

The
REFORMED BAPTISM FORM



Bastiaan Wielenga

The **REFORMED BAPTISM FORM**

A COMMENTARY

B. Wielenga

Translated by Annemie Godbehere

Edited by David J. Engelsma



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Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

Jenison, Michigan 49428

www.rfpa.org

mail@rfpa.org

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FOREWORD

The great worth of this book is that it is the translation into English of a thorough, penetrating, sound commentary on the historic, inestimably rich Reformed baptism form. This baptism form is the authoritative form for all Reformed churches in the whole world that stand in, or have some relation to, the Dutch Reformed tradition. Most of these churches still use this baptism form on the occasion of the administration of the sacrament.

The commentary was originally published in Dutch in 1906. The second edition, which was virtually unchanged, appeared in January 1920. This translation used the second edition published by Kok of Kampen.

To the best of my knowledge, this volume represents the first translation of Wielenga's magisterial work into English. It is therefore the first commentary on the Reformed baptism form in English with the doctrinal weight, the church-historical width, the covenantal insight, the biblical depth, and the passionate practicality of the Dutch Reformed ecclesiastical and theological tradition at its best.

Regarding the format of the commentary, the chapter divisions and subheads are Wielenga's. The chapter titles, except for chapter one, are also Wielenga's. The original title of chapter one, "Introduction," was changed to "Nature and History of the Reformed Baptism Form." Certain quotations of phrases and sentences in the baptism form are given in italics, as is the case in the original Dutch.

All footnotes by the editor are identified by the concluding "Ed." Footnotes by the translator are identified by "Tr." All footnotes not attributed to the editor or the translator are Wielenga's.

The content of the commentary speaks for itself. Particularly regarding the covenantal God, his covenant of grace, and covenantal

salvation, which constitute the doctrinal foundation of the sacrament of baptism, the commentary sets forth, defends, and applies the creedal Reformed faith concerning the covenant. The explanation of the covenant in its various aspects is the fruit of the development of the doctrine of the covenant by the Holy Spirit in the Reformed churches, from Calvin through Dordt to the great reformatory movements in the Netherlands of Wielenga's time, the Secession of 1834 and the *Doleantie* (grieving movement) of 1886.

The commentary will be especially helpful to Reformed churches, ministers, and other members in its explanation of the baptism form's authoritative treatment of covenant and election in relation to the baptism of infants. Grievous schisms over this issue have troubled Reformed churches both in the Netherlands and in North America since Wielenga wrote his commentary. The present-day, powerful, spreading heresy within Reformed churches of the federal vision centers on this issue. Reformed churches yet today are divided over this and related issues: Who are the children of believers to whom God promises salvation and with whom he establishes his covenant? What is the meaning of the phrase in the baptism form that affirms that the infants of believers are already "sanctified in Christ" before they are baptized? Does election bear decisively on the covenant of God with the children of believers?

It is perhaps necessary to note that publication of the commentary does not imply the agreement of the publisher or of the editor with every expression or thought in the document. Some of the differences that the Protestant Reformed have with isolated expressions in the commentary are explained in footnotes. There has been further development of the grand doctrine of the covenant after Wielenga. But the development has occurred within the tradition in which Wielenga stood and to which he gives expression.

Then there are matters of baptismal practice, always interesting, some of which a Reformed minister might never have thought of until confronted with them by the commentary. For example, is it

fitting in baptizing someone to sprinkle with three distinct applications of water or with one only?

It would be an inexcusable injustice to Wielenga and his commentary, as well as a foolish failure in encouraging all Reformed Christians to read the commentary, that a foreword would say nothing about the style, or form, of the writing. Wielenga wrote the commentary for all the members of the Reformed churches, not only, or even primarily, for the theologians. In many sections, the description of aspects of the Reformed doctrine of baptism with its practical implications is moving, even poetic with the poetry that spontaneously expresses the beauty and profundity of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of God with the infant children of believers.

The faith of every believer concerning the sacrament of baptism, not least regarding its application to himself or herself, will be expanded and enriched by the commentary.

The preaching and teaching concerning baptism by the Reformed minister who reads the commentary will be enhanced, to the benefit of the congregation.

—David J. Engelsma, editor

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

Bastiaan Wielenga was a learned, prominent minister of the word in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) in the early to middle 1900s. He was born in 1873 and died in 1949. Dr. Wielenga was an erudite theologian. He studied for the ministry at the Theological School in Kampen and earned his doctorate at the University of Heidelberg in 1899.

Wielenga devoted his entire ministry to the labor of the pastorate. In recognition of his exceptional theological abilities, in 1912 the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands appointed him to the office of professor of theology at the Theological School in Kampen. Wielenga declined the appointment, at least in part because of his love for the pastoral ministry. From 1911 to 1940, Wielenga served as pastor of the large, influential congregation in Amsterdam. He became emeritus in 1940.

Bastiaan Wielenga was a son of the *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834. His instructor and mentor was Herman Bavinck. Wielenga held Bavinck in the highest regard. He called on the great Dutch theologian when Bavinck lay on his deathbed. Strongly influenced by Bavinck regarding both his theology and his “spirit,” Wielenga combined, or sought to combine, firm, confessional Reformed convictions with personal, mild tolerance.

Whether his tolerant spirit weakened his stand for the truth in the controversies that erupted during his ministry, for example, the so-called “movement of the youth” (*beweging des jongeren*), the Geelkerken case, and the “liberation” (*vrijmaking*) among others, the theology he taught, particularly in his commentary on the baptism form, would not have been extreme or radical by anyone’s standards.

On the contrary, it would have been the orthodoxy of Bavinck, of the Secession of 1834, and of the Reformed Reformation arising from 1517.

Wielenga had a fruitful pen. Either by himself or with the cooperation of others, he founded, edited, and wrote regularly for several Dutch periodicals and also produced a number of brochures. These include some that are published still.

Among his many books are commentaries on the other secondary creeds of the Reformed churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition, besides the baptism form. These are (in English translation; the books are available only in Dutch) *Our Lord's Supper Form* and *Our Form of Marriage*.

Among his many other works, Wielenga wrote *Heirs of the Covenant*; *The Lion Has Roared* (a fine commentary on Amos); *The Reformation of 1834*; *Marriage as an Institution of God*; *The Essence of Christendom*; *The Reformation of 1886*; and *Jesus Christ and Cultural Life*. In addition, Wielenga wrote two volumes of exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism, *Our Catechism*, and translated Calvin's *Institutes* in an abbreviated edition.

No doubt showing the influence of Abraham Kuyper and Bavinck, Wielenga concerned himself much with the relation of Reformed Christianity and culture. This was the theme both of certain of his books, for example, *Jesus Christ and the Cultural Life*, and of some of the periodicals he founded or edited, for example, *Voices of the Time*.¹

This learned, pious, spiritual child of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the time of their glory; of Herman Bavinck; of the Secession of 1834; and of the Reformation as it developed in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and the covenantal theology of the Reformed baptism form, we present to the Reformed people of God for the first time in the English language slightly more than one hundred years after the original publication of this work.

—David J. Engelsma, editor

1 For a more complete description of Wielenga's ministry, see *Biografisch Lexicon voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme* (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 399–400).—Ed.

A WORD ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

The translator of this work was aptly named. She was Annemie Godbehere. A lovely, godly woman, she was ruled by God.

Living with her husband in France, where true, Reformed churches are few and far between, Mrs. Godbehere came into contact with the Protestant Reformed Churches and the Reformed Free Publishing Association (RFPA) through the Reformed conferences in Great Britain of the British Reformed Fellowship. Fluent in Dutch as in French and English, Annemie was engaged by the RFPA to translate certain Dutch works that the RFPA thought profitable for Reformed readers who can read only English.

Annemie did not live to see her translation of this work in print. Scarcely had she finished translating this work than she died of cancer. In fact, the cancer made it difficult for her to complete the translation of this work. Heroically, she labored on, in severe pain and despite the hindrance of the medical treatments.

If the RFPA dedicated its volumes, this one would surely be dedicated to the memory—the fond memory—of Annemie Godbehere.

—David Engelsma, editor

PREFACE

When I began this treatise on the Reformed baptism form, a few years ago now, as a series of articles in the *Church Post* of Gelderland, I had no idea that it would develop into a book. As happens to many, it also happened to me. The language of the form appeared to me so undemanding and clear that no deeper reflection and further clarifications seemed required, except where they concerned the disputed points in this liturgical article.

For many of us, the sounds of the Reformed baptism form are like those sounds of an old song, heard in early childhood and indelibly engraved in our memories. However, not everything the memory retains exists also in our consciousness. How often do we mechanically sing a psalm that we learned by heart as children? It is precisely because the memory has faithfully retained it. Exactly how easily does something familiar glide over the top of the way we think without stirring the depths of our spiritual life?

Therefore, while I studied this form with deliberation and analyzed every word, my amazement increased each time because of the wealth of thoughts in nearly every sentence of its time-honored language. As a result, each time I appreciated the significance of the Reformed form more deeply for its truly scriptural view of baptism. But no sufficient unity of thought concerning this form has matured so far in Reformed churches.

If it is an undeniable fact that even today's Reformed Christians may still view the form for infant baptism with loving reverence, then a truthful explanation of the form could assist in the sorely needed tempering of the still-continuing tremors of unrest. This is the purpose of the study. As a result, it may contribute to the further development of the view on baptism.

My main goal was not to provide a polemical treatise. Only when it seemed necessary have I extensively defended my view; hence the writing received a polemic sound. My treatise is neither a historical description of the doctrine of baptism, nor a dogmatic treatise. Rather, I desired to submit a purely exegetical work.

Nobody is impartial, but I have insisted on open-mindedness, which is necessary for proper exegesis. The question I continually asked myself was, what does the form say? How did the Reformed fathers account for their view of baptism in this act of the Reformation?

When evaluating the work, please bear in mind that this has been my point of departure. It is not my idea of baptism (although as a matter of fact it is in accord with the form) that I have tried to represent here, but a valuable liturgical heritage from the century of the Reformation.

Therefore, those who disagree with some views and express their criticism (which I prefer rather than avoid) should provide grounds for their exegetical insight. Only in this way will we make progress and work together for the prosperity of the life of our church.

True, the form is not the gospel. It does not rank equally with God's word. The observant reader will see that I have proposed more than one correction in what, in my opinion, is an unfortunate expression. Certainly, for a fruitful solution to be possible, we need to come first to an understanding of how the church in her official liturgy expresses herself concerning this matter.

The first question is, what does the form say? Then follows the next question, is everything said in the form true?

My mind will be at rest concerning the second question if the first can be answered accurately. If the form agrees with the life-giving truth of God's everlasting word, the baptism form will remain sufficient for the church in the twentieth century. Then she may safely deliver the form to her children.

Of course, the character of this treatise requires that only those matters may be discussed to which the form refers directly.

Nevertheless, may the reader keep in mind that I have also included within the usual scope of interpreting the ritual part, the highly contemporary issues concerning the address at baptism, the presentation, the manner of sprinkling, the time and order of baptism, and whatever concerns the sacrament of baptism itself. If, in some places, the explanation developed into an overly broad scope in the eye of the reader, this “overestimation” is a healthy reaction against the numerous failures to appreciate the wealth of our form, of which I also consider myself guilty.

Finally, may the reader be assured that my endeavor was not first, not even most importantly, to provide material for an elevated theoretical, dogmatic view of baptism. But the ardent desire of my heart is that by the publication of this writing many people reading this work learn to regard baptism more purely, appreciate it more warmly, and more zealously plead the covenantal promises on behalf of believers and their children, before the throne of him who calls himself I Am That I Am.

—B. Wielenga
Arnhem, November 1906

AT THE SECOND PRINTING

The first printing sold out some time ago now. Social deprivation, because of the war,¹ delayed the arrival of the second printing for a long time.

The attention the book received may be viewed as a sign that the Reformed doctrine, as it matured during the flourishing period of the Reformation, still engages the soul of younger generations.

In the days when the Secessionists and the people of the *Doleantie* battled out their differences, controversy over several questions concerning baptism, especially those of a liturgical nature, raised its head. The after-effects, which lasted several decades, have now abated. There is peace. Both parties have understood one another, and both have come to terms over the issues.²

Nevertheless, a comprehensive view of the doctrine of baptism, according to the understanding of the fathers of the Reformation, should still be regarded as relevant. Particularly in some circles of Reformed people, the sound doctrine of the covenant of the

1 World War I. The book first appeared in 1906 prior to World War I.—Ed.

2 There were two important reformations of the apostate Reformed church in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century. The first was the Secession of 1834 (*Afscheiding*). The second was the *Doleantie* of 1886. *Doleantie* describes the second reformation as a movement that grieved over the necessity of church reformation. Between the theologians and people of these two movements of reformation were doctrinal differences, including differences regarding baptism. The large majority of the two denominations formed by the two reformations united in 1892 as the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Wielenga was confident that the differences between the two movements of reformation, which persisted within the united denomination, had been amicably settled by the time the second edition of this book was printed. Later history would prove him mistaken. In the early 1940s the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands would suffer schism, largely over the issue of the doctrine of the covenant, particularly regarding infant baptism.—Ed.

flourishing period of the Reformation is still not deeply rooted. The more appealing literature and, regarding the doctrine of the covenant, superficial writings of the eighteenth century are preferred.

It also is undeniable that Methodism,³ with its various sectarian branches, exerts its influence more than ever in the churches, to the detriment of a sound view of infant baptism. Reliable instructions concerning the doctrine of the covenant and polemical defense against methodistical degeneration of church life are of vital importance for the venerable church of old. They are an urgent need in our revolutionary time, especially in the realm of the spiritual.

I have not thought it necessary to make significant and radical changes in this book, although I believe it to be more Reformed now in some things. I mention with gratitude that I benefited during the revision from the work of others. I refer particularly to the important series of articles of Dr. H. H. Kuyper's *Children of the Covenant* in the *Heraut* of 1915–16,⁴ also from an apologetic viewpoint.

I also took note of any criticism, especially that of Dr. Oorthuys and Professor Bouwman. In all fairness, I needed to make changes in some places. For the benefit of the ordinary reader, who is less interested in scholarly questions, some sections are in brackets [...]. The reader may pass over them without any detriment to understanding the whole.

—B. Wielenga

Amsterdam, January 1920

3 By "Methodism" Wielenga refers to the doctrines and practices of the spiritual movement begun by the English preacher John Wesley. This movement taught that salvation is a dramatic experience of conversion by the adult sinner's acceptance of Christ, under the influence of highly charged revivals and emotional revivalists. Methodism was (and is) Arminian in its theology: salvation depends on the decision of the free will of the sinner. Methodism had no eye for the covenant, for God's saving of his people in the line of generations, for God's saving of the children of believers in a non-dramatic manner by the instruction and rearing of the children, or for infant baptism.—Ed.

4 The *Heraut* (Herald) was the periodical of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.—Ed.

NATURE AND HISTORY OF THE REFORMED BAPTISM FORM

LITURGICAL FORMS AND THEIR ROLE

The Reformed church has a wealth of forms. Many do not envy us this wealth, and seemingly with right.

A form is only a *form*. Even the word *form* alone gives the impression of something mechanical and of some coldness. We typically receive a form from the tax office to complete, or we get one from the post office to accompany something we wish to send.

It is dry and cold. It reeks of parchment and sounds rather formal. How does it apply to a *dynamic Christianity*? How can we harmonize it with the liberty of God's children? How can the form be a speech from the believer's heart to the heart of the Father? May we draw a limit to the Spirit's activity in prayer or in the sacrament, by something drawn up by the hands of men?

Such is the language one hears. Indeed, many a Christian who claims the name of "strictly Reformed" *suffers* the forms more by virtue of habit than from a loving conviction and appreciation of their true value because he understands them. Surely, I am not too presumptuous in saying that I meet only a few who truly and profoundly experience the beauty and spiritual clarity of the forms.

Is this still an old and continuing reaction against Rome, which imprisoned souls behind the bars of often-incomprehensible forms, until they became parched and withered away? Certainly *not*, for precisely our Reformed fathers, still trembling from having once

embraced Rome's system, drafted these forms and gave them to the congregation as the backbone of church life.

Is it then a reaction in our own time against the Anglican and Lutheran churches, where ceremony was, in some places more than in others, allowed to push the lively preaching of God's word into the background? Clearly, this also is not the case, as few among us know their mode of worship intimately.

Where coldness toward the forms is deliberate, we can no doubt attribute it to the fear that an ecclesiastical form detracts from the absoluteness of holy scripture. Where it is less rational, we may in nine out of ten cases attribute it simply to a lack of knowledge. The old axiom "Unknown, unloved" shows itself to be true, even on a spiritual level.

I challenge the fearful of the first case, who believe that human language darkens God's pure word. It is precisely the point of the form to lead ordinary people to that word and to bind the entire church together in unity of thought and perception on the immovable foundation of that word.

As for those who do not love because they do not know, I have no other medicinal remedy than the one that requires them to listen when the voice of history speaks. We need to open their ears with the breath of conviction and make them appreciate what these forms have been to the church of the Lord; what a blessed power has emanated from them; and what they still *can* be for the church, if she rightly understands them.

The forms are only dry and cold to those who do not see them as the fruit of God guiding his people. They are only cold to those who do not understand their *content*.

We also have the three forms of unity. But they are usually not regarded as forms, because confessional writings are separated from everything that concerns our service of public worship. Although there is a difference between the confessional and the liturgical writings, nevertheless the confession is also a form, a *formula*.

How many “Reformed” people do not even know what these three forms are, let alone have read or studied all three. Clearly, the Heidelberg Catechism, that profound book of comfort, still lives in the hearts of the Lord’s people! Yet how many have never experienced the voice of the martyrs, who kept the truth even when it cost them their blood, in the Belgic Confession (the Thirty-seven Articles)?

Where are they who have read the Five Articles¹ for their spiritual edification and strengthening of their faith? Search the church books that Reformed people bring with them to the house of prayer. In most cases you do not find the three forms of unity. The Catechism stands there *alone* and...*lonely*. The liturgical collection also is sadly mutilated. The pruning shears have severed many of its living branches.

Therefore, the first action of reformation must be to deliver the entire heritage of the fathers again into the hands of everyone. The appointed nurturing place lies in the catechism class.

The second necessary act of reformation must be that the “familiar” forms are made more understandable. This will be my endeavor when I treat the baptism form, the most “familiar” of all forms (and the most *understood?*). May it be a tonic for the spiritually languishing soul.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BAPTISM FORM

Why does the baptism form occupy such a central place in the life of our church? Clearly, because the sacrament, to which this form introduces us and for which it prepares, is the heart and starting point of the church’s visible manifestation. The Lord’s supper is the flower and the crown; baptism is the *root* and *foundation*.

At baptism the church stands on guard. Here is the gate through which her new members enter. Indeed, so crucial is the question, what do you think of baptism?—the expression of the life of the

1 The Canons of Dordt—Ed.

church—that baptism may be called her shibboleth and identifying mark. From there the lines and paths diverge.

Tell me what baptism means to *you*, and I will tell you what *you* are to the *church*.

An understanding of baptism not only draws the demarcation line between the Reformed and their earlier opponents from the time of the Reformation (the Roman Catholics and Lutherans), but also demonstrates the prevailing difference in doctrine that divides Reformed people from the methodistical view of life in our century. Your doctrine of baptism determines whether you are a Methodist or not.

By your principle of baptism, you stand firmly against the enormous influence that Methodism so beguilingly emits. Experience teaches us that also in our circle, disputes concerning the view of baptism repeatedly surface, threatening the very unity of the church. A sad historical example of this is the tension between the people of the Secession and the *Doleantie* in the years after their union in 1892.² The necessity becomes evident for the Reformed church to make a clear confession of her doctrine of baptism, in a separate liturgical article, whereby each minister of the word, and thus also each member of the congregation, is bound to its particular view.

BEAUTY AND STRENGTH OF THE BAPTISM FORM

But there is yet another ground for our reverent love, which is given us in the form and content of the formula.

It is difficult to find beauty in something one hears and sees

2 We can now omit the description of these disputes in the previous edition, as thankfully, they no longer apply to our time. They have lost their historical significance in today's generation.

[The thought expressed by Wielenga in this footnote was wishful. Within twenty years, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, for whose members Wielenga wrote the commentary on the baptism form, would suffer schism over the doctrinal issue of covenant and infant baptism. A few years later, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America would split over the same issue.—Ed].

daily. The most pleasing melody becomes tiring to the ear when we hear it day after day. The most magnificent mountain view eventually leaves the eye indifferent after having admired it year on year. Because amazement is the origin of the sense of beauty, familiar daily delights apparently close the eye. It seems as if familiarity dulls the senses.

This has happened for many with our spiritually beautiful form. Not a few listen thoughtlessly to the reading. They find it tiring, as it is always so much the same. When they enter the church and see the preparation for the ceremony, a weary sigh routinely escapes their lips, and “baptisms again!” arises from their religiously (or rather spiritually) untouched and indifferent frame of mind. Perhaps the demand placed on the ecclesiastical “public” is too hard. In the churches where baptism takes place almost every Sunday, it may be preferable to introduce a shortened form and to read the entire form not more than once per month.

Nevertheless, there certainly are also others who listen without conscious thought, although they know what comes next. Yet they can be further ahead in thoughts than the teacher and complete his sentences from memory, unless, of course, the teacher reads the form with dignity and feeling and with a lively voice transforms the sounds. How can it be that soundly Reformed people do not get impatient, but listen for their edification, and often with blessings?

The answer is that the form is profoundly *biblical* in the true sense of the word. Indeed, it is anointed language. The compilers did not deliberately attempt to make it beautiful, but with a holy zeal endeavored to make scripture speak through them. Therefore, a glow of newness keeps on shining, which the centuries cannot dim.

As the interpretation of a biblical truth is also biblical in the form, it will remain fresh and youthful. It is sprinkled with the dew of eternal youth of God’s word, which remains in all eternity.

Note the reference to the profound promises that the triune God seals to the child! It seems as if scripture’s most exquisite pearls

are read together in one strand. What a climax! How bold this lofty ascent from high to higher: *until we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal.*

Consider the moving prayer with its historical images and the holy paradox: *joyfully bearing its cross!*

Attend to the words in the prayer of thanksgiving that speak of a powerful consciousness of forgiveness of sin, also for the seed of the congregation, and that strong sense of the most holy character of a nation of priests and kings! Observe that it can soften the heart of a Christian and comfort a feeble heart!

Then add the thought that for centuries the people of the separated church heard this same form, including those on whose graves we walk, and that it will still be read when our ears are finally closed. Also think that the old sounds we heard from infancy can still stir up and comfort a sluggish spirit in an ordinary village church, with its damp whitewashed walls and its sleep-inducing bright light through its ancient Gothic windows.

HISTORY OF THE BAPTISM FORM

Such an ancient form has a long history. It is partly a *history of suffering* because books and people experience often the same fate of martyrdom. Before we treat the form itself and analyze its contents, we will, as behooves prudent people, start with its history and gather information concerning its origin and its perilous historical circumstances.

Its history will not provide us with the same clear and touching answer as the question concerning the origin of the confessional writings. It shocks us to the core when the parchment on which the confessions are written reveals that they came into existence by the torchlight of terrifying persecution.

When you know that the Thirty-seven Articles were pressed from the heart's cry of Guido de Brès, the hero of faith, who weighed his life in the balance more lightly than the truth, you will already