

Battle for

SOVEREIGN

GRACE

in the

Covenant

Battle for
SOVEREIGN
GRACE
in the
Covenant

The
Declaration
of
Principles

David J. Engelsma



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To the honored memory of the two
TOWERING CHAMPIONS
OF SOVEREIGN GRACE
who contended valiantly for the Reformed faith
in the very dark, almost desperate, days of
1953, Herman Hoeksema and George M.
Ophoff, and of the doughty little warrior who
fought beside them—Hope’s stalwart elder
and my old friend, Richard Newhouse

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Preface

This is a book about a document: the Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

It is not a history of the schism that the document occasioned, even though some, even a great deal, of this history necessarily enters into the account of the document.

There ought to be a history of the schism within the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1953. Short treatments of the schism have appeared in works on other subjects. But it is time for a thoroughly researched, full-blown history of the event.

Such a history becomes a virtual necessity for members of the Protestant Reformed Churches. No minister survives who took part in the controversy. Members who lived through those agonizing years and can therefore speak to the younger generations from experience become few. And the record of the history is largely buried in old issues of magazines, acts of synods, and the archives containing letters and other documentation of the schism. These sources do not attract the average church member, regardless how interested in the history he or she may be.

The younger generations in the Protestant Reformed Churches ought to know the schism in the history of their churches. The issue was a fundamental doctrine of the Reformed, Christian faith—the truth of the covenant of grace. The outcome of the controversy, in addition to reducing the size of the denomination by two-thirds, powerfully formed the churches into what they are today. This is true not only doctrinally but also in other ways, for instance, their polemical character, that is, their willingness to contend for the faith. Inasmuch as, evidently, there could have been no clear, firm grasp of the doctrine of sovereign grace in the covenant apart from the schism, the schism was the preservation of the Protestant Reformed Churches as Reformed churches confessing salvation by the almighty, irresistible grace of God only.

A history of the schism would serve a good purpose also with regard to members of other Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

The schismatic faction in the Protestant Reformed Churches, particularly the ministers, many of them both able and popular, were successful in convincing the Reformed churches in North America and abroad that the conflict in the Protestant Reformed Churches was mainly about personalities and carnal power. And of course, to hear them, the only offensive personality was Herman Hoeksema.

A history of the schism, based on readily ascertainable and incontrovertible facts, would conclusively demonstrate that the conflict was mainly about doctrine, and that this doctrine is at the heart of the Reformed, Christian faith: the covenant of God in Jesus Christ, or in the words of Hebrews 9:15, the “new testament.”

The struggle of the Protestant Reformed Churches in the early 1950s was a battle for the gospel of salvation by the sovereign grace of God, nothing less. It was a struggle to maintain in these churches Augustine’s confession of grace against Pelagius; Luther’s confession of grace against Erasmus; the Reformation’s confession of grace against the Roman Catholic Church; Calvin’s confession of grace against Bolsec, Pighius, and Servetus; and Dordt’s confession of grace against Arminius.

But the struggle of the Protestant Reformed Churches was a battle for the gospel of grace with specific reference to the covenant of God in Jesus Christ. *Covenant* grace—the Protestant Reformed Churches contended in the early 1950s and confessed in the Declaration—is particular, sovereign, irresistible, and the sole explanation of the salvation of the baptized children of believers.

In thus confessing grace in the covenant and with regard to salvation in the covenant, these churches officially settled a controversial issue that had long troubled the Reformed churches. Again and again, the false doctrine of a conditional covenant in which grace is wider than election and therefore resistible, conditioned by the will and works of baptized babies, has surfaced in the Reformed churches. Today, this doctrine of conditional, resistible grace in the covenant plagues Reformed and Presbyterian churches in the theology of the federal (covenant) vision. It is the overthrow of the gospel of grace.

In the Declaration of Principles, the Protestant Reformed Churches addressed directly the issue of a conditional or an unconditional covenant. They condemned the doctrine of a conditional

covenant, not merely as unacceptable to the Protestant Reformed Churches but as heresy—the fundamental heresy of denying that salvation is alone of God who shows mercy and of making salvation—in *the covenant*—dependent on man’s willing and running (see Rom. 9:16).

Thus the Protestant Reformed Churches settled the great issue concerning the covenant, just as Dordt settled the issue concerning salvation, whether dependent on God’s eternal will of election or dependent on the allegedly free will of the sinner.

The history of this battle, settling an ages-long controversy over covenant grace and covenant salvation, should be written.

But this is not that book, even though some of the history will appear in it.

This book concerns the Declaration of Principles. In the main, it is a history of the Declaration—when, how, and why it appeared in the Protestant Reformed Churches; the controversy surrounding its adoption; and its content.

The book contains five appendices that will assist the reader in comprehending the history, doctrine, and significance of the Declaration. The first is a timeline of important events in the history of the adoption of the Declaration and of the schism that the Declaration occasioned. The second is the Declaration of Principles. The third is my brief commentary on the content of the Declaration, to my knowledge the only such commentary. The fourth and fifth appendices are my critical reviews of two recent books that defend the covenant theology of Norman Shepherd and the federal (covenant) vision. These reviews starkly indicate the heretical fruits that are sprouting in the Reformed community of churches from the root of the covenant doctrine that the Declaration exposes, rejects, and condemns. Thus the reviews demonstrate the significance of the Declaration, as of the great battle that the Protestant Reformed Churches fought in the early 1950s on behalf of sovereign grace in the unconditional covenant.

The occasion for this book is the sixtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration by a synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1951 and the sixtieth anniversary of the schism of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1953.

I write this book for a popular, as distinguished from a scholarly,

theological audience, for young people as well as their parents and grandparents.

Does the Declaration warrant such treatment, sixtieth anniversary or not?

The book itself will have to prove the warrant.

To the questioning member of the Protestant Reformed Churches and to a skeptic outside the churches, I may here respond with questions of my own.

Does an ecclesiastical document about covenant, promise, faith, infant baptism, election, and grace have some importance?

Is a document that occasioned schism in a Reformed denomination of churches significant?

Is a document that was influential to preserve an entire denomination of Reformed churches in the orthodoxy of the three forms of unity, in our doctrinally weak and apostate twenty-first century, worthy of some attention?

And then there is this provocative statement by Herman Hoeksema on the floor of the synod of 1951, which would adopt the Declaration. He spoke in the heat of battle, surrounded by foes who would pounce on the statement to charge pride and folly: “We must not go back, but defend our beautiful and strong position at the head of all the Reformed churches.” He added immediately: “And therefore, we must stand on the basis of our Confessions. Let us continue to do this.”¹

“At the head of all the Reformed churches”!

Many will fume at this statement, as many fumed in 1951. Others will laugh, as many laughed in September 1951. But perhaps not so furiously, or so heartily, today, when many of the Reformed churches in North America are permeated with, and helpless before, the heresy of the federal vision.

This is the heresy that at its root was exposed, opposed, and condemned in the Declaration of Principles, some twenty-five years before the heresy surfaced, with virtually irresistible force, in the Reformed churches in North America.

1 Herman Hoeksema, “The Synod of 1951,” *Standard Bearer* 28, no. 8 (January 15, 1952): 173.

Chapter One

Provisional Adoption of the Declaration

The Declaration of Principles is a nearly eight-page synodical decision of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, in the back of the *Acts of Synod, 1951* of these churches.¹ The synodical decision that is the Declaration states certain fundamental truths concerning the Reformed, biblical doctrine of the covenant of grace, as these fundamental truths are authoritatively expressed in the Reformed confessions. These confessions are mainly the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Canons of Dordt, and the Reformed Form for the Administration of Baptism.

In general the principles enunciated in the Declaration are, first, the truth that salvation in the covenant of grace, particularly regarding the baptized children of godly parents, depends wholly on the baptizing and promising God and not at all upon the baptized infants.

Second, the covenant, its blessings, and its salvation have their source in God's eternal decree of election. And covenant salvation is as unconditional as the election out of which it flows.

Specifically, these principles are the truth that God establishes the covenant of grace only with the elect children of believing parents; the truth that the covenant promise (by which the covenant is established with the children of believers and according to which the children are saved) is unconditional, that is, gracious, depending only upon the sovereign grace of the promising God and not upon works of the children; and the truth that the faith by which

1 *Acts of Synod, Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1951*, 201–8.

children, like their parents, are justified and saved is the gracious gift of God to the children and not the work of the children, upon which the covenant and its salvation depend as a condition.

These principles had been known and confessed by the Protestant Reformed Churches from their founding as a separate denomination of churches in 1924. Correctly, the preamble of the Declaration says about the principles of the covenant expressed in the Declaration that “these have always been maintained in the Protestant Reformed Churches.”

When ministers in the denomination began opposing these principles of the covenant in the late 1940s and early 1950s, they were rejecting fundamental truths that the denomination had always believed and confessed, even though as yet it had not officially adopted these truths. And the ministers opposing these principles knew it.

The statement of these principles in a “declaration” was occasioned by a request to the Protestant Reformed synod of 1950 from the domestic mission committee of the denomination. The mission committee asked for a “form” that missionaries could use in the organization of groups in Canada as Protestant Reformed congregations.

Your committee requests Synod to draw up a form that may be used by those families requesting organization into a Prot. Ref. congregation. We believe that this would serve to remove all misunderstanding and aid toward unity.²

At the time the Protestant Reformed Churches were working with Dutch immigrants in Canada who had deep convictions concerning the doctrine of the covenant. These convictions differed essentially from the doctrine of the covenant embraced and preached by the Protestant Reformed Churches. These immigrants had themselves inquired of the Protestant Reformed missionaries whether the Protestant Reformed Churches’ doctrine of the covenant would be binding on them, were they to organize as congregations in the federation of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The mission committee presented one such inquiry to the 1950 synod. Identifying his family as “confessing members of the Reformed Church maintaining Article 31 of the Church Order

2 *Acts of Synod, Protestant Reformed Churches of America, 1950, 54.*

[commonly known as the liberated Reformed churches],” the author of the inquiry made this request: “As one of the most important points, I would gladly receive elucidation whether you will hold the former liberated Reformed people, when they are received by you as confessing members into the Protestant Reformed Churches, to your conceptions concerning covenant and baptism, or that they need to expect no binding in these [doctrinal] matters from you.”³

The mission committee assured synod that the letter “is quite typical of repeated requests that we have received from various groups in Canada.”⁴

That the Declaration was drawn up and adopted by synod in response to a request for such a “form” by the denominational mission committee became important later, when Protestant Reformed ministers and consistories raised objection to the Declaration as having been adopted by synod without having originated from a local consistory. Synod defended the church political legality of the Declaration by noting the request from the mission committee and by appealing to Article 30 of the Church Order. This article states that in the major assemblies of Reformed churches (one of which is the annual synod) “only such matters shall be dealt with...as pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common.”⁵ A request from a denominational committee concerning the mission work that the churches in common are doing is a matter with which a synod may rightfully deal.

To the requests from the Dutch immigrants in Canada for enlightenment whether the Protestant Reformed beliefs concerning covenant and baptism would be binding upon them, should they join the churches, the mission committee responded, “We do not feel that it lies within our jurisdiction to give answer to this question.”⁶

3 Ibid., 52–53. The request was in Dutch. The translation of the Dutch is mine. An English translation of this part of the letter is found in the *Acts of Synod, Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1953*, 165.

4 Ibid., 52.

5 Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Article 30, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 389.

6 *Acts of Synod, 1950*, 53.

The mission committee therefore turned to the synod for the answer to the question about the binding nature of the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant of grace. In their request to synod for an official statement, or “form,” the mission committee added that it “would appreciate having something uniform and definite to present to these groups, particularly when they request organization.”⁷

A synodical committee of pre-advice recommended that the 1950 synod “adopt the following clear-cut expression as one which should appear in each request for organization, along with the denial of common grace and the Three Points of 1924, and profession of adherence to the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order of Dordrecht and professing the Scriptures to be the infallible Word of God.” The “clear-cut expression” proposed by the committee was as follows:

The promise of the Gospel, both as to the will of God to save His people and the execution of His will to save them, is not general, that is, it does not include all the baptized children of the church, but is particular, that is, it pertains only to the elect of God.⁸

Although this recommended statement was brief, it did express the heart of the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant, as well as address the main points of controversy over the doctrine of the covenant between the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated). It would have conveyed to the mission committee and ultimately informed the Dutch immigrants in Canada that it is the confession of the Protestant Reformed Churches that the covenant promise, “I will be your God and the God of your children,” applies to the elect children and elect further descendants of believing parents.

The much-longer Declaration would only expand on this short statement. In addition the Declaration would polemically reject the covenant conception opposed to the doctrine of the covenant that the short statement confesses and demonstrate that this covenant doctrine is indeed binding in the Protestant Reformed Churches,

7 Ibid., 54.

8 Ibid.

since it is the expression of the binding Reformed creeds.

The two professors at the Protestant Reformed Seminary, who would play a prominent role in the subsequent controversy over the Declaration, Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff, were not members of the committee of pre-advice that drew up and recommended the short “clear-cut expression” in response to the request of the mission committee.

The synod of 1950 was not satisfied with this brief statement. Evidently, synod desired a more detailed statement regarding the covenant doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches, with which groups desiring to be organized as Protestant Reformed Churches ought to be familiar and in agreement. The decision of synod was “to re-submit this matter to the committee of pre-advice, and to add the two professors as advisors to this committee.”⁹

Charged on Friday with drawing up a “form” that would give direction to the mission committee, the now enlarged committee presented the Declaration to synod the following Monday. The Declaration was drawn up, therefore, in one day—the Saturday between the resubmission to the synodical committee and the following Monday.

The synodical committee of pre-advice called the document that it proposed to synod “A Brief Declaration of Principles of the Protestant Reformed Churches.”¹⁰ In the very small print of the *Acts of Synod*, the brief Declaration runs to slightly more than seven pages.¹¹

This proposed response to the mission committee was much longer and more detailed concerning the covenant doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches than was the original “clear-cut expression.” It was also negative, stating and condemning certain teachings concerning the covenant that the Protestant Reformed Churches repudiate, whereas the “clear-cut expression” was only positive.

Synod adopted the “Brief Declaration,” as was later acknowledged by all, without much discussion and with hardly any opposition.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 83.

11 Ibid., 83–90.

Only one of the sixteen synodical delegates voted against adopting the Declaration.

The trouble-free and almost unanimous adoption of the Declaration was misleading. Immediately after the synod vehement objection to the Declaration would surface throughout the denomination. Controversy would rage. And the result, some three years later, would be schism.

As the committee that had drawn up and presented the Declaration recommended, the synod of 1950 also decided:

1. That synod subject this entire document to the approval of the churches.
2. If no objection is offered, to adopt this at our next synod.
3. To adopt this [Declaration] in the meantime as a working hypothesis for our mission committee and for our missionaries in the organization of churches.¹²

Adoption of the Declaration by the synod of 1950, therefore, was only provisional. The decisive adoption was delayed to the synod of 1951. In the meantime, however, the Declaration had authority in the churches. It was to be “a working hypothesis” for the mission committee.

THE AUTHOR

The author of the Declaration was Herman Hoeksema. He himself acknowledged his authorship. Defending the Declaration soon after the synod of 1950, Hoeksema mentioned that one reason he felt himself responsible for the document was that “the committee asked me to draw up the first Draft of this Declaration of Principles, which then was discussed by them and proposed by them to synod, and finally adopted by this body.”¹³

The foes of the Declaration also recognized Hoeksema as the Declaration’s author. At their first separate synod upon separating from the Protestant Reformed Churches, they busied themselves

12 Ibid., 90.

13 Herman Hoeksema, “Reply to Rev. Blankespoor,” *Standard Bearer* 27, no. 1 (October 1, 1950): 4.



Herman Hoeksema, author of the Declaration, foremost defender of the Declaration, leading theologian in the PRC, and “doctor of the covenant.”

to vote the Declaration null and void in their communion. In the course of this action, they spoke of “the author of the Declaration, the Rev. H. Hoeksema.”¹⁴

It was only fitting, indeed to be expected, that Hoeksema would compose the Declaration of Principles.

The Declaration must express the fundamental truths of the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant of grace. Not only was Herman Hoeksema the leading theologian in the Protestant Reformed Churches, but he was also the man who had led the churches into the knowledge of the truth of the covenant as the churches confessed it.

Reacting against the doctrine of the covenant taught him and all other seminarians in Calvin Seminary by the Christian Reformed theologian Prof. William Heyns when Hoeksema was still a Christian Reformed seminarian, Hoeksema set himself the task of forming a doctrine of the covenant. This doctrine would be both a genuine development of a prominent, indeed *the* prominent, conception in the Reformed tradition, as represented especially by Herman Bavinck, and in harmony with the Reformed creeds, particularly the Canons of Dordt. Early in his ministry in the Protestant Reformed Churches, already in 1927, Hoeksema had spelled out this doctrine of the covenant in a series of articles in the *Standard Bearer*. Later, sometime before 1932, these articles

14 *Acts of Synod, 1953*, 353. It is a peculiarity of the *Acts of Synod, 1953* that the minutes of the continued synod of the schismatic faction, March 1954, are bound together in one volume with the minutes of the synod of the still-united churches that met in June 1953 but then recessed until March 1954.

in the Dutch language were published as *De Geloovigen en Hun Zaad* (Believers and their seed).¹⁵

CONTROVERSY

During the year between the provisional adoption of the Declaration by the synod of 1950 and what was intended to be the decisive adoption of the document by the synod of 1951, there was heated debate about the Declaration in the Protestant Reformed Churches. Controversy raged. Schism was in the air. The two periodicals that served the members of the churches, the *Standard Bearer* and *Concordia*, contended over the Declaration—the *Standard Bearer* defending the Declaration, *Concordia* opposing its adoption. Sermons reflected on the Declaration and the doctrinal issues it addressed. Households discussed the matter, not always amicably.

Those Protestant Reformed ministers who opposed the Declaration were, in fact, defending the covenant doctrine of Klaas Schilder and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated).

They had become enamored of this doctrine of the covenant at least in part by the persuasive presentation of it by Schilder himself. In the fall of 1947, at the invitation of the Protestant Reformed Churches, he had spoken on the covenant at conferences with the Protestant Reformed ministers, he had preached his covenant conception in the churches, and he had won them over by personal conversations.

Although the ministers did not forthrightly state that they rejected the prevailing Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant

15 The original articles in the *Standard Bearer* appeared in volumes 3 and 4 of the magazine. The series began in volume 3, number 14 (April 15, 1927), and concluded in volume 4, number 3 (November 1, 1927). The booklet, published in Grand Rapids by C. J. Doorn, contains no publishing date but was certainly published before 1932, since Hoeksema remarks on the booklet in his editorial in the December 15, 1932 issue of the *Standard Bearer*. The booklet was translated into English by Homer C. Hoeksema and published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) as *Believers and Their Seed* in 1971. A revised edition of this English translation was published by the RFPA in 1997, titled *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*.

in favor of the doctrine of the liberated, there can be no doubt that all their opposition to the Declaration was due to, and expressive of, their embrace of the liberated doctrine.

First, the principles of the covenant doctrine that they advanced were fundamental elements of the liberated doctrine of the covenant. These principles were (and are) a severing of the covenant and covenant grace from the decree of election; the extension of the gracious covenant promise to all the baptized children without exception; God's establishment of the covenant with all the baptized children alike; and the conditionality of the covenant promise, as of the covenant itself.

Second, in their defense of a doctrine of the covenant opposed to, and by, the Declaration, the adversaries of the Declaration admitted their attraction to, if not their wholehearted embrace of, the covenant doctrine of Schilder and the liberated. Defending the conditionality of the covenant in the sense that, although there is no condition for a child's entrance into the covenant, there are conditions for remaining in the covenant, Rev. Andrew Petter appealed to Schilder (whose views he was propounding): "Dr. Schilder expressed this in his speeches among us by saying: 'There are no conditions *for* the covenant, but there are conditions *in* the covenant. God does not give the enjoyment of life to His people except under conditions of faith and conversion.'"¹⁶



Klaas Schilder, founding father of and leading theologian in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated); vigorous proponent of a conditional covenant, cut loose from election; chief external foe of the Declaration; and influential in converting many Protestant Reformed ministers to his theology of the covenant.

16 A. Petter, "The Covenant, XXVII—Dr. Schilder," *Concordia* 6, no. 4 (Thursday, March 31, 1949): 3.



Klaas Schilder (l) and Andrew Petter (r) under the palm trees in southern California on one of Schilder's tours of the Protestant Reformed Churches. During these tours, especially in 1947, he indoctrinated many Protestant Reformed ministers, including Petter, who were evidently susceptible to this indoctrination, in the liberated doctrine of the covenant. Far more was going on under the palms than only the enjoyment of southern California scenery and flora.

That these conditions in the covenant—in the covenant theology of Petter and, as he correctly supposed, in the covenant theology of the liberated—are real, full-fledged conditions, upon which God and his saving work in the child depend, Petter made plain by the example of them that he gave from earthly life. “A settler can home-stead a section of land on condition that he tills so much of it.” Petter then asked rhetorically: “Is he a Pelagian heretic, minimizing the counsel and efficacy of God over his tilling, when he calls this government stipulation a condition that is set before him?”¹⁷

To which question the answer is, “The settler is not a Pelagian settler, if he stands toward the government and demands his rights on the basis of his performing the prescribed condition, for home-steading was by works. But a minister who

teaches a child to take his stand toward God with regard to his covenant salvation according to this (revelatory) example is a Pelagian heretic and responsible for the child's eternal damnation. Such a minister denies salvation by grace alone in the covenant and teaches baptized children that covenant salvation is by and on the basis of the child's works.”

Writing after the schism had happened, Petter frankly acknowledged the influence of the liberated doctrine of the covenant on

17 A. Petter, “The Covenant, XLIII—Correspondence,” *Concordia* 6, no. 20 (Thursday, December 8, 1949): 4.

himself and his colleagues in the churches that now were separated from the Protestant Reformed Churches. Having referred to the “contact with the Liberated of the Netherlands,” Petter added: “In that contact most of our ministers tried to form an evaluation of their covenant views and many of us felt that also in our criticism of the conditional element in their theology we must not go to the extreme that would lose our understanding of the conditional expression and relations as they are used in the Bible in the administration of the covenant and in the preaching of the full counsel of God.”¹⁸

Rev. John D. De Jong and Rev. Bernard Kok, both ardent supporters of a conditional covenant and vehement foes of the Declaration, let the cat out of the bag as early as 1949. In that year they traveled to the Netherlands and met with leading churchmen of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated). At the meeting they informed the theologians of the liberated churches that

[Hoeksema’s] conception regarding election [in relation to the covenant] is not church doctrine. No one is bound by it. Some are emitting a totally different sound. Their [Kok’s and De Jong’s] opinion was that most (of the Prot. Ref.) do not think as Rev. Hoeksema and Rev. Ophoff [about the covenant]. And sympathy for the Liberated was great also in the matter of their doctrine of the covenant...

For the conception of the Liberated there is ample room.

This was the report of the meeting of the two Protestant Reformed ministers and the liberated theologians by Prof. Benne Holwerda, of the liberated churches, in a letter to a liberated immigrant in Canada.¹⁹

Contributing to the strife in the churches were two events that were intimately related to the Declaration and its provisional adoption by the synod of 1950. One was the preaching by a prominent Protestant Reformed minister of the covenant doctrine that

18 A. Petter, “Was the Split Necessary?” *Reformed Guardian* 1, no. 9 (November 27, 1953): 9.

19 The quotation is from the letter of Professor Holwerda in the article by G. M. Ophoff, “Revs. De Jong and Kok in The Netherlands,” *Standard Bearer* 25, no. 20 (August 1, 1949): 470.

the Declaration condemned as contrary to the Reformed confessions. The minister was Rev. Hubert De Wolf, who was prominent by virtue of being one of the pastors of First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At the time it was the largest and most influential congregation in the denomination. On April 15, 1951, after synod's provisional adoption of the Declaration and in deliberate contradiction of the Declaration, De Wolf preached a sermon explicitly defending the doctrine of a conditional covenant promise to all who hear the preaching of the gospel. The sermon climaxed in the statement "God promises everyone of you that, if you believe, you shall be saved."²⁰ This sermon divided the congregation and inflamed the entire denomination. Members of the church protested the sermon to the consistory.

The second event that contributed to the division of the Protestant Reformed Churches during the year between the provisional adoption of the Declaration in June 1950 and its intended decisive adoption in June 1951 was the virtual deposition of a Protestant Reformed minister and an elder by a nominally Protestant Reformed congregation in Canada. This congregation was made up of Dutch immigrants whose strong covenant convictions were contrary to the beliefs of the Protestant Reformed Churches as expressed in the Declaration. In January 1951, again *after* the provisional adoption of the Declaration by the synod of 1950, the nominally Protestant Reformed consistory in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada deposed Rev. Herman Veldman and elder Sam Reitsma for preaching and upholding in the congregation the doctrine of an unconditional covenant with the elect only.²¹

Not only did this action make the debate about the Declaration more heated, but it also lent urgency to the request by the mission committee for a "form" to be used in organizing new churches, particularly new churches whose membership might be Dutch immigrants committed to a doctrine of the covenant diametrically opposite that of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The mission committee of the Protestant Reformed Churches had organized

20 *Acts of Synod, Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 1954, 54.*

21 For this history, see Gertrude Hoeksema, *A Watered Garden: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1992), 173–74.

the congregation in Hamilton as a Protestant Reformed church prior to the adoption of the Declaration and evidently without making the difference over the covenant an issue.

In these circumstances of controversy and open division, the synod of 1951 met. The main matter on its agenda was the adoption of the Declaration, decisively. Also included in the agenda were numerous protests against the Declaration from both ministers and churches. Indeed, Classis West, one of the two classes comprising the denomination, protested the adoption of the Declaration and overtured the 1951 synod “to declare that as churches we are not at all ripe and ready to compose a Declaration, and that the need for it has NOT [*sic*] been proven.”²²

Because of the opposition to the Declaration on the part of Classis West, which could only be expected to be voted by its delegates at synod, final adoption of the Declaration by the synod of 1951 was doubtful when synod assembled.

22 *Acts of Synod, 1951*, 108.