

Covenant & Election FAQs (*VERSION 6.4*)

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How do covenant and election relate to one another?

There are many issues of semantics that enter into this discussion and many issues of real substance, so we need to be careful. If we oversimplify, we can say that election relates to God's eternal plan to save a people for himself. The number of the elect is fixed from eternity past and may not be increased or diminished. The covenant is God's administration of salvation in space and time, the historical outworking of his eternal plan. We have then two basic perspectives, the decretal/eternal and the covenantal/historical, through which to view salvation. As the handout above shows, the Bible *ordinarily* (though not always) views election through the lens of the covenant. (For more on this, see Norm Shepherd's book *Call of Grace*.) This is why covenant members can be addressed consistently as God's eternally elect, even though some of those covenant members may apostatize and prove themselves to not be elected to eternal salvation.

To do full justice to the biblical teaching, we must distinguish covenant and election without separating them. Sometimes Scripture simply conflates the elect and the covenant body, such as in Eph. 1:3ff and 2 Thess. 2:13. Other times, Scripture distinguishes the elect from the covenant community, such as when the biblical writers warn that some within the covenant will fall away (Rom. 11, 1 Cor. 10). To follow the Biblical model, we must view our fellow church members as elect and regenerate *and* threaten them with the dangers of falling away. This is not contradictory because we admit we only have a creaturely knowledge of God's decree. We can never, in this life, know with absolute certainty, who the elect are. So we have to make evaluations and declarations in terms of what has been revealed, namely the covenant (Dt. 29:29).

The key to keeping election and covenant together is to remember that the covenant is the visible, historical context in which the eternal decree of election comes to fruition.

What does it mean to look at election through the lens of the covenant? Or to look at special (individual) election through the lens of general (corporate) election?

In the Bible, election is always presented as good news – as pure gospel – for the covenant people of God. Yet, in many modern Calvinistic presentations, the doctrine takes on an ominous, threatening character. It raises the question, "Am I elect?," a question anxious souls want to have answered. But we cannot peer into the eternal decrees of God to see his roll of chosen ones. Nor do we have spiritual X-ray vision ('cardio-analytic abilities', as one theologian puts it) that allows us to gaze into the depths of our hearts to see if we are *really* regenerate. But here is a place where the Bible must be allowed to trump the deductions we might otherwise draw from premises provided by systematic theology. The inspired writers, after all, often speak of the covenant people of God as elect. And surely this knowledge of who is elect cannot be due simply to the fact that the Spirit is working in them as they write. Continually, the apostles address real words of comfort and assurance to visible churches – often very troubled visible churches! – and this is to serve as a model for pastors today. Our theology must allow us to speak the gospel in the first and second person, in a very personal and direct way. If Paul had been writing Eph. 1 as a modern Calvinist, he would had to have said, "He chose *some* of us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame..." But Paul's theology of election permits him to speak of the whole covenant community as elect in Christ, even when he knows some members of that congregation will apostatize (cf. Acts 20:28-30). We could also compare Paul's strong words of comfort to the elect in the Roman congregation in Rom. 8, with the strong warning given to those same people a few chapters later (11:17ff). I suggest 'viewing election

through the lens of the covenant' is one helpful way of conceptualizing what Paul is doing in texts such as these. Paul is treating the generally, or corporately, elect, as specially elect until and unless they prove otherwise. True, corporate election may not issue forth in final salvation, as the nation of Israel shows (cf. Dt. 7; Rom. 9-11). Apostasy is a real possibility for all covenant members, and is to be warned against. But corporate election is the context in which special election is worked out. There is indeed an election with an election (cf. Rom. 9:6), but for pastoral purposes, the two can and must be collapsed into one another. Thus, we are to regard all who are baptized and bear Christ's name as God's chosen ones. We can derive real assurance from our participation in the covenant community. Looking at election through the lens of the covenant 'brings election down to earth,' so to speak. It makes election tangible.

What is the payoff of relating covenant and election as you've done?

We can truly derive comfort and encouragement from our covenant membership. God loves everyone in the covenant. Period. You don't have to wonder if God loves you or your baptized children. There is no reason to doubt God's love for you. You can tell your fellow, struggling Christian, "You're forgiven! Christ paid for your sins!" This is far more helpful than only being able to tell someone, "Well, Christ died for his elect, and hopefully you're one of them!" No, looking at election through the lens of the covenant, as Scripture does, allows us to really and truly apply the promises of Scripture to ourselves and our fellow covenant members. Election does not have to remain an abstraction; through the covenant, it is 'brought down to earth', so to speak. Of course, the other side to this is that now we are also obligated to warn one another in the covenant community of the dangers of falling away.

The cash value of this teaching is seen, then, **pastorally**, in that we can really function as priests to one another, applying God's Word directly to each other in the covenant community. Paul's epistles, to take one example, are filled with first and second person language. Occasionally when he is dealing exclusively with predestination (the election perspective), such as in Rom. 8:28ff, he uses more abstract, less direct language. But generally, he speaks covenantally and personally, and imitating this pays great dividends pastorally. We learn to think of ourselves as God's elect, with all the privileges and responsibilities this status brings.

There is also an advantage **exegetically**, in that we can remain more faithful to Scripture as a whole and not merely select portions of it. If our theological system does not allow us to use the biblical language itself (e.g., Jude 5, Mt. 18), then something is wrong. There is certainly something odd about *sola Scriptura* Protestants sacralizing extra-biblical formulations, even to the point of exalting them above Scripture's own formulations.

Finally, there is a payoff in terms of **catholicity**: as we have seen, this is the traditional Augustinian (and Calvinian) way of dealing with these things. We are being faithful to our reformational and pre-reformational roots.

What is a non-elect covenant member?

God has decreed from the foundation of the world all that comes to pass, including who would be saved and lost for all eternity. Included in his decree, however, is that some persons, not destined for final salvation, would be drawn to Christ and to his people for a time. These people, for a season, enjoy real blessings, purchased for them by Christ's cross and applied to them by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament. (Reformed theologian John Murray makes it clear that whatever blessings reprobate experience in this life flow from Christ's work and the Spirit's work.) They may be said to be reconciled to God, adopted, granted new life, etc. But in the end, they fail to persevere, and because they fall away, they go to hell. Why would God do this? It's a mystery! Why would God allow sin to enter his creation in the first place? Why did he allow Adam to fall? Perhaps God allows some in the covenant to fall away so that those who do persevere will know that they only did so by the grace of God. Whatever the case, the teaching of Scripture is clear: some whom he adopts into covenant relation, he later hardens (Rom. 9:4, 18, 11:1ff).

Are you saying there is NO difference at all between the covenant member who will persevere to the end and the covenant member who will apostatize?

No. God certainly knows (and decreed) the difference, and systematic theologians should make this difference a part of their theology. But from our creaturely, covenantal point of view (which we should not apologize for!), there is no perceptible difference (e.g., Saul and David look alike in the early phases of their careers; Judas looked like the other disciples for a time). No appeal to the decree can be allowed to soften or undercut this covenantal perspective on our salvation. It is only as history is lived, as God's plan unfolds, that we come to know who will persevere and who won't. In the meantime, we are to do what was described in the handout above and demonstrated throughout Paul's epistles – treat all covenant members as elect, but also warn them of the dangers of apostasy.

The language of the Bible forces us to acknowledge a great deal of mystery here. For example, the same terminology that describes the Spirit coming (literally, "rushing") upon Saul in 1 Sam. 10:6 is used when the Spirit comes upon David (1 Sam. 16:13), Gideon (Jdg. 6:34), Jephthah (Jdg. 11:29), and Samson (Jdg. 14:6, 9; 15:14). But in four of these five cases (David, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson), the man in question was clearly regenerated and saved by the Spirit's work (cf. Heb. 11:32). This means that at the outset of Saul's career, the biblical narrative itself draws no distinction between his initial experience of the Spirit and the experience of those who would enter into final salvation. Saul's apostasy was not due to any lack in God's grace given to him, but was his own fault. While God no doubt predestined Saul's apostasy (since he foreordains all that comes to pass), God was not the Author of Saul's apostasy (cf. WCF 3.1). Saul received the same initial covenantal grace that David, Gideon, and other saved men received, though God withheld from him continuance in that grace. At the same time, his failure to persevere was due to his own rebellion. Herein lies the great mystery of God's sovereignty and human responsibility (cf. WCF 3.1, 8).

While we as Calvinists like to make a sharp distinction between genuine regeneration and the common operations of the Spirit, we should be willing to recognize that this distinction does not enter into many biblical passages. Instead, we need to be willing to speak of the *undifferentiated grace of God* (or the generic, unspecified grace of God). For example, in Heb. 6:4-5, some Reformed theologians try to draw subtle distinctions, showing highly refined psychological differences between the blessings listed, which do not secure eternal salvation, and true regeneration, which does issue forth in final salvation. But it is highly unlikely the writer had such distinctions in view, for at least two reasons. For one thing, it is by no means certain that those who have received the blessings listed in 6:4-5 will fall away. The writer merely holds it out as a possibility, a danger they must beware of. In fact, he expects these people to persevere (6:9).

But if the blessings catalogued are less than regeneration, and these people might persevere after all, we are put in the awkward position of saying that non-regenerate persons persevered to the end (cf. 2 Cor. 6:1)! Second, the illustration immediately following the warning, in 6:7-8, indicates these people have received some kind of new life. Otherwise the plant metaphor makes no sense. The question raised does not concern the nature of grace received in the past (real regeneration vs. merely common operations of the Spirit), but whether or not the one who has received grace will persevere into the future. Thus, the solution to Heb. 6 is not developing two different psychologies of conversion, one for the truly regenerate and one for the future apostate, and then introspecting to see which kind of grace one has received. Rather, the solution is to turn away from ourselves, and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:1ff). This is the 'secret' to persevering (and to assurance).

All this may be true, but is it a good thing to talk about? Won't it scare some people?

Certainly, anyone issuing the covenant community warnings about apostasy should do so with humility and compassion. Of course, these *are* warnings, so they should also be delivered with appropriate rhetorical forcefulness. But let's not outwit ourselves and make too big deal of these things. After all, these warnings are commonplace in Scripture. There is a staggering disproportion between the frequency of warnings in Scripture, and the infrequency of their being sounded forth in our churches. On page after page after page, one finds the inspired authors warning the covenant

community. It seems to me, warnings of this sort, scary as they are, should be a matter of course, a regular part of church life. We should find ourselves continually encouraged with the promises we have received, but almost as often, find ourselves warned about what will happen if we spurn these promises.

Don't passages like 1 Jn. 2:19 and 2 Cor. 13:5 contradict your view of apostasy?

No. There may be various kinds of apostasy – some apostates may be hypocrites all along, but others clearly had a quite genuine faith, hope, and love (such as Saul). The biblical writers rarely call into question whether or not their hearers have received grace; usually this is taken for granted. What they question is whether or not their hearers will continue in the grace they have received. In 1 Jn. 2:19, the key issue concerns the 'us' that the apostates have departed from. It could be the band of apostles (these apostates claimed to be apostles, but their departure from the covenant community proves they never really were – instead they were anti-christs) or the elect/persevering community (their going out from us shows us they never really were part of the elect – those eternally predestined for salvation). There is no reason to say that John is claiming these eventual apostates never experienced ANY blessing whatsoever so long as they remained in the covenant community. Note his continual references to 'abiding' in what has been received throughout his writings. John does not deny that they were 'of us' in every possible sense. Also, exegetically and grammatically, it is possible that John is saying they *ceased* to be part of us, rather than that they *never* were part of us.

How can I have an 'infallible assurance of faith' (WCF 18.2) if I am in constant danger of apostasy?

Our attitude should be like that of Paul, who knew he belonged to the Lord (e.g., 2 Tim. 1, 4:6ff), and yet lived in healthy fear of the danger of falling away (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Assurance must never lead to presumption, complacency, or carelessness. Part of the reason for pushing the envelope and formulating things provocatively is not simply to be faithful to Scripture (which uses deliberately provocative formulations), but to shock us out of our spiritual doldrums. Our Calvinistic pre-occupation with the decrees tends to make us rather complacent (the 'frozen chosen'!). There is a fine line between biblically-based assurance and presumption.

When I've talked to people who have had their assurance shaken by this kind of teaching, in virtually every case, after conversation with the person, it came out that the basis of their assurance was flawed. They had grounded their assurance on a past experience, perhaps, with the result that they became overly introspective: 'Did I *really* mean that prayer I prayed?' Or, they were trying to make their assurance a matter of iron-clad logic: 'Systematic theology requires that God deal with me in such and such a way.' Knocking down these props for people is often painful, but has a good result in the end. It throws us back onto the loving arms of Christ, not just for salvation, but for assurance as well. As Calvin said, Christ is the mirror of our election, and only by looking to him can we know we are among God's chosen.

Why is this teaching about apostasy so hard for me to accept?

I'm not sure; it could be for a variety of reasons. Some people who have been in the Reformed church for a while are startled by it because they thought that when they learned the TULIP, they had all they needed to know. But TULIP is not an exhaustive biblical theology, and systematic theology more generally cannot be treated as a substitute for actually getting your hands dirty with the text of Scripture. Sometimes we use systematics or a paradigm like TULIP to tame the Scriptures. This is a mistake. Systematic theology is a helpful check on our reading of Scripture. But it's like Cliff Notes – it really only does you good if you read the real text carefully. Moreover, there is great potential for confusion since the terminology of systematic theology doesn't always match the Bible's own terminology. Indeed, the Bible has no systematic theological vocabulary; it speaks more in metaphor and imagery than technical terminology.

I think many long time Reformed believers struggle with these things because they were taught election in abstraction from the covenant. The Reformed community has good books on election and

good books on the covenant, but few that tie them together. Plus, the Reformed church has often paid inadequate attention to the OT in its theologizing (particularly about salvation), so a case like Saul is not studied closely enough and isn't allowed to properly refine our positions.

But, in reality, these things shouldn't be too difficult for us. Whatever problems there seem to be for what philosophers have called the theoretical intellect, there is no problem at all for the practical intellect: I stand in fear of falling away, all the while trusting Christ to preserve me completely. I am spurred on by both the promises made directly to me as a covenant member, and the threats about the possibility of apostasy. Logically, we may have to fight to hold these things together, but practically there is no difficulty. [Analogy: How many of you who are married are committed to remaining faithful to your spouse? How many of you are absolutely confident that, no matter what, adultery is not something you'd ever do, so that you have no need to guard yourself against it? See, promise and threat, assurance and vigilance, can go together quite easily in the real world!]

For better *and* for worse, we have numerous popularizers of Reformed theology around today. The result is that what most of us think of as 'Reformed' is greatly truncated. American Reformed theology is like a bad cassette recording of the real thing. I'm simply trying to recover nuances that were originally in the tradition, but have been lost. Yes, some of it may seem trying, but in the end it is worth it.

What does it mean to be 'in covenant'?

On the one hand, some so totally identify covenant and election that to be in covenant and to be elect are one and the same. In other words, no non-elect persons ever enter the covenant. We don't know if someone becomes a covenant member at baptism because we don't know if that person is elect. On this view, the covenant is divorced from the concrete church community and the sacraments that identify and mark out the church. The covenant remains an invisible reality, known only to God. Obviously, this opens the door to a highly introspective and individualistic faith. In the end, my local church affiliation doesn't really matter on this scheme; what counts is being a part of the 'invisible church', known only unto God.

At the other extreme are those who identify the covenant with the visible church, but make covenant membership a matter of mere externals. Joining the church is no different than joining a social club of some sort. Election cannot be tied to the covenant in any direct way; covenant members cannot be addressed as God's elect in any real sense. The covenant never touches our deepest identity; it's only a skin-deep relation. Everyone baptized is a covenant member...but so what? The covenant has no salvific value.

Against both of these distortions, we must insist that the covenant is nothing less than union with the Triune God, nothing than less than salvation. The church is not merely a human community and the church's enactments of the means of grace (Word and sacrament) are not mere human works. Rather, the church herself *is* God's new creation, the city he promised to build for Abraham. The church is not merely a means to salvation, a stepping-stone on the way to a more ultimate goal. Rather, the church herself *is* God's salvation, the partially realized goal that will be brought to final fulfillment in the eschaton. So when someone is united to the church by baptism, that person is incorporated into Christ and into his body; that person becomes bone of Christ's bone and flesh of his flesh. Until and unless that person breaks covenant, he is to be reckoned as among God's elect and regenerate saints.

Unfortunately, we take the church for granted, and view it as a rather mundane earthly institution; in reality the church is the colony of heaven on earth, the firstfruits of the new creation in Christ. In the church, the life of the world to come has already begun. We are in a new sphere of existence, a new family, a new world order.

Of course, those who do not live 'new creation lives', who sink back into the old world's way of doing things (living according to the flesh rather than the Spirit, etc.), will be cut off from the new creation community. We are God's new humanity, and we must develop an appropriate eschatological consciousness. We are to live now, in principle, as we shall live in the resurrection.

What does it mean to be a 'covenant breaker'?

Think of the covenant as a marriage. Baptism is your wedding ceremony, uniting you to your husband Christ (Rom. 6:1ff, Eph. 5:22ff). So long as you remain faithful, Christ will keep you under his protection and care, and share all he has with you. But if you become an adulterous spouse, an unfaithful spouse, Christ will cut you off and divorce you.

What, then, does it mean to be unfaithful to the terms of the covenant? Not all sins are grounds for divorce from Christ, just as not all sins are grounds for divorce in an earthly marriage. Indeed, Christ is a very forgiving, merciful husband and will put up with all kinds of sin on our part. (These are sins that do not lead to death, 1 Jn. 5:16). He does not demand perfection from us, only loyalty. Even serious sins need not be considered covenant breaking in the full sense, provided we are willing to confess our sin and struggle against it. (Just look at David and Peter!) God looks at a video of our lives, not merely a snapshot; he looks at the whole story of our lives, not just a single chapter. He is concerned with our direction, not perfection. A life of sustained faithfulness is what counts, however great or numerous our failings may be along the way.

Covenant breaking is when you stop trusting Christ, and put your hope in another. When does that happen? This is what the church discipline process is all about. Excommunication is the point at which someone is finally divorced from Christ. When you harden yourself in sin and refuse to repent, you are in danger of being cut off.

But just because the covenant can be broken does not mean it is not a real relationship, with real privileges granted and real obligations demanded. When the prophets of Israel called the people back to repentance, they never disparaged the covenant. In fact, they continually call on the Israelites to live out in faith what they have received in covenant. In the new covenant we must do this as well. Just as we might call on a married man contemplating adultery to "be true to your wedding vows!" so we call on our fellow new covenant members to "be true to your baptisms!" In other words, "Be who you are!! You're united to Christ in baptism, dead to sin and alive to God – live like it!" Covenant breakers are untrue to the covenant relation into which they were baptized. But what makes covenant breaking so heinous (cf. the warnings in Hebrews) is the fact that it is sin against a gracious relationship with Christ. It would have been better for breakers of the new covenant to have never heard of Christ! Think of a man who commits adultery behind the back of the most loving, beautiful wife in the world...multiply the enormity of that sin by infinity and you have a sense of the guilt that devolves upon new covenant breakers. To whom much is given, much is required.

Can apostates repent and return to the church? Can they be given another chance?

Yes! If someone apostatizes and is cut off from the covenant community in excommunication, that person is always free to repent and return to the church and the Lord. Indeed, we must recognize that one purpose of excommunication is to restore the wayward brother (1 Cor. 5, 1 Tim. 1:19-20). We see at least one such apostate repenting and returning to the church in Paul's Corinthian correspondence. Mt. 12:31ff, Heb. 6:4-6 and 1 Jn. 5:16 have sometimes been used to deny the freedom of apostates to return. But this is a misreading of these passages. The unpardonable sin seems to be related to Jews who first had the ministry of Jesus and rejected him, and then also rejected his Spirit after the resurrection and Pentecost. It was a unique danger for Jews living at that peculiar time in redemptive history. True, there may still be a form of aggravated apostasy from which one may not repent, but we shouldn't try too hard to gauge if someone has committed this kind of sin. We should always seek the repentance and restoration of apostates. The Heb. 6 text may address the same kind of sin that Jesus did in Mt. 12; or repentance may be impossible in this case because Jews who turned back to the temple and the old covenant system would very soon perish in the Jewish War of 66-70.

Are you saying someone can lose his salvation?

That depends. What do you mean by salvation? In many instances, the biblical writers view salvation as an eschatological concept – in this sense no one is saved till the last day. But salvation can also be understood as a past reality (you were saved in eternity past when God chose you in Christ, or when

Christ died on the cross for you, or when the Spirit converted you) and a present and progressive reality (e.g., you are in the process of working out your salvation in fear and trembling, Phil. 2). No elect person can lose his salvation, however much he may backslide. This is the point of Jesus' teaching in Jn. 10 – God the Father and God the Son will not lose their grip on those they have chosen for final salvation.

But the biblical language itself is more complicated. In one sense, all those in the covenant are 'saved'. They have been delivered out of the world and brought into the glorious new creation of Christ. But not all will persevere. Jude (5) speaks of the Israelites as having been saved, and then destroyed, because they did not persevere. The preface to the Ten Commandments addresses Israel as God's redeemed people. But many of those redeemed did not continue trusting their deliverer and perished. 2 Pt. 2 speaks of a similar class of people – redeemed by Christ, they then deny him, and are destroyed. To take another example, 1 Pt. 3 says eight people in all were saved from God's wrath in Noah's ark. But if we read the Genesis narrative, we find one of those saved, Ham, apostatized and came under a curse.

What are we to do with these examples? Someone might say, "Well those are cases drawn from OT types. Those were pictures of salvation – not the real thing. Salvation in the new covenant cannot be lost." But the problem with this is that it draws a contrast precisely where the NT writers themselves draw a parallel. Paul, Peter, Jude, and the writer to the Hebrews all use these OT stories to warn new covenant believers, lest they too fall from grace. Imagine a reader of 1 Cor. 10 saying, "Well, those Israelites redeemed out of Egypt perished, but that was the old covenant. In the new covenant, it's 'once saved, always saved.'" But Paul specifically says the record of the Israelites who failed to persevere and were destroyed was "written for our admonition" in the new covenant era. Moreover, Jesus spoke of those in the new covenant who would be united to him, but then cut off because they did not persevere in fruit bearing. But if Jesus himself is salvation, then, in some sense, being cut off from him entails being cut off from the source of salvation.

Again, there is no question that God's elect, predestined for final salvation, will persevere to the end. They cannot fall away because God is determined to keep them in the path of life. But reprobate covenant members may temporarily experience a quasi-salvation. They were, in some sense, bought by Christ (1 Pt. 2), forgiven (Mt. 18), renewed (Mk. 4), etc., and lost these things. These formulations are not offered merely to push the envelope of what Reformed theology will allow to the breaking point, or to be unnecessarily provocative, or to stir up doubt in the hearts and minds of the faithful. Rather, such category-exploding formulations are needed to do justice to the full-orbed teaching of Scripture.

Finally, perhaps all this can be made more palatable if we think of salvation in more relational, narrational, and covenantal categories, rather than metaphysical categories. 'Salvation' is not a thing we possess that can be lost and found, like car keys. Rather, it is a matter of relationship, of being rightly related to God. But relationships are not static, timeless entities. Rather, they are fluid and dynamic. Some marriages start well; the couple is really in love. But then things go sour. Our salvation covenant with the Lord is like a marriage. If we persevere in loyalty to Christ, we will live with him happily ever after. If we break the marriage covenant, he will divorce us. It may not be wise to call this 'losing one's salvation', but it would be unbiblical to say nothing at all was really lost. That would simply be a denial of the reality of the covenant.

Doesn't this approach over-emphasize human responsibility?

No. Actually, it's impossible to over-emphasize human responsibility because we are infinitely accountable to God. Only if we deny the Creator/creature relationship, and put human responsibility on a continuum with divine sovereignty, is it possible to think of one being emphasized at the expense of the other. It's not a matter of either/or but both/and. Of course, God's sovereignty is always the ground and presupposition of human responsibility. But we have maintained all along that salvation is a work of God's sovereign grace.

Is this teaching an innovation?

No, hopefully the quotations in the handout above show that this teaching is well within the borders of traditional Reformed theology. Teaching of this sort is found in Calvin, Bucer, Burges, Ward, numerous Reformed Anglicans, etc. Plus, the Lutheran branch of the Reformation teaches something similar.

Calvin is known for his doctrine of predestination, but he was also the covenant theologian par excellence. In fact, he devotes more time and effort in his commentaries and *Institutes* to covenant than to election. Not surprisingly, Calvin had a robust doctrine of apostasy. He speaks of apostates as those who had been formerly 'reconciled to God' and 'adopted' by him, joined in 'sacred marriage' to him, recipients of 'illumination' and 'grace,' having 'faith,' etc. He says the eternally reprobate can, for a season, share in the special, effectual call of the Holy Spirit. Those who fall away have forsaken their salvation and forgotten that they were cleansed. He clearly says the warnings are for those elected by the Father and redeemed by the Son – in other words, they're for us.

The Synod of Dordt, which gave us the famous TULIP, says, concerning covenant children, "We must judge the will of God from his Word, which declares the children of believers holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God fearing parents ought not to doubt the salvation and election of their children..." Clearly the Dordt divines were looking at election through the lens of the covenant, just as we have advocated in this handout. Election comes to realization in the context of the covenant.

The WCF does not address apostasy explicitly or directly; it is primarily concerned with the decretal, election perspective. It does teach the warnings are genuine, not hypothetical (14.2). But it also uses terms like 'saved', 'justified', etc., only in relation to those who enter into final salvation, and thus they are virtually synonymous with 'elect.' This perspective is fine as far as it goes; the things discussed here are extra-confessional, in that they do not deny any confessional teaching, but supplement it. I should add that after the Arminian controversy in the early 16th century (giving rise to what became known as Reformed scholasticism), the Reformed church became quite pre-occupied with the decretal perspective. It was in this environment that the WCF was written. This emphasis was quite necessary and helpful at the time, though early Reformed theologians were undoubtedly more balanced.

In more recent Reformed theology, John Murray has had quite a bit to say about the relationship of the work of Christ to common grace and the non-elect within the covenant. For Murray, many benefits from Christ's work accrue to people who ultimately do not reach final salvation. And yet, the 'L' in TULIP (limited atonement) remains in tact because the atonement does in history precisely what God designed for it to do. Following on the heels of Murray, Norman Shepherd sought to reformulate some Reformed doctrines, not to alter their substance, but to take account more fully of the Bible's covenant perspective.

Going back behind the Reformation, all I am teaching here can be found in Augustine. This great church father was certainly the most significant influence on Luther and Calvin. Augustine taught that believers, called by God, and regenerated (in some sense) by him, might fall away. Of course, Augustine also taught unconditional election: All those chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world to receive eternal salvation will indeed do so – God's purposes cannot fail. Perseverance is a gift given to the elect alone, and it ensures their entrance into final salvation. Augustine felt no contradiction between these two poles of election and apostasy; in fact, he felt it was necessary to keep them together in order to be faithful to Scripture.

Standing squarely in the tradition of Augustine and the best Reformers, my project is twofold: **First**, to make the biblical promises of salvation real to us. The people of God need to hear themselves spoken of and to as God's elect, as his children, as those bought with the price of Christ's blood, as those renewed and indwelt by the Spirit. Otherwise, the 'doctrines of grace' remain an abstraction, removed from our experience, and the truths of God's sovereignty in salvation cannot comfort us. The Reformed church usually uses very direct language in talking about sin ("You're a sinner! You're guilty before God!"). But when we turn to talk about the gospel, we suddenly become impersonal and abstract ("Christ died for the elect, whoever they are...Those the Father chose are regenerated by the

Spirit"). This impersonal language is bound to feed doubt and despair among God's children and is the result of failing to take covenant theology seriously.

Second, to make the threats of apostasy real to us. We cannot hide behind the doctrine of election, or the 'invisible church,' and say these warnings are for other people, but not for us. They do apply to us, and we need to heed them. They do not undermine a properly grounded assurance, but they do keep us on our toes, spiritually speaking. There is no place for presumption or complacency, lest "the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace the assurance of faith" (Calvin).

So what exactly happened to Saul from 1 Sam. 10 to 1 Sam. 16?

When Saul was anointed, the Holy Spirit came upon him in a mighty way. This does not mean the Spirit had not been active in his heart prior to his anointing. No doubt the Spirit was active in the life of Jesus prior to his full reception of the Spirit at his anointing/baptism. Saul has already shown signs of piety, but now he receives new creation life from the Spirit. We see the fruit of this new heart in the following chapters as he displays faithfulness, humility, fights against the Lord's enemies, etc. However, in 1 Sam. 13, he begins to backslide. His heart grows harder and harder towards the Lord, till finally he grieves the Spirit so deeply that the Spirit departs from him in 1 Sam. 16. Saul is thus the classic case of apostasy, of falling away from the Lord.

Saul may not be used as a counter-point to the teaching of Scripture elsewhere (and the confessions of the Reformed churches) that God is sovereign in salvation. Saul did not fall *in spite of* God's decretal attempt to save him; rather Saul's renewal as well as his apostasy were both part of God's sovereign orchestration of history. God chose to withhold the gift of perseverance from Saul for his own wise and holy purposes. In an ultimate sense, then, Saul was not elect, not purchased by Christ, not fully regenerate, etc.

But Saul's case shows how far apostates can enter into God's grace before falling away. Saul really did taste of God's mercy and love; he really did possess the Holy Spirit and the new creation life the Spirit brings; he really was adopted into God's family and really lived a godly, exemplary life for a time. But he failed to persevere. No doubt, there is a great deal of mystery in this, just as there is a great deal of mystery in the fall of the first man, Adam. Saul, as a new Adam figure, had been restored to God's image, but fell back into the corruption of the world. He experienced the powers of the age to come, but slipped back into bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

We cannot deal adequately with Saul's case if our only theological categories are elect and non-elect. We must understand the place of the covenant as well. It is not enough to say that Saul's fall proved he was non-elect. In some sense, he was, for a time, part of God's elect people in and through the covenant. When he fell he lost all the blessings of his covenant relationship with the Lord. He did not go to hell simply as a non-elect person, but as a disinherited son, as an unfruitful branch, as a covenant breaker, as an unfaithful spouse of the Lord, etc. So long as Saul remained in covenant with the Lord, he had every right to think of himself as elect. Those around him would have also considered him to be elect, since he had all the marks of one called by God to eternal salvation. But he sinned grievously, failed to manifest any genuine repentance, and was formally cut off from the elect/covenant community by Samuel. Saul became a defiled house for the Spirit, and so the Spirit departed from him.

The application should be clear: We are like Saul in chapter 10. We have received the Spirit and been adopted by God in our baptism/anointing. But now we must persevere. If we sin, we must not make excuses, blameshift, pridefully try to save face, etc., but must, like David, cry out in humble repentance and brokenness and move on knowing God has forgiven us.

Can you give me one last summary of what you're saying?

God, in eternity past, elected in Christ a great multitude to salvation. This election was wholly gracious and unconditional, having its source only in the free mercy and good pleasure of God. Those the

Father elected to eternal salvation, he sent his Son to die for. His atoning work is fully sufficient for their salvation and completely accomplished their redemption. The Holy Spirit works in these same chosen ones to apply Christ's saving work to them and keep them faithful to Christ their whole lives. Because of the hardness of their hearts in sin, this work of grace must be, ultimately, irresistible. No elect person can be lost and no non-elect person can attain salvation.

God's eternal decree to gather his elect into a people for his name is worked out in history. One's election becomes manifest in the administration of Word and Sacrament, as one responds to the preached gospel and enters the church community in baptism. Christ is present in his church by his Spirit, to see to it that all his elect ones are brought to faith in him.

However, God mysteriously has chosen to draw many into the covenant community who are not elect in the ultimate sense and who are not destined to receive final salvation. These non-elect covenant members are truly brought to Christ, united to him and the church in baptism, receive various gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, and may even be said to be loved by God for a time. Corporately, they are part of the chosen, redeemed, Spirit-indwelt people. But sooner or later, in the wise counsel of God, these fail to bear fruit and fall away. In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ's blood, really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. But God withholds from them the gift of perseverance and all is lost. They break the gracious new covenant they entered into at baptism.

Thus, the covenant is a true revelation of God's salvation, for in the covenant community, all God's people, elect and non-elect, find gracious blessings. The covenant really is gospel – good news – through and through. Yet only those who continue to persevere in loyalty to the covenant and the Lord of the covenant inherit final salvation. Those who fall away lose the temporary covenantal blessings they had enjoyed. Ultimately, this is because God decreed that these covenant breakers would not share in the eschatological salvation of Christ. Of course, these apostates cannot blame God for their falling away – it's their own fault, since God's overtures of love towards them in the context of the covenant were sincere. And those who do persevere to the end cannot claim any credit or make any boast – all they have done has been because of God's grace at work in them to keep them faithful.

All covenant members are invited to attain to a full and robust confidence that they are God's eternally elect ones. Starting with their baptisms, they have every reason to believe God loves them and desires their eternal salvation. Baptism marks them out as God's elect people, a status they maintain so long as they persevere in faithfulness. By looking to Christ alone, the preeminently elect One, the one who kept covenant to the end and is the author and finisher of the faith of God's people, they may find assurance. But those who take their eyes off Christ, who desert the church where his presence is found, will make shipwreck of their faith and prove to have received the grace of God in vain.

This, then, is the biblical picture. The TULIP is still in place, but has been enriched by a nuanced covenant theology. By framing the issues as we have, we are able to preserve God's sovereignty in salvation and hold covenant breakers accountable for their own apostasy. Plus, we can do justice to the Scripture's teaching on the nature of the church and efficacy of the sacraments, as well as the genuineness of the covenantal promises and threats. Nothing has been lost by our reformulation of the popular Reformed picture, and a great deal has been gained.