I believe that new light can be shed on past confusions about covenant theology within Dutch Reformed churches. Engagement with proponents of the New Perspective on Paul and Federal Vision provide an opportunity for an advance in our understanding of the nature of the covenant of grace. Weaknesses and problems in the New Perspective on Paul and Federal Vision provide a grid for identifying traditional weaknesses in formulations of the covenant among the Dutch Reformed. I will put forward the thesis that contemporary errors shed light on 150 years of conflict over the covenant among the Reformed.

In a series of articles I plan to explore the doctrine of the covenant within the context of the thought of Hoeksema, Schilder, and theologians and synodical decisions within the United Reformed Churches. We will explore what the ecumenical implications are of the results of this study for relationships between the Protestant Reformed Churches, the Canadian Reformed Churches, and the United Reformed Churches. I believe that a fresh look at these matters can help show the way forward in ecumenical relations between the three denominations, even though it will mean that each tradition must engage in some helpful self-criticism. I will argue that certain covenant formulations that are perceived as providing sufficient cause for church division on closer examination do not support this.

The first two important subjects that we will consider in this series are (1) the covenant and conditionality and (2) the essence of the covenant.

Is it possible to affirm both unconditional and conditional promises within the covenant? Herman Hoeksema believed that since the covenant as to its essence involved unconditional promises being made to God’s elect friends, this ruled out identifying faith as a condition of the covenant. Hoeksema identified Schilder as holding to a ‘conditional covenant.’ Klaas Schilder thought that the Scriptural emphasis upon the covenant as a historical administration ruled out the idea that God made unconditional promises within the covenant only to the elect. He emphasized conditional promises with a demand.

It will become evident that we need to distinguish between the use of the language of conditionality within the covenant and Schilder’s formulation of the covenant that Hoeksema identifies as a “conditional covenant” doctrine.

There has been a long discomfort with the language of conditionality within the Reformed tradition. We will take a careful look at how Hoeksema and Ophoff analyze conditionality within Schilder’s thought. The central thesis that I present on the subject of
conditionality and the covenant is: *Conditionality within the covenant becomes problematical when it functions within a Semi-Pelagian paradigm.*

**Tension over the Grammar of Conditional Statements**

Discomfort with the word “condition” can be found within the Reformed tradition. For example, while the first edition of Rev. J. Jongeleen’s 1927 *Manual of Reformed Doctrine* used the word “condition”, the second edition replaced the word. The first edition read: “The covenant of grace is the gracious disposition of God concerning believers and their seed wherein God is willing to grant all the blessings of salvation from time and eternity through the Mediator of the covenant, upon *condition* of faith and obedience.”¹ The later edition read “upon *obligation* of faith and obedience.”²

The matter of conditionality within the covenant has been a sensitive issue in Reformed theology because of the doctrine of conditional election in Arminian theology. If election is not conditional on God foreseeing faith in a person, is it possible to speak of faith as a condition within the covenant? Others have implied that if faith can be understood as a condition within the covenant, then it is not possible that God provides within the covenant of grace unconditional promises that come only to the elect. K. Schilder wrote: “The figure of an unconditional offer of salvation for the *elect* is fiction. It doesn’t exist.”³

John Calvin was concerned that when the ignorant heard the word “condition” that they would immediately suppose that semi-Pelagianism was being taught.

But as soon as the ignorant sort do hear of the word condition, they bear themselves in hand that God maketh some payment, and that when he sheweth us any favor, he doth it in recompense of our deserts. And by that means the wretched Papists do blind themselves with vain presumption, and quite overthrow themselves by perking up after that fashion against God, and therefore they must at length be cast down in their own loftiness. For whereunto do they lean? Behold (say they,) God telleth us that he will bless us if we serve him: therefore it followeth that all the promises which he maketh are conditional.⁴

Jonathan Edwards had terminological issues with the word “condition” although he regularly spoke of faith as a condition of the covenant. Conrad Cherry explains:

---

⁴ John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 322.
As we noticed previously, Edwards expressed a distaste for the word “condition” when applied to saving faith. The word is ambiguous; it hardly clarifies the relation between faith and salvation. If by “condition” one means an “inseparable connection,” it may be said that works are conditions of salvation for they also are inseparably connected with it. Above all, if faith is a condition in the sense of being an instrumental cause of salvation which lies outside Christ and salvation and upon which redemption follows, the meaning of faith is obscured; for faith is the actual relation to or union with Christ and his gift of salvation. Nevertheless, Edwards confessed that one is sometimes forced through custom to use this inadequate word “condition” when speaking of faith in order to stress the indispensability of faith for salvation, and we do find Edwards continually referring to faith as the condition of the covenant of grace.\footnote{Conrad Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 117.}

Herman Hoeksema had terminological objections to using the language of faith as a condition of the covenant. Responding to the views of Rev. A. Petter, Hoeksema wrote:

Nevertheless, I do not agree with the brother on the question concerning conditions in the covenant, and I think, too, that this terminology is dangerous and is liable to convey a meaning that is foreign to the Reformed conception of the truth. Whatever meaning we may attach to certain terms, we must never forget that words have meaning in themselves, and that this fundamental meaning of the terms stands out in the minds of people. And when it is said that God establishes His covenant with us, or that we are saved, “on condition of faith and obedience”, the impression this expression makes upon the minds of the people (and not without reason) is that the will of man is one of the determining factors in the matter of salvation. And thus, on the wings of a term, one instills nolens volens the Arminian heresy into the minds and hearts of the people. And for that reason I consider the term “condition” dangerous. Nor is the Rev. Petter justified in quoting me in support of the use of the term as he did. If he will check up on his quotations, he will admit that I wrote quite the opposite from the way he quoted me.\footnote{Herman Hoeksema, *The Standard Bearer*, Vol. 26, 29.}

In a famous exchange between Klaas Schilder and Herman Hoeksema, the Kampen professor defended his concept of a conditional covenant by defining what he did not mean by “conditions” within the covenant. Schilder writes that theologians should be “careful with dictionaries” when analyzing the grammar of conditional statements or the theological grammar
used by the Orthodox Reformed when they used the language of conditionality. Schilder ruled out various misuses of the concept of conditionality:

a. By *condition* do you mean something which would *bind* GOD? Then we say unconditionally: “unconditional is the password!”

b. By *condition* do you mean something *for which* God has to *wait* before He can go on? Then we say unconditionally: “unconditional is the password.”

c. By *condition* do you mean something we have to *fulfil*, in order to *merit* something? Then we say unconditionally: “unconditional is the password!”

d. Do you mean by *condition* something which God has *joined to something else*, to make clear to us that the *one* cannot come *without the other* and that we cannot be *sure* of the one, unless we are at the same time *assured* of the other? Then we say unconditionally: “conditional is the password!”

Schilder writes that “faith is indeed a gift of the Covenant God, but it is at the same time a condition, that he establishes. A *condition he places upon us* in order to arouse our sense of responsibility, to stimulate that sense, and even to proclaim it. A condition that is not Remonstrant, but Reformed.”

The URC Report on Federal Vision

Nathan Langerak argues that the URC’s 2010 Synodical Report on Federal Vision “is fatally flawed and dangerous because, while the report declares certain federal vision teachings to be contrary to the Reformed creeds, it leaves untouched the vicious root of that heresy in the federal vision’s doctrine of the covenant.” According to Langerak, Federal Vision theology is not to be faulted for defining the covenant as “salvation.” He agrees with supporters of Federal Vision that the covenant is not merely “a *means* whereby God accomplishes…salvation.” Langerak’s own position is: “The covenant is salvation itself.”

Following David Engelsma, Langerak argues that the root heresy in Federal Vision is the doctrine of a conditional covenant. This is the claim that interests us in this present article. Note how Langerak relates the issue of whether the covenant is a means or the goal itself to the issue of conditionality: “The error of the federal vision heresy is that, while defining the covenant as

---

8 Ibid., 77-78.
11 Ibid., 133. Italics added.
12 Ibid., 133.
communion with God in Jesus Christ, it does not teach nor emphasize the saving significance of that covenant, but emphasizes the conditionality of that covenantal relationship.” According to the Federal Vision position, through baptism every single baptized child or person is formally united to Christ. Every baptized child receives general, conditional promises. “Because of that general, conditional promise, the federal vision teaches a conditional covenant.” The URC report does not condemn supporters of Federal Vision for emphasizing conditionality within the covenant relationship. Langerak cites the following statement from the report:

Though FV writers maintain that all covenant members are elect in Christ, they also want to stress the **conditionality** of the covenant relationship. If those with whom God covenants do not meet the condition of the covenant, namely, persevering faith and repentance, they can lose their salvation and become subject to God’s covenant wrath. Since the covenant obliges believers and their children to embrace the promise of the gospel in the way of a living faith, it is possible that some covenant members can lose the grace of communion with God in Christ that was once theirs. The problem with the FV formulation at this point is not that it emphasizes the “conditionality” of the covenant relationship. It is undoubtedly true that the covenant promise demands the response of faith and repentance. The Reformed confessions consistently maintain that believers and their children are ordinarily saved in Christ in the way of faith and repentance. Langerak follows a trajectory within the PRC when he responds: “Conditions in the covenant are not the same as “in the way of” and being saved “in the way of faith and repentance.” His conclusion: “Teaching a conditional covenant and emphasizing conditions is not laudable, but censurable. It is essentially importing Arminianism into the covenant of grace and denying what Dordt taught about salvation.”

**The Reformed Confessions and Conditionality**

Two statements from the *Westminster Larger Catechism* can frame a discussion about conditionality and the covenant. The two statements are found in two questions and answers that are next to each other, Question and Answers 31 and 32.

Q. 31. With whom was the covenant of grace made?
A. The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.

---

Q. 32. How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?
A. the grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation.

What is striking is that Westminster systematizes faith as a condition within the covenant of grace with the idea that the covenant of grace is a covenant that is sovereignly established only with the elect in Jesus Christ.

Herman Hoeksema argued against the language of “faith as a condition” with an argument from silence with respect to the Three Forms of Unity: “The Reformed fathers in the composition and formulation of our confessions studiously avoided the term condition, or at least had no room for it anywhere in the expression of Reformed thought.” He finds this striking given that fact that the “Fathers certainly were acquainted with the term conditio for already Calvin who had a profound influence upon Reformed thinking at the time and upon the formulation of the Reformed symbols, used the term.” He adds: “Surely if the term condition had represented an important element in Reformed thinking it would be met with more than once in this elaborate exposition of our truth as we confess it.” Hoeksema realizes that he is making an argument from silence. But, he writes: “I think this makes this argumentum e silentio rather weighty and valid. It proves definitely, if not that our Reformed fathers consciously rejected the term and purposely avoided it, yet that they had no need of it, and that they found no room for it in the system of Reformed truth.”

Hoeksema thinks that the idea of faith as an instrument and faith as a condition are at odds with each other. “If, however, faith is a God-given instrument it is completely outside of the category of condition, for the simple reason that, in that case, it belongs to salvation itself. It is part of the work of God whereby He brings sinners to Christ and makes them partakers of all His benefits of righteousness, life, and glory. And part of salvation cannot, at the same time, be a condition unto salvation.”

Schilder responds to Hoeksema’s arguments from silence and the latter’s interpretation of a reference to faith as a condition in the preface to the Staten translation (Dutch Bible) as evidence of deformation following the Synod of Dort. “If colleague Hoeksema wishes I can prove to him that already in the Written Conference, which means before the Dort synod, the Reformed party spoke of conditions in the covenant. If he wishes I will show him that also the acts of the Dort synod themselves repeatedly speak of conditions, and that it fought fiercely against any doctrine of conditions whenever it was understood in the sense of Arminian

---

thinking.” Schilder quickly adds: “But also that those Acta speak quietly and cheerfully of a Reformed condition-doctrine, that God does not give the one without the other.” Schilder explains how the Canons of Dort systematize unconditional election and faith: “The same Canons of Dort, which want nothing to do with conditions for salvation being chosen out of a set of possible conditions (to which God would be bound; I, 10), have nevertheless acknowledged that God in freedom decreed that ordinarily salvation will not come as a fruit of his election without faith preceding it (I, 12).” Schilder explains what the Canons of Dort are not teaching about faith:

Conclusion: there is no meriting condition (I,9).

It is not one of a series of possibilities to which God should be bound, from which He would make a choice (I, 10).

It is no prerequisite condition which would bind God (I, R. of E., 4,5;I,9).

It is not a changed condition (I, R. of E., 7).

It is not a contingent condition (I,R. of E., 7).

Yet it is a designated condition (I, 12; II, 5) to which I am bound, as Christ was in the desert, and as was the man who wanted to become a father according to the ordinance freely set by God.  

Herman Hoeksema sometimes implies that the idea of libertarian free will is imbedded in the very idea of conditionality. Words “have meaning in themselves.” But he also admits that words “derive significance also from the usus loquendi, i.e., from the common use of a term.” But why should we allow Roman Catholic nomism or Arminian theology to define the meaning of words? Calvinists do not allow Arminians to own words like “election” or even “freedom.” For example, Jonathan Edwards joined Calvin in providing a positive definition of the nature of human freedom. Hoeksema wants to banish from Reformed theology the language of conditions while affirming human responsibility.

But, you say, how then about the responsibility of man? Do we not need the term condition to denote that man is a responsible creature? Do we not make man “a stock and block” by laying all emphasis on the truth of election and sovereign grace?

My answer is decidedly: No!

I must say more about this in the future. I am not yet through with my discussion of conditions.

24 Ibid., 131.
25 Ibid., 133.
26 Ibid., 133-34.
28 Ibid., 78.
But let me suggest that instead of the Pelagian term “condition” we use the term “in the way of”.

We are saved in the way of faith, in the way of sanctification, in the way of perseverance unto the end.

This term is capable of maintaining both: the absolute sovereignty of God in the work of salvation and the responsibility of man.29

Let Hoeksema be consistent and also ban any use of the word “condition” from business and daily life. If the language of conditionality implies an Arminian world-view, then instead of telling someone, “Buying a BigMac is conditional on going to McDonalds” you need to say: “In the way of going to McDonalds you can purchase a BigMac.”

Sometimes a theological analysis of conditionality seems to be done in the rarified air of theological discourse that is about 30,000 feet over the biblical terrain where we actually find the language of conditionality in conditional promises. Next time we will examine the biblical use of conditional language within the covenant of grace.