

B. Wielenga. *The Reformed Baptism Form: A Commentary*. Trans. Annemie Godbehere, ed. David J. Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016. Hardcover. 448 pages. \$39.95. ISBN 978-1-944555-12-2. Reviewed by Carl A. Schouls, emeritus minister of the Free Reformed Churches of North America.

The Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) is a Protestant Reformed venture; in fact, it is the voice of the Protestant Reformed Churches in print. This makes the appearance of *The Reformed Baptism Form* by Bastiaan Wielenga even more striking. We congratulate the RFPA on this book: it is of pleasant appearance and format, and it has clear (i.e. black on white!) pages.

This work is not of Protestant Reformed origin. Dr. Bastiaan Wielenga (1869–1949) was pastor of the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. This is a translation of the second edition (1920, with footnotes). I have access to only the first (1906, no footnotes). But there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of this translation. The editor, Prof. David J. Engelsma, is professor emeritus of dogmatics and Old Testament (1988–2008) at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. One minor point: the footnote on page 147 regarding “the red danger” should not have referred to “sheer modernism” in the churches, as Engelsma suggested. It was (and still is) a code word for communism and all left-wing ideologies. The early twentieth century was an age of unrest, revolution and anarchy, much of it fomented by the “new” doctrine of radical communism.

The original was entitled in translation, *Our Baptism Form*. This translation is *The Reformed Baptism Form*. A hundred years ago, in the context of the then Dutch Reformed literary “market,” that title, *Our Baptism Form*, made sense. This was for the Reformed public; *all* Reformed churches, of whatever denomination (and there were but three or four then), used this form. Everybody understood what this was. Now in the English-speaking world, it would be foolish to use the same proprietary title. While the Christian Reformed Church still had an updated version of this form as recently as 1976, it has since produced a new form that seems to be identical to the form used by the Reformed Church in America and very much like the form in use in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and may be a version of the high liturgical form used in the French Reformed churches of Calvin’s time. I know of no commentary of any Reformed baptism form in English until this one appeared. In it the Reformed churches have received a precious gift. It is also a timely gift.

The book is a pleasure to read, if you have the time and the interest to tunnel through some theological issues that, regrettably, may be mysterious to many people today. The book is divided into six chapters, beginning with a review of the nature and history of the form, then dealing with the parts of the form as they express (1) the doctrine of baptism in general (longest section), then of (2) infant baptism, followed with comments (3) on the prayer before the administration of baptism, while the rather brief (4) admonition to parents between that (4), and (5) the thanksgiving prayer receives almost as much attention as the first main section.

The tone of the book is set in the first section dealing with the doctrine of baptism in general. It is warm, pastoral, clear in opposing error, and winsome. For example, his later dealing with the phrase, “not out of custom” (280ff.), bespeaks an irenic spirit even though Wielenga is hard hitting at this point. This gentle approach is not surprising, considering he was a protégé of Herman Bavinck, the great contemporary of Abraham Kuyper, who quietly worked in the “great” Abraham’s shadow but went his own way, firmly developing in the theology he had inherited and living in the stream of the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834.

The book is worth reading especially by the younger generation of elders and ministers who are not versed in some aspects of Reformed history.

The first version appeared at the time of animated discussions about the covenant of grace. Wielenga might have thought 1905 was the end of the upheaval period of the nineteenth century. Without going into detail about covenant development (if *really* interested in my views, see Google SpindleWorks.com), that period was *not* over, and mid-twentieth century E. Smilde came out with his review of the struggles of that era in *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop* (A century of

struggle about covenant and baptism). The publication of the current volume, with its extensive editorial footnotes, forcefully proclaims that struggle is *still* not over.

As far as his covenant views go, Wielenga, not surprisingly, was Kuyperian, albeit not stridently. He stresses that the prayer before baptism asks God to “graciously to look upon this *Thy* child.” He points out that this prayer originated in a certain covenant concept. (Our Psalter has dropped this specific note—the Dutch form, once (and still?) used by all Reformed churches in the Netherlands has “*dit Uw kind*” [“this Thy child”]). What happened in the translation?! Careful review of our forms is certainly needed.) But Wielenga also states, “Concerning the children of believers *in general*, the congregation knows and believes, indeed thanks God, that he has accepted them as living members of Christ. But the congregation may not and cannot say of a specific child, ‘This one is elected.’ After all, he may still be an Esau.”

The book may be a gift—but that applies primarily to the original being translated into English. This book has left me bewildered and at times, dismayed. If there was a need for some commentary on the baptism form, why not just translate it, *as is*? And if there was the need to make some comments/some indications that major elements do not accord with views held by the publisher/editor or his church, why not add a *few* footnotes, or even an entire separate chapter to explain this. I have not kept count of the number of instances of critique on the covenant view not only of Wielenga but of all other Reformed (and Presbyterian) teachers who do not hold to the views of Herman Hoeksema and his followers. Of course, Engelsma has every right to issue such critique and he may believe that extremism in defence of orthodoxy is a virtue, but also in such defence there is a time, a place, and a method which can be correct, incisive, and still gentle and generous. There is a two-page footnote (56–58) severely exposing Wielenga’s “grave error...of forgetting the Canons of Dordt and their doctrine of particular, irresistible (sovereign) grace.”

Engelsma and Wielenga are correct in pointing out the *inconsistency* of church members who have their children baptized but do not partake of the Lord’s supper. But compare Wielenga’s treatment of an old saint who had never yet embraced the full meaning of the riches of his baptism (120, but much broader description on page 111 of the first edition) with Engelsma’s statement (277, note 8) that “unbelieving parents” (he does not allow for the possibility of doubt, struggles of faith, fear) are partakers of a “sore evil,” infused through Puritan influence teaching that a mystical “experience” is required as a seal upon God’s grace. He misrepresents both many of these people and the source from which this springs. There may have been Puritans (and Reformed) who have wrongly stressed the “mystical experience” part to expose dead orthodoxy or presumed salvation. They still exist; however, the pietistic stream in Dutch Calvinism long predates Puritanism and can be traced back to the early Middle Ages.

Wielenga’s classic has been used to piggy back a covenant view controlled by election in such a way that the well-meant offer of the gospel is heresy. This may be the only doctrinal statement in this review with which Engelsma will readily agree. The old and now little-known controversy of supra versus infralapsarianism is still alive. Should this invite further discussion? I prefer not. I prefer to live peaceably as much as possible in this sin-crazed, violent, mad world. (And I hear howls of protest!)

P.S. My (and Pastor P. Vander Meyden’s) theological education was at the Protestant Reformed seminary in the mid 1970’s. I thoroughly enjoyed my time there (as much as the heavy workload can be enjoyed by any student); we were treated cordially; we still have occasional good contacts now with those with whom we spent three fruitful years. We were not convinced of these particular views but they taught us how to preach!