

The Pilgrim's Pathway
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***For the Sake of Accuracy:
Berkhof, Schilder, and the Legal/Vital Distinction***

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“Even though there have been some modern Reformed writers who have expressed doubts about the utility of speaking of the visible and invisible church (e.g., John Murray) and others who have rejected the internal/external distinction altogether (e.g., Klaas Schilder, Norman Shepherd, and the Federal Visionists) nevertheless, [Herman] Bavinck and [Louis] Berkhof witness to its ongoing vitality in modern Reformed theology” (R. Scott Clark, “Baptism, Election, and the Covenant of Grace (Part Two),” *The Outlook* [March 2007, vol. 57, no. 3], p. 23).

This paragraph forms the conclusion of the author's second of three articles dealing with covenant and election, and supplies the reader with a cast of “characters” classified presumably in terms of their relative orthodoxy. The class includes three performance groups. The honors group of theologians includes H. Bavinck and L. Berkhof. The passing group includes the esteemed J. Murray, who merely “expressed doubts” about a theological distinction pertaining to the church. But the flunking group of theologians, those who have allegedly rejected the internal/external theological distinction pertaining to the covenant of grace, includes—within the same parentheses—Klaas Schilder, Norman Shepherd, and the Federal Visionists.

Our interest lies in explaining why Klaas Schilder does not belong within those parentheses, and why he in fact should *on this point* be moved to the head of the class to join Louis Berkhof.

Berkhof: a real Vosian

To understand what follows, you must read Berkhof's chapter on "The Dual Aspect of the Covenant" in his *Systematic Theology* (4th revised edition, pages 284-289). In this chapter, Berkhof sought to explain the proper understanding of membership in the covenant. He explains—and finds unsatisfying—a number of distinctions that theologians throughout the history of Reformed theology have used at this point. Some have distinguished between an external and an internal covenant. Others have distinguished between an external and internal *aspect* of the covenant (Mastricht and others). This latter distinction Berkhof found problematic, because "[i]t offers no solution of the problem in what sense the non-elect and non-regenerate, who are members of the visible Church, are children of the covenant *also in the sight of God*, and can therefore become covenant breakers" (p. 285; italics original).

In his survey of Reformed opinion, Berkhof explained that Reformed theologians like Kuyper and Bavinck spoke of two sides of the covenant, the one external and the other internal. By contrast, Geerhardus Vos used terms still more specific by distinguishing between the covenant as a purely legal relationship and the covenant as a communion of life. *It is precisely Vos' distinction between the legal and vital aspects of the covenant of grace that Berkhof then proceeds to explain, defend, and apply!*

Only once in his later discussion does Berkhof use the phrase "external legal relationship," but then in direct connection with the fruit of "the glorious reality of a life in intimate communion with the covenant God" (p. 287).

Given his extended explanation of the legal/vital distinction as it applies to the covenant of grace, it seems clear that Berkhof found this distinction to be more satisfying than the distinction between the external and internal aspects of the covenant of grace. (Further evidence of our claim that this legal/vital distinction was Berkhof's solution to explain the relation between covenant and election may be found in J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election*, trans. by C. Pronk [Inheritance Publications, 1995], p. 53. *We highly recommend this very accessible, and very timely, English-language summary of Dutch Reformed covenant theology, including aspects of K. Schilder's thought.*)

Our point is that although Berkhof did *mention* the distinction between the internal and external aspects of the covenant of grace, it is more accurate to say that Louis Berkhof clearly

preferred the distinction between the legal and the vital aspects of the covenant of grace. This placed him very close to Geerhardus Vos, in fact.

J. Kamphuis: a real Schilderian

In his monograph, *An Everlasting Covenant*, J. Kamphuis discusses the church controversy in the Netherlands during the 1940s involving, among other matters, the doctrine of the covenant. At one point, he reports the attempt by the critics of K. Schilder and associates to invoke the distinctions between internal and external covenant, between the substance and the appearance of the covenant, and between old and new covenants, in order to defend their claim that God enters into covenant with the elect only. Read carefully Kamphuis' observation about the appearance of the internal/external distinction in the debate:

“However, here we encounter a distinction that will soon appear to be fatal, the distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ *in its application to the Covenant and the Word of God, the gospel of grace*. Let it be clearly understood, the question is not whether this distinction could serve in a different context. Here it concerns a very special application. Is it legitimate to distinguish an external side and an internal side in the Covenant?” (p. 45; italics original).

Notice that what had been L. Berkhof's conclusion became J. Kamphuis' [{27}](#) question! “Is it legitimate to distinguish an external side and an internal side in the Covenant?” But notice also Kamphuis' unambiguous admission that *in some other context* (left unspecified) the internal/external distinction could serve well, *but not with respect to the covenant of grace*. So it cannot accurately be said of J. Kamphuis, who was perhaps the most vigorous Schilderian theologian of the post-Schilder generation, that he “rejected the internal/external distinction altogether.”

K. Schilder: a real Berkhofian

A number of implications flowing from this internal/external distinction as applied to the covenant of grace troubled K. Schilder and subsequent Schilderians. One of these was the tendency on the part of some Reformed theologians to use this distinction to describe an internal

covenant (with elect children only) and a merely external covenant (with non-elect children). In this way such theologians sought to “solve” the problem of relating covenant and election. This meant, in effect, that what is signified and sealed in the sacrament of infant baptism differs according to the differing covenantal relationships involved.

Such a “solution,” however, generated other problems, exegetically and doctrinally, problems which we cannot explore here.

What alternative did K. Schilder propose, then, to the internal/external distinction? Rather than distinguish between an internal aspect and an external aspect of the covenant of grace, Schilder preferred to speak of the legal aspect and the vital aspect of this covenant. Using this latter distinction, he taught that all baptized children are legally in the covenant of grace, and therefore all children are genuinely addressed by its promises, demands, and threats. By the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, some of these baptized children come to faith, whereby they appropriate the promised blessings of the covenant of grace in vital union with Jesus Christ.¹

Thus it would be most accurate to say that on this point Geerhardus Vos, Klaas Schilder, and Louis Berkhof were all preferring and using the same terminological distinction to resolve the issue of relating covenant and election. That distinction was not between the internal and external aspects of the covenant of grace, but between the legal and vital aspects of the covenant of grace.

Conclusion

I will not speculate about why Dr. Clark thought it necessary to classify K. Schilder together with Rev. N. Shepherd and “the Federal Visionists.” Whatever the motive, this

¹ Incidentally, this is precisely where some of those who are associated with “Federal Vision” who appeal to K. Schilder and B. Holwerda have misunderstood and misappropriated their views. Schilder taught very clearly the difference between God *promising* salvation to each child being baptized, and God *imparting* salvation to each child who has been baptized. *To receive the salvation promise is not yet to receive the promised salvation.* Together with the promise given at baptism comes the obligation of faith. Faith is the response-route along which God imparts salvation, not just to baptized children who grow up to believe, but to everyone who believes. The fact that some baptized children grow up not to believe in no way affects the promise they received at baptism, which promise belongs by covenant-legal right to every child born to a believing parent.

You can read Schilder’s own views in *Looze Kalk [Untempered Mortar]. Een wederwoord over de (zedelijke) crisis in the “Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland”* (Groningen: Erven A. de Jager, 1946), in the following sections: on Rom. 2.28, § 4. “‘Jood’-Bondeling” [“Jew”-Covenant member], pages 11-14; on the tendency to turn the two “sides” of the covenant into two covenants, § 19. “Geen twee ‘zijden.’ Maar twee ‘verbonden’” [Not

inaccurate classification fosters the mistaken impression that somehow the name and thought of K. Schilder should and can easily be associated with the errors of Rev. N. Shepherd and those connected with “the Federal Vision.” Through guilt by association, the same opprobrium would then fall upon those in North America who are historically and ecclesiastically related to Schilder (the Canadian Reformed Churches). But for the sake of accuracy and fairness, the view of K. Schilder on the distinction used to relate covenant and election must really be understood as being fully compatible with the view shared by G. Vos and L. Berkhof.

two “sides.” But two “covenants”], pages 37-39; and on the problems resulting from the internal/external distinction, together with his solution, Chapters 5-6, §§ 20.-24, pages 39-48.