

*The Reformed Baptism Form: A Commentary*, B. Wielenga, trans. Annemie Godbehere, ed. David J. Engelsma. Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016, 425 pages. Reviewed by Rev. Nathan J. Langerak

The Reformed Free Publishing Association must be commended for publishing an English translation of the valuable commentary on the Reformed baptism form by Dutch, Reformed minister Bastiaan Wielenga. The original work was a thorough examination of the Reformed baptism form used by Reformed churches in the administration of baptism. He wrote the commentary in the first decades of the twentieth century. The work long existed in only its original Dutch. Thanks to the work of the translator, editor, and publisher the English-speaking church world can now read and profit from Wielenga's excellent commentary.

If she were alive today, I would give Annemie Godbehere my hearty thanks for applying her considerable translation skills to this book. This is Dutch theological writing that is worthy of the time and effort she expended on it. As the English poet Ben Jonson wrote, "Such bookes deserve translators of like coate, as was the genius wherewith they were wrote. And this hath met that one."

Wielenga, a disciple of Abraham Kuyper, taught the Reformed truth of sovereign grace. Wielenga wrote for his people not for scholars. He wrote to edify the churches not to garner laurels from his colleagues. His commentary is clear and faithful in its exposition, simple and poetic in its expressions, moving in its exhortations, scholarly in its comment and controversy, and generally sound in theology. All of these come out clearly in an English translation that is both accessible to the average reader and free of Dutch idioms that frequently can jar English sensibilities and obscure the plain meaning. Because of this the book reads well, and the chapters of this substantial book fly by as one reads.

I commend the editor for his excellent work in bringing the translation to completion and seeing it through to publication. There is an obvious attention to detail that went into and must go into publishing a book, a large book, a theological work, and besides all that a translation. There is an evident concern for the reader that he be able to follow the argument. His skill with the Dutch and thorough acquaintance with the subject matter are all easily discerned.

This extensive labor by translator and editor is enhanced by the attractive hardcover, gilded lettering, sturdy binding, fine fonts, and easy layout of the book by the publisher.

The publication of this commentary comes at an important time in Reformed church history. Many Reformed churches are overrun by false covenantal theology, which is being and has been used to overthrow the gospel of saving grace and the salvation of many. That covenantal theology at its essence teaches that God makes his covenant with all the children of believers, elect and reprobate. Its proponents hate predestination and now have revived the old Arminian war against predestination, especially and emphatically denying that predestination must govern the covenant of grace. Besides the gross false doctrine involved in their erroneous covenantal theology, the end result of this doctrine is that the gospel truth of justification by faith alone is overthrown and the damning heresy of justification by faith and works is taught.

This commentary shows conclusively that there is only one covenantal doctrine of the Reformed baptism form, of the worthies who wrote and adopted the form, and of the churches that used it. The Reformed churches early taught this doctrine as their official doctrine of the covenant. The form is the oldest Reformed creed, and as such it carries great weight concerning the question of what covenantal doctrine is Reformed. The commentary proves that the Reformed covenantal doctrine is the doctrine that teaches that election governs the covenant and the promise of the covenant. The sovereign God of the covenant makes his covenant only with the elect children of believers. He incorporates them only into Christ Jesus so that they are sanctified in him, gives to them alone the promise of salvation in Christ, seals that promise to them by baptism, and effectually works that salvation in them until he presents them in heaven among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.

The commentary also demonstrates that this covenantal doctrine, which is the only one that harmonizes with the Reformed doctrine of salvation taught in the three forms of unity, was under constant assault from Baptists and especially from the abysmal Puritan theology that infiltrated the Dutch churches from England, especially through William Ames, Willem Teelinck, and other theologians of the *nadere reformatie*, whose basic and serious theological error is that assurance is not of the essence of faith. This false theology became lodged in the Dutch church world and waged constant warfare on the doctrine of the covenant taught in the baptism form, insisting always that it is Reformed and seeking to claim the distinguished Reformed pedigree of the baptism form.

The conflict became sharpest in the practical question of whether parents were to regard their children as regenerate or unregenerate. That conflict frequently masqueraded as a conflict

over presupposed regeneration. The proponents of Puritan theology often accused the Reformed of the error of presupposed regeneration for teaching that the parent must raise his child as a regenerated believer and that God ordinarily regenerates the children of believers in infancy. Behind these disputes, which were cast in the form of what view of their baptized children parents ought to take, were deeply theological issues about the nature of the covenant of grace, the objects of God's promise, and the reality of God's saving work in the hearts of infants, who without their knowledge are received unto grace in Christ. Wielenga shows that this strange doctrine has no basis in the covenantal view of the baptism form.

The form's covenantal doctrine is still under relentless assault today. The present-day disciples of the *nadere reformatie* and of the Puritans in their covenantal theology still plague the Reformed covenantal scene and still seek to latch onto the form for support and standing for their erroneous theology. In many places the covenantal view of the baptism form has been cravenly surrendered to its foes or mercilessly smothered by its enemies and replaced by a covenant of conditional promises made with elect and reprobate alike.

Perhaps this dreadful reality of the state of covenantal theology in the Reformed church world explains the astounding silence and lack of fanfare at the occasion of this significant publication, especially among the churches of NAPARC and their theologians, which have the baptism form as part of their Reformed heritage. Apparently, there is nothing to celebrate, because even Wielenga's comparatively mild explanation of the form's covenantal doctrine is far from the covenant doctrine of the majority of apostatizing Reformed churches and theologians. These churches have, officially in many cases, repudiated this covenantal doctrine and the creedal doctrine of grace with which it harmonizes.

For those who still love the truth of the covenant in the baptism form, the translation and publication of this commentary are significant. The commentary can be read with great profit. Wielenga in the main is sound in his exposition of the baptism form. Take for example his exposition of the form's teaching of the antithesis: By his being incorporated into Christ, of which baptism is sign and seal, the world has become his enemy and he has become enemy of the world. The water of baptism was a sign to him of an irreconcilable antithesis (245). This thrills and instructs the Reformed believer. Throughout Wielenga gives new life to old, familiar phrases that, if they have not bred contempt through their familiarity, are frequently read over without much thought. His practical warnings against using baptism out of custom—parents who are so

concerned about the baptism gown but do not exchange a single word about the significance of the sacrament—and against parents who wait for relatives and put off the sacrament so long that the baptized child might well reach up to shake the baptizing minister’s hand should be taken to heart and not rejected out of hand as mere opinion from a bygone era. Without doubt, the lover of Reformed covenantal doctrine who reads this commentary will come away with a new appreciation for and many fresh insights into the language of the form.

Once or twice Wielenga strays from the language of the form and gives his opinions. Then Wielenga makes statements with which the Protestant Reformed Churches and any right-thinking Reformed man would strongly disagree. Wielenga writes about Esau and God’s covenant, “The promise and seal in baptism of the washing away of sins through Jesus Christ was also to the Edomite, but he simply disregarded its admonition...God established the covenant with him also, but he brusquely broke this covenant” (54–55). This is bad and an anomaly in his commentary. Indeed, just prior to this statement and throughout the commentary, he makes clear that the object of the promise of baptism is the *elect*. In another instance when he explains the upbringing of children, he strays into the error of common grace: “Clothing, cleaning, taking care of the young child are outside the promise of baptism. They are all based on creation, not on re-creation. The life of human beings, as long as they have not come to the years of discretion, reveals itself exclusively as an animal life, which belongs to the realm of common grace” (350).

These stumbles bring up a particularly helpful feature of the commentary, the editor’s footnotes. Wielenga included some footnotes in his commentary. The translator provides a few footnotes. The editor includes many more. The footnotes are a worthy, worthwhile addition to the commentary. These notes are of differing kinds. In some the editor explains some obscure Dutch phrase, idiom, or person. In others, and these are by far the most helpful, the editor comments on the covenantal theology taught by Wielenga, making clear the issues and how they bear today on questions regarding the covenant. Adding to the value of the notes is that in many of them the editor does his own original translation work or brings his knowledge of the covenantal questions and contemporary controversies to bear on the issues raised by Wielenga. For instance, when the editor responds to Wielenga’s comment about the promise being made to Esau, he translates from Kuyper’s untranslated work, *The Doctrine of the Covenants*. Kuyper clearly contradicts the position espoused by Wielenga: “The covenant of grace is absolutely not an uncertain covenant, but on the contrary an absolutely certain covenant that only and exclusively has the elect in view.”

Kuyper also criticizes as “Arminian” the idea that the promise of baptism is given to all the baptized children (57). In other notes the editor points the reader to helpful resources for further study. The notes are an invaluable aide for the reader. They allow him to grasp easily the arguments in more difficult places and point him to the contemporary relevance of the baptism form and its doctrine.

Wielenga throughout the commentary deals with the text of the baptism form. That is the strength of his commentary. The text as it was in use in his day differed at certain points from the official text adopted by the Synod of Dordt. At places he suggests emendations and changes to the text used in his day, in order to bring it into conformity with the official text. Of note is Wielenga’s comments on the words “or witnesses” in a question to the parents. This phrase is a remnant of Roman Catholic theology and practice in the administration of baptism. This phrase is also included in the English received text. The practical relevance of his comments is that in the administration of baptism today these words should be omitted as an intrusion into the form.

Wielenga also deals extensively with disputed phrases. By means of them those in the Dutch Reformed churches who disagreed with the doctrine of the form tried to foist another covenantal doctrine on the form. He devotes a particularly long section to the phrase in the question to parents, “sanctified in Christ.” In explaining this long-disputed phrase, he is at his scholarly, theological, and polemical best. He points out that in his day this issue was already two centuries old. It was not two centuries old because the baptism form was unclear on what it meant by “sanctified in Christ,” but on account of the exegetical dishonesty and dogmatical agenda of many theologians when they explained the baptism form. Wielenga proves that the baptism form can mean nothing else by this language than that the children of believers are really, internally, and savingly united to Christ and sanctified in him and that the phrase does not mean merely to be set apart in an outward way or placed in a better position to be saved.

He also contradicts and condemns as “Arminian” the opinion that this phrase means real, internal sanctification and that it refers to “all of the children” of believers, not only to the elect children of believers (311). This position that he criticizes as Arminian is a popular doctrine of the covenant promoted today in Reformed churches, in which all the children are said to be incorporated into Christ and sanctified internally by him. Necessarily this means that the promise of God, the grace of God, the Spirit of God, and the covenant of God ultimately fail in many cases.

Wielenga accuses those who taught these things of reading their own theology into the form. About this reading of one's theology into the form in order to deny the clear teaching of the form, he says,

Some people may have a different view of the doctrine of baptism. They may call the position of the compilers [of the baptism form] untenable...Let them be frank and say, "I do not agree with it" ...But do not fudge on the matter. Our exegetical [explaining the plain meaning of the form] conscience objects to someone's eisegetical [reading one's theology into the form] doctrine of baptism, in order to support it with the authority of this legacy of our fathers. This must be stopped.  
(320)

The dispute over the covenantal doctrine of the form has not and still today is not driven by simply explaining the words of the form, but by a "clash between system and system" (315). To interpret "sanctified in Christ" as referring to a mere objective, or outward, setting apart is the result of a dishonest imposition of a foreign system on the form. To interpret "sanctified in Christ" as referring to all children brought for baptism and not the elect only is the imposition of Arminianism on the form. These other views imposed on the form belonged to the church in her "decline" and were introduced in "the days of ecclesiastical backsliding" and espoused a sacramental and covenantal doctrine "that was openly detested and contested by our fathers," a doctrine "that in the century of the Reformation was already held by the Socinians and Anabaptists and later by the Remonstrants and rationalists" (317).

That just such a covenantal doctrine, exposed by one's interpretation of this crucial phrase as a mere setting apart, is in fact widely held in Reformed churches explains the strange phenomenon that churches with Reformed in their names and that use the baptism form have rapprochement with Baptists, who condemn the baptism of infants. And some of these Reformed churches even allow membership to those who do not bring their children for baptism. Long gone is the conviction of the Reformed faith toward Baptist theology as expressed in article 34 of the Belgic Confession: "Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of infants"—a detestation that manifests itself in a visible separation from them and vocal condemnation of their false doctrine. Wielenga points out that the covenantal doctrine of these ecclesiastically

backslidden Reformed churches and the Baptists is basically the same. By teaching that the phrase means merely an external setting apart in an external covenant, they regard baptism “as some kind of confessional act...It is nothing other than a symbol of transition from paganism to Christianity, a sign of faith and conversion or promise of obedience” (317).

Whoever would explain this phrase properly, Wielenga insists, “must consider the form from the situation in which it emerged and regard it against the background of the covenant view that it encompassed” (317). The situation out of which the form emerged was the Reformation’s and ultimately the Synod of Dordt’s teaching of salvation by sovereign and particular grace, a salvation governed by the truth of election and reprobation. Whoever will understand the form’s covenantal doctrine and will be faithful to it cannot espouse a covenantal doctrine that contradicts and ultimately overthrows the Canons’ teaching about sovereign grace, that God is gracious to his elect people alone. In the preaching of the gospel that precedes the sacrament and in the administration of the sacrament itself, God does not offer or promise grace to the reprobate, much less incorporate them into his covenant. That situation out of which the form came gave rise to the doctrine of the covenant found in the form. This doctrine Wielenga explains by quoting Herman Bavinck: “Election and church, the internal and external side of the covenant...held together as much as possible” (316). Wielenga explains this as the position of those “who sought as long and as closely as possible to maintain the unity of election and covenant (315). Covenant controlled by election is the covenantal doctrine of the baptism form. The question of one’s doctrine of the covenant is ultimately not a question only of a covenantal doctrine but a question of the doctrine of grace and the truth of God. Is the grace of God and thus also the God of that grace a failure who promises to all and fails to come through for many? Or is he the sovereign God of scripture who sits in the heavens and does all his pleasure?

I do not pretend that Wielenga confesses with perfect clarity all the points of doctrine about the covenant as they are now confessed in the Protestant Reformed Churches. The doctrine of the covenant has been developed since Wielenga, particularly through the fierce battle for the truth of sovereign grace in the covenant that was waged in the late forties and early fifties in the Protestant Reformed denomination against the very view of the covenant that Wielenga calls Arminian, that the promise of God is made to all the baptized. By means of that painful controversy the “unhappy and largely infertile baptismal dispute” and the “wicked confusion,” which it created for centuries in Reformed churches and which is noted and lamented by

Wielenga, was settled and the truth won (321). The current unhappy dispute that exists and the wicked confusion that are being created today can be settled in no other way than by adopting the covenantal view of the form: the covenant is controlled by election.

No honest reader can possibly read this book and suppose anything else than that this basic doctrine of the covenant taught in the Protestant Reformed Churches is the basic doctrine of the baptism form and of the worthies who adopted it. One might disagree with it, but let him be honest and say that, as Wielenga exhorts. Any other view of “sanctified in Christ” than that espoused by Wielenga, Kuyper, and Bavinck and their spiritual heirs, who teach that the words mean internal sanctification of the elect children of believers, is “out of place in the baptism form and is also not in keeping with the doctrine of the covenant that predominated in the church of the Reformation” (326).

May the commentary serve the promotion of the covenantal theology of the Reformation and of the Reformed fathers, and let the reader judge whether his or her theology is Reformed, like that of the baptism form.