespective of any response on the part of Abraham and his children? The biblical record shows that conditions were, indeed, attached to the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham.

These conditions included Abraham's act of circumcising himself and his children, Abraham's believing, and Abraham's obedience of life. It is Shepherd's teaching that "the promises made to Abraham were fulfilled only as the conditions of the covenant were met" (The Call of Grace, pp. 13-20).

Also as the new covenant, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the covenant is conditional. Although in the new covenant God graciously promises many blessings, "at the same time, faith, repentance, obedience, and perseverance are indispensable to the enjoyment of these blessings. They are conditions..." (The Call of Grace, p. 50).

In view of the fundamental importance of a conditional covenant for the new Calvinistic doctrine of justification by faith and works, Presbyterian and Reformed theologians are laboring mightily to prove that John Calvin and other Reformed fathers taught a conditional covenant. Noble Reformed scholarship is now forced into the ignoble service of the lie of self-salvation. This enslaved scholarship discovers that John Calvin, as a conditional theologian, differed from Martin Luther in the essential Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. Wonderful to relate, Calvin was open to, if he did not teach, justification by faith and the works of faith (see Peter A. Lillback, The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology, Baker, 2001).

Logical Development of a Conditional Covenant

The prominent, powerful movement in reputedly conservative Reformed churches today rejecting justification by faith alone and with this doctrine all the doctrines of grace is a movement of "covenant consciousness." It advertises itself as a development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. And, in fact, it is a genuine, logical, necessary development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant. For the first time in the history of Reformed Christianity,

defenders of a conditional covenant are themselves acknowledging, indeed proclaiming, that a universal, conditional (breakable) covenant implies universal, conditional (losable) justification; universal, conditional (losable) election; universal, conditional (losable) atonement; universal, conditional (losable) regeneration; and universal, conditional (losable) preservation. In a word, the doctrine of a universal, conditional covenant implies universal, conditional (resistible) grace.

It does so in at least three ways.

First, the doctrine of a conditional covenant maintains that faith is a condition. By "condition," it does not mean what some of the earlier Reformed theologians meant by "condition": a necessary means by which God bestows His salvation upon the elect sinner, without which God does not save the elect sinner, and which God Himself works within the heart of the elect sinner. But the conditional covenant means by "condition" an act of the sinner himself upon which the covenant promise, the covenant itself as regards its continuance and final perfection, if not its establishment, all the covenant blessings, and the covenant God Himself depend.

In what must be the rankest statement of faith as a condition ever by a Reformed theologian, Norman Shepherd has written:

Thus, the promises made to Abraham had to be believed if they were to be fulfilled. We must not discount faith as a condition to be met for the fulfillment of promise. In fact, Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham's faith was so significant that it was credited to him as righteousness! If so, then righteousness was a condition to be met, and faith met that condition (The Call of Grace, p. 15).

According to Shepherd, faith is the act of the sinner. Upon it depends the promise of God. As such, the act of believing is itself the sinner's righteousness. Not the obedience of Jesus Christ for Abraham is Abraham's righteousness by imputation. But Abraham's own believing is his righteousness.

The conditional covenant regards faith as a condition in precisely the sense the Canons of Dordt have in mind when they reject the error of making faith a condition, not only of election but also of salvation (I, Rejection of Errors/3, 5; I/10). The conditional covenant refuses to view faith, with the Belgic Confession, as "only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness . . . an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits" (Art. 22).

The defenders of a conditional covenant are always speaking of our being and remaining in the covenant, our being justified, and our being saved, "because of faith," or "on the basis of faith." In his explanation of Romans 3:24-26, N. T. Wright says, "Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly . . . on the basis of the entire life (What Saint Paul Really Said, p. 129; emphasis added). Scripture, however, only speaks of our being justified "through," that is, "by means of," faith, or "out of faith," as instrument, or source (Rom. 3:28; 5:1).

If faith is a condition of the covenant and all its blessings, including justification, faith is a human work. It is a human work upon which God's gracious work depends, regardless of the denial that

this work is meritorious. Faith is a human work that contributes to one's salvation, contributes greatly to one's salvation. Justification, which like the covenant depends upon the sinner's faith as a condition, is by human work -- the human work of believing. But if faith itself is a human work, upon which righteousness with God depends, all of the good works that flow from faith should also be viewed as conditions of righteousness and salvation, indeed as part of the sinner's righteousness with God. Thus, the contemporary heresy of justification by faith and the works of faith is really only the natural development of the doctrine dear to a conditional covenant, namely, that faith is a condition.

In keeping with their view of faith as a condition, defenders of a conditional covenant are averse to acknowledging faith as the gracious gift of God--fruit and effect of election (Canons, I/9); purchased by the death of Christ (Canons, II/7); and actually "conferred, breathed, and infused into" the elect, both as regards "the will to believe and the act of believing also" (Canons, III, IV/14). Norman Shepherd repeatedly insists that the covenant demands faith. He refuses to say that the covenant gives faith, as indeed it also gives obedience (Jer. 31:31-34).

Chapter 7

Contemporary Development of a Conditional Covenant (concluded)

The movement in conservative Reformed churches denying not only justification by faith alone but also all the doctrines of grace is, as it claims, a development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant.

One way the doctrine of a conditional covenant implies justification by works is its teaching that faith is a condition upon which the covenant, the covenant blessings, and the covenant God Himself depend. Faith itself is a human work contributing to covenant salvation. It is a short, logical, and inevitable step to teach that also the works of faith are conditions and, therefore, part of the sinner's righteousness with God. This was the subject of the previous chapter.

Liberating the Covenant from Election

A second way in which the doctrine of a conditional covenant necessarily implies the denial of the gospel of salvation by sovereign grace is the conditional covenant's adamant refusal to have the covenant determined and controlled by election. Defenders of a conditional covenant state this refusal in a misleading way: "The covenant is not to be identified with election." In fact, no theologian or church has ever been so doctrinally dense as to identify covenant and election. What they mean, of course, is that election, accompanied by reprobation, does not determine who they are with whom the covenant is personally and everlastingly established. Neither does election determine the recipients of the blessings of the covenant. Nor does election determine who are saved in and by the covenant.

The accurate--and honest--way of expressing their position would be, "The covenant with its blessings and salvation is outside the sovereign control of predestination." Or, "the blessings and salvation of the covenant are broader, much broader, than election." Or, "the grace of God

in the covenant is universal, whereas the grace of election is particular."

The question that the liberators of the covenant from election never answer is, "Whose will then does control and determine the covenant?"

A covenant liberated from election necessarily extends the covenant grace of God in Christ to many more than those only who are finally saved by this grace, posits a death of Christ for many members of the covenant who perish in the end, and allows for the falling away of many who were once united to Christ by covenant grace. These implications of the doctrine of a conditional covenant are boldly proclaimed today as a new orthodoxy for Reformed churches.

That the covenant is determined by election is the apostle's teaching in Galatians 3:16, 29:

Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one. And to thy seed, which is Christ.

And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

God established His covenant by promise with Christ personally, who is the elect, and in Him with those who are Christ's, that is, all those whom the Father gave to Christ in the decree of election (John 17:6ff.).

On this biblical basis, to the utter confounding of all the Presbyterians who join in the hue-and-cry that "the covenant is not to be identified with election" the Westminster Larger Catechism declares that "the covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed" (Q. and A. 31). This is clear. This is decisive. This is the truth. And this is authoritative for all Presbyterian officebearers.

Christ is the head of the covenant of grace, as the comparison between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12ff. implies. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.... Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life" (Rom. 5:12, 18). If Christ is the head of the covenant, then the establishment of the covenant, the blessings of the covenant, and the salvation of the covenant are determined by election.

It is precisely the point of the apostle in Romans 9:6ff. that God's covenant salvation in the Old Testament had its source in, and was determined by, God's election. God's covenant mercy was particular: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" (v. 15). It was freely bestowed only on the children of the promise, who alone were counted by God for the seed of Abraham: "The children of the promise are counted for the seed" (v. 8). And the children of the promise, that is, those descendants of Abraham to whom alone the promise was given and who were begotten spiritually by the power of the promise, were determined by election (vv. 10-18).

Whenever in the history of the church the gospel of grace has been corrupted, the cause has been fear or hatred of sovereign, particular, gracious election.

A Universal, Ineffectual Promise

The third way in which the doctrine of a conditional covenant implies universal, conditional grace, and thus is responsible for the destruction of the gospel of grace that is underway in conservative Reformed circles today, is its teaching of a universal, conditional promise. According to the conditional covenant, God directs His gracious covenant promise to all baptized persons alike, if not to all who hear the preaching of the gospel. The meaning is not merely that all hear the promise. But God on His part promises to every baptized person alike that He will be his God, that He incorporates him into Christ and the covenant, and that He will save him.

United Reformed minister John Barach spoke for the movement and, in reality, for those who hold a conditional covenant when he said that baptism is God's promise to every baptized person that he is an elect (Christian Renewal, Feb. 12, 2001, p. 17; June 2001, p. 5).

This covenant promise is grace. Given to all, it is grace to all.

But the gracious covenant promise depends for its fulfillment upon the condition of faith. Depending as it does upon the condition of faith, and even upon the works of faith, the gracious promise of the covenant fails of fulfillment in multitudes of instances.

The source of Norman Shepherd's total reconstruction, and complete destruction, of creedal Calvinism, indeed historic Protestantism, is his covenant doctrine. The heart of his covenant doctrine is the teaching that the covenant consists of two parts, a gracious promise and the condition of faith. The gracious promise, made to many more than only those who are finally saved, is God's part. The condition of believing is man's part. Man's part is not of grace. And upon man's doing his part, God's part depends.

No one can examine this doctrine in the light of the Canons of Dordt and come to any other conclusion than that the doctrine is Arminianism applied to the covenant.

This aspect of the conditional covenant, namely, a general promise that depends on the condition of faith, the apostle denies in Romans 9:6ff. The perishing of many Israelites in the Old Testament and the perishing of many baptized members of the visible church today do not indicate that "the word of God hath taken none effect." The word of God is the covenant promise. This promise was not given to every Israelite. It is not given today to everyone who hears the gospel, or who is baptized. The covenant word of promise concerns, and is directed to, "Israel," that is, the true covenant people of God according to election. Though heard by them, and rejected, the covenant word of promise does not concern, nor is it directed by God to, those who are only "of Israel," that is, the reprobate who live in the sphere of the covenant.

The covenant promise did not fail, though many physical children of Abraham went lost in unbelief.

The gracious covenant promise is particular and unconditional. As such, and only as such, it is effectual. It establishes the covenant. It maintains the covenant. It begets its own

children: "children of the promise." It works faith in its children by (not: because of) which it can bestow, and the children can embrace, Christ and all the blessings of the covenant. It bestows the blessings of the covenant. And it saves every member of the covenant.

The gracious, almighty covenant promise, that is, the Word of God, does all these things in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The covenant promise depends upon nothing in the covenant people.

But the covenant people depend upon the covenant promise.

A general, conditional covenant promise, on the other hand, is ineffectual. It is weak. It is as weak as the sinner upon whom it depends. It cannot establish the covenant with a man, or, if it does, it cannot maintain the covenant. It cannot bestow the blessings of the covenant upon a man, or, if it does, it cannot assure their continuance. It cannot save the members of the covenant, or, if it does begin to save, it cannot preserve them in salvation. A gracious covenant promise that is general and conditional is quite "un-sovereign." Contemporary defenders of a conditional covenant are making this very clear.

What this doctrine of universal, conditional, losable grace in the (breakable) covenant does to the assurance of salvation is dreadful. It destroys all assurance. Are you object of the gracious promise of God today? No matter; tomorrow, you may be object of His just curse. Are you in living communion with Christ as a baptized member of the church today? It means nothing; tomorrow, you may be cut off. Are you elect today? Never mind; tomorrow, you may be reprobate.

A universal, conditional promise means the loss of all comfort.

Chapter 8

Defense of the Faith

The contemporary movement in reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches denying justification by faith alone and attacking all the doctrines of grace is logical development of the theory of a conditional covenant. Therefore, it cannot be opposed, not effectively, except by the repudiation of a conditional covenant.

There are theologians who are condemning the movement, although they are few. The silence of most Reformed theologians and churches -- silence in the face of one of the gravest threats to the gospel of grace since Dordt! -- is deafening. But the theologians who do speak out mostly limit themselves to the error of denying justification by faith alone. They do not get to the root of the evil. They cannot. With the rare exception, they are themselves committed to a conditional covenant.

One of two things will happen.

The theologians and the churches may reexamine their confession of a conditional covenant. Pray God this is the outcome! Then, Reformed theologians and churches will at last seriously confront these questions: Is the covenant conditional, that is, dependent on what the sinner does? Is the promise of the covenant directed in grace to all alike, depending for its realization on the sinner? Is the covenant independent of election? Is the covenant breakable in the sense that God establishes it with a man by gracious promise so that he has the life and benefits of the covenant in his heart, but because of unbelief and disobedience loses the covenant in the end?

If the Reformed churches face these questions, they will also be led to consider whether the covenant is not a warm, living relation of love, rather than a cold contract; whether the covenant in Scripture is not itself the highest good -- the very blessedness of salvation--rather than a mere means to some other end; and whether Christ is not the head of the covenant of grace.

Or, the outcome of the present development of a conditional covenant will be that Reformed and Presbyterian churches succumb to the heretical movement, whether by tolerating the heresy or adopting it.

There are reasons to fear that this will be the outcome. For one thing, the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches refuse to discipline the officebearers who are publicly promoting the heresy by writing, by lectures, by conference, and by preaching. An outstanding instance of this refusal to discipline was the action of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church at its general assembly in 2003 overturning the discipline of an elder who had taught justification by faith and works in the public worship services of a congregation (see *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, August-September 2003, pp. 20, 21).

Another reason for fearing that the Reformed and Presbyterian churches will succumb to the heresy of a doctrine of justification by faith and works rooted in a conditional covenant is that some of their seminaries are fountainheads of the new departure from the gospel of grace. One of them has been a fountainhead of this grievous error for the past thirty or more years. All this while, it has been pouring pastors who teach the false doctrine of justification by faith and works into the churches it serves. (See Mark W. Karlberg, "The Changing of the Guard: Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia," *The Trinity Foundation*, 2001.)

It is the peculiar calling and privilege of the Protestant Reformed Churches at this crucial hour in the history of the Reformed churches to defend the gospel of sovereign grace by proclaiming and defending the truth of the unconditional covenant. In the unique history of these churches, God has led them to a clear understanding and heartfelt embrace of the unconditional covenant. It may be that some will now hear the witness of the Protestant Reformed Churches to the unconditional covenant. Who knows, as Mordecai asked of Esther, whether they are "come to the kingdom for such a time as this"?

In this witness to the truth of the unconditional covenant, the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary has an important role. It prepares ministers of the gospel to resist the contemporary assault on sovereign grace. It instructs ministers in the truth of the unconditional covenant. It trains men both to teach the unconditional covenant and to warn against the doctrine of a conditional covenant. It sends out pastors who teach believers and their children that God is

God and that salvation is of the Lord in the covenant, as on the mission field.

If the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches will still not hear this witness and succumb to the heretical development of a conditional covenant, approving justification by faith and works, they will thereby be destroyed as Reformed churches and will take on the mark of the false church according to Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

When the churches do succumb, they will be responsible for the damnation of their own members and the future generations of their members -- all those who trust for righteousness in their own works, as their churches have taught them.

But even then, the covenant promise of God will not have failed -- not in a single instance. Nor will anyone have lost the union with Christ that he once enjoyed by virtue of the bond of the covenant of grace.

The covenant promise of God is never ineffectual (Rom. 9:6).

The truth is that even in conservative Reformed churches not all who are in the sphere of the covenant are covenant friends of God (Rom. 9:6). They always seek their righteousness in the works of the law (Rom. 9:32).

Only some are, or ever were, "children of the promise." They seek, and attain to, "the righteousness which is of faith" (Rom. 9:30). And this is due solely to divine election (Rom. 9:6-33).

The word for this grand truth is grace.

Appendix

Recommended Reading on the Unconditional Covenant

- David J. Engelsma, "The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers." South Holland, IL: Evangelism Committee, 5th printing 2000.
- Herman Hoeksema and Herman Hanko, Ready to Give an Answer: A Catechism of Reformed Distinctives. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997.
- Herman Hanko, God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988.
- Herman Hoeksema, Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant. Preface by David J. Engelsma. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, rev. ed., 1997.
- Herman Hoeksema, Reformed Dogmatics. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966, pp. 285-336