

Report of the Committee to Study the Implications of the Doctrine of the Covenant for Our Young People

Presbytery of the Southwest
Stated Fall Meeting, September 21-23, 1989

INTRODUCTION

Your Committee, consisting of Messrs. Jack Peterson, Gerald Taylor, and James Van Dam was elected by the presbytery at its 1988 fall stated meeting and charged with the following mandate:

"to study the implications of the doctrine of the covenant for the observance of the Lord's Supper, public profession of faith, and the assumption of full covenant responsibilities by young members, and to report to the fall, 1989, stated meeting of presbytery with specific proposals, including grounds, if they conclude that changes in the subordinate standards are required" (*Minutes*, 88-44-55).

The presbytery action had its genesis in the debate over paedocommunion at the 55th General Assembly (GA), which led to an action "requesting the presbyteries to study the implications of the doctrine of the covenant for the observance of the Lord's Supper, public profession of faith, and the assumption of full covenant responsibilities by young members..." (*Minutes of the 55th GA*, p. 60).

Your committee has met in an attempt to fulfill this assignment. It reviewed the reports of the Committee on Paedocommunion and two minority reports made to the 54th and 55th General Assemblies, plus two protests made to the 55th GA (see *Minutes of the 54th GA*, pp. 50-51, 229-251; and *Minutes of the 55th GA*, pp. 59-62, 65-66, 70, 73, 374- 421). It also reviewed the report of the Committee to Study the Issue of Covenant Children Partaking of the Lord's Supper of the Christian Reformed Church (see *Agenda 1986*, pp. 346-370; and *Acts 1986*, pp. 617- 620), as well as other materials.

It is not the intent of your committee to reexamine the debate over paedocommunion per se. Regarding this issue the GA has made the determination to "...advise the sessions of the OPC that the requirement of the Scriptures and our subordinate standards for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not age, but a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking" (see *Minutes of the 55th GA*, p. 60, #209, point 1). This is as far as the Assembly is willing to go at the present time. Each member of your committee is in agreement with the thrust of this statement.

The present report begins, in Section I, with a brief description of the doctrine of the covenant and its outworking in the life of the church. In subsequent sections, implications of the doctrine of the covenant are discussed as they relate to the observance of the Lord's Supper by young members (Section II), the public profession of faith by young members (Section III), and the assumption of full covenant responsibilities by young members (Section IV). The findings of the report are reiterated in a summary in Section V, and the report concludes with several recommendations for action by the Presbytery of the Southwest.

I DEFINITION AND OUTWORKING OF THE COVENANT

To help the presbytery understand the direction of this report, we feel it is necessary to begin with a brief description of the committee's perspective on the covenant.

In the covenant God graciously promises to be our God and the God of our children, he takes us as his people, and he promises to dwell with us. As stated in Leviticus 26:12, "I will walk among you and be your God and you will be my people. "The covenant speaks of a relationship in which God brings sinners into his family and lives with them. He does this at the cost of the blood of his Son, which Jesus refers to as "my blood of the covenant." In the covenant the Lord tells us how His grace is administered in this world and throughout redemptive history. By means of the covenant, God goes with us through history.

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The covenant is unilateral in origin and bilateral in continuation. The covenant is graciously instituted by God unilaterally. He calls the covenant into existence. Man does not negotiate it; the covenant exists because God says it exists. However the covenant is also bilateral in that once it exists, man must keep it. Thus the covenant calls for a response, that of faith and obedience. The covenant contains both promise and responsibility, gift and demand.

This two-sidedness is characteristic of both the covenant and also its sacraments, which come not only with promise but also with responsibility, not only blessing but also curse. Baptism, the initiatory ordinance, signifies that God with His promise is standing with us at the beginning of our life's history. In this sacrament the person is passive as God begins his life in the covenant by speaking to him. God wants to enter history with this child. On the other hand, the Lord's Supper, the ordinance of continuation of life in the covenant, belongs to history in progress. This sacrament, while first and foremost an activity on God's part, demands a response from God's people. Thus baptism expresses the unilateral side of the covenant, whereas the Lord's Supper expresses the bilateral side. (For a more extensive treatment on these matters see B. Kamphius, "Infant Baptism and Infant Communion", *Lux Mundi*, Volume 3, Part I (March, 1984), pp. 5- 8; Part II (September, 1984), pp. 3-6).

Concerning the outworking of the covenant in the life of the church, Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us that "the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." This means that we are not privy to the mind of God in knowing whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, the names of those whom He has elected and regenerated. Rather, we infer who are elect and regenerate by their profession of faith in Jesus Christ (the Lord and Mediator of the Covenant) and their walk before Him. Therefore a session must not attempt to read the heart of an individual, but instead must treat each individual on the basis of the credibility of his profession and life. This also means that it is possible for a person who has made profession of his faith before the church and is considered a Christian and a full member of the church, to come to the point of breaking covenant with the Lord, if he no longer evidences faithfulness to the Lord.

II IMPLICATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT FOR THE OBSERVANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER BY YOUNG MEMBERS

A. The Prerequisite of Profession of Faith

The Larger Catechism in answer #177 states that the Supper is to be "administered only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves." The 55th GA (1988) determined to "...advise the sessions of the OPC that the requirement of the Scriptures and our subordinate standards for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not age, but a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking." While the two statements may seem to be contradictory, they find their agreement in the thought that what is required for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not a set physical age but a degree of spiritual maturity, which the Catechism describes as the "ability to examine themselves" and the 55th GA describes as the possession of a "faith that confesses...while partaking."

The root argument of the reports of the Committee on Paedocommunion is that children by virtue of their baptism have the right to participation in the Lord's Supper. Therefore, on the basis of that argument, all baptized members have the right to participate in the Lord's Supper. The only exception would be a case of discipline in which the disciplined member is excluded from the sacrament. This means that infants, in their view, may not be excluded from the sacrament because that would be tantamount to discipline without benefit of due process. Infant communion becomes required by that argument. The report says that "...infant and child members of the New Testament visible church are therefore commanded by God to eat at the Lord's Supper,

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if physically capable...." (The addition of the thought "if physically capable" is an argument from general revelation; it introduces a consideration that is alien to the command.)

It is this line of argument that the Assembly rejected when it stated, "...the requirement of the Scriptures and our subordinate standards for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not age, but a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking." The Assembly's statement requires that the emphasis be placed upon the faith of the individual and not chronological age. It neither keeps from the table younger members who possess that faith nor invites to the table older ones who do not possess that faith. Judging the credibility of that faith continues to be the responsibility of the session.

B. Balancing Privileges and Responsibilities

We also see the task before us running in tandem with another declaration of the GA, namely, that "...the assembly encourage the sessions to be more faithful in the oversight of the flock of Jesus Christ, particularly to the covenant children who are in truth members of the church." In other words, it is the prayer of this committee that our report be useful in the life of the church for dealing with the particularly vexing problem of how do we help our children to live covenantally before the Lord. After all, at the time of entrance into the covenant (baptism), a seat is reserved at the Lord's Supper for the new covenant member. How do we help our children respond to the invitation to the Lord's Table, which Christ has given them already at their baptism? Or, more pointedly, how do we teach our children to enjoy the privileges of covenant life while simultaneously remembering their responsibilities of faith, repentance, and obedience before our God? (See Deuteronomy 5-7, especially 5:3,6,7-21; 6:2-8, and 7:1-16) This is a difficult task! Erring too much on the side of privilege produces a Pharisaical smugness regarding assurance of salvation, whereas focusing too much on responsibilities leads to legalism without grace. Those who are covenantally redeemed must learn to embrace and balance privilege with responsibility.

In our estimation, the heart of the paedocommunion position sees covenant primarily in terms of privilege (allowing infants to participate in the Lord's Supper), while paying lip service to responsibility. We believe that the bilateral nature of the covenant is seen most pointedly in the institution of the Lord's Supper when Scripture demands that all participants are to "examine themselves" and "discern the Lord's body" (I Corinthians 11:27,28). Infants do not possess the maturity of faithfulness expected in such statements by the Holy Spirit given through Paul. Since they do not have the opportunity to exercise their gifts and benefit from the ministry of believers, they cannot be expected to live up to the responsibilities demanded of Church fellowship. Privileges they do already enjoy by virtue of their baptism include associating with the covenant community; sitting under the teaching and preaching ministry of the church, especially in the worship context; and tasting of the work of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 6:5, i.e. seeing prayer requests answered, witnessing people converted by divine grace, and seeing the witness of how people's lives reflect the maturing fruit of the Spirit). But none of these privileges require their participation in the Lord's Supper.

It is because we recognize this bilateral dimension of covenant life (privilege and responsibility) that we substantially agree with the GA's decision not to implement paedocommunion in the life of our Church.

III IMPLICATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT FOR PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH BY YOUNG MEMBERS

A. Two-Tiered Membership Untenable

The Report of the Committee on Paedocommunion (1988) includes the following paragraphs (see *Minutes of the 55th GA*, p. 380):

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Much confusion in theory and practice has arisen in the Reformed churches because of a failure to appreciate the true paradigm for admission into the sphere of covenant blessing. While Reformed churches universally confess the biblical warrant for, and propriety of, infant baptism, there is often confusion among them which arises in seeking to apply the categories of adult conversion to the case of a covenant child (especially in infancy and early childhood). How do the categories of repentance and faith--recognized criteria for the admission of an adult convert into the church--apply in the case of a covenant child?

While we confess that there is only "one baptism," yet in practice (if not in principle) we tend to view the meaning of baptism in the case of a covenant child differently from that of an adult convert. The status of covenant children is disputed: Are they believers? Nonbelievers? Are they only outwardly in the covenant? Are they "in the church," but not yet "in Christ?" A two-tiered view of membership develops within the church. Finally, a rite of "public profession of faith"--analogous to that made by the adult convert--is imposed as a requirement on covenant children to insure that they can (at last) be seen and treated in the categories of adult conversion. In practice, the covenant privilege of participation in the Lord's Supper is accordingly withheld from the covenant child until such an "adult-style" profession of faith (conversion?) takes place. While little or no biblical warrant for such a procedure can be found, the practice is maintained because of the "paradigm problem." If adult conversions are the norm for admission into the church, then the place and demands made of covenant children must be seen in terms of that pattern.

We appreciate their raising the issue in this way. The questions asked must be faced. They are crucial. However, the answer of the Committee regarding the participation in the Lord's Supper does not take into consideration the nature of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper and its relation to that of baptism, and also fails to take sufficiently into account the requirement of the covenant to confess and profess faith and walk in obedience to the Lord.

We believe that a proper understanding of the covenant lead to the following three theses:

1. Children of believers who are baptized are church members. (I Corinthians 7:14; Acts 2:31, 36-39; Ezekiel 16:20,21; Romans 11:16; Genesis 17:7; Our Confession of Faith (WCF) XXV.2; Form of Government (FOG) XII.1; and Book of Discipline (BOD) 1.4). Church members are church members. The infant members of the church are to be treated as believers. They must be taught to pray "Our Father which art in heaven." They are properly taught to sing "Jesus loves me." They must be taught their responsibilities to love and obey the Lord.

2. The church has a responsibility for all its members, including the children who have not made a public profession of faith. (Luke 12:42,43; II Timothy 4:2,5; John 21:15,17; FOG XII.1 and BOD 1.4). They are among those who must be taught the Word of God. They must be instructed in the teaching of the Scripture. They must be taught the Catechism as summarizing the message of the Bible. They must be shepherded by the elders of the church. They are under the discipline of the church. They must be involved in serving the Lord and his church.

3. The fact that baptized covenant children are members of the church also means that their public profession at the age of maturity is not the act of entering the church, but a continuing in it. To say of our covenant children that they "join the church" at profession of faith is a heresy and a violation of the ninth commandment. This is an error that should be avoided.

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B. Scriptural-Covenantal Basis for Public Profession of Faith

Profession of faith is required by the Word of God in its teaching about the covenant.

As we said earlier, the covenant is unilateral in origin. God establishes his covenant. It is a sovereign disposition of his grace. Once it is established, however, the covenant is bilateral. The covenant is both promise and demand. It is God promising, "I will be your God, you will be my people and I will dwell with you." It is God taking Israel as his people and dwelling in their midst in the tabernacle of meeting and requiring of them total commitment to him. In the words of Exodus 19:5-6: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Peter, using that language, says of the New Covenant church: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Those words are addressed to those who "believe" (verse 7), who are to "abstain from sinful desires" (verse 11), etc., that is, to the church, "to living stones...being built into a spiritual house" (verse 5). Our children from infancy on are members of that church. That gigantic blessing is theirs: "God is their God, they are his people. He dwells with them!" And those requirements are demanded of them too--to "obey him fully and keep his covenant", to "believe" and to "abstain from sinful desires." To put it another way, being in the covenant, being baptized into Christ, requires of them that they profess their faith in him and in his word.

In baptism God puts his name on our children. At the beginning of their life he says to our infants, "I am your God" and expects, and even demands, from them their response of faith and obedience. We teach them this fact from the very beginning. They learn obedience to God through learning to obey us. They are responsible members of the church.

The Lord's Supper is the sacrament that pictures the continuing of life in the covenant. It is the sacrament that responds to the grace of God by actively participating in the means of grace. While we are totally passive in baptism, it is something done to us, something we receive, that marks the sovereign initiation of the Lord in saving us. On the other hand, the Lord's Supper involves us in action. At the command of the Lord through his minister, we take and we eat, we take and we drink. We respond to the command of the Lord by obedience. The infant can not do this. Further, there are other requirements of the Supper. What is required is a "faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking." When our children are ready for that, they are ready to be admitted to the Lord's Table. The Report of the Committee comes to the same basic conclusion when it says,

Can a covenant child "examine himself" as commanded here in the sense in which Paul uses it? Leaving aside the question of the relevance of the command to the Corinthian children or to our contemporary covenant children (see below), we can answer the question with a qualified "Yes." It is possible for a covenant child, when tested (cf. I Corinthians 10:13), to demonstrate by his words and behavior that he is living a godly life which seeks the approval of God. Such faithfulness can be observed even in a young child by both parents, elders, and other members of the church (see *Minutes of the 55th General Assembly*, p. 385).

The conclusion of your committee is that the Committee on Paedocommunion does not, in fact, argue for participation in the Lord's Supper for all baptized persons, but only for those who have "a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking".

The Christian is called on in covenant faithfulness to profess his faith publicly, not only to qualify for participation in the Lord's Supper but also when he presents his child for baptism. If he is ordained to office in the church, he is again called on to profess his faith before the congregation.

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Protest No. 4 to the 55th GA (1988) (see *Minutes of the 55th GA*, p. 70, #243) protested the action that declared "that the requirement of the Scriptures and our subordinate standards for meaningful participation in the Lord's Supper is not age, but a faith that confesses, discerns, remembers, and proclaims the body of Christ while partaking". The protest was on the ground "that the Assembly has erred by making a declaration of doctrine as being required of the Scriptures without citing an express statement therein nor a necessary deduction there from." This includes the charge that no Scriptural proof was given for a required profession of faith. Your committee feels that the argumentation given in the present report adequately answers that protest.

IV IMPLICATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT FOR THE ASSUMPTION OF FULL COVENANT RESPONSIBILITIES BY YOUNG MEMBERS

This now brings us to a fact of life, namely, that our children do not remain infants forever! How do we nurture their faith? How do we encourage our privileged covenant children to produce works befitting those who confess Christ as Lord and Saviour? How do we help our children to see that gratitude for salvation in Christ becomes the dynamic that propels our kingdom life, issuing in acts of praise that glorify and enjoy God forever? If the truth be known, this is an area of tremendous weakness for most churches, and the OPC is no exception. Statistics that speak of the small numbers of covenant children making profession of faith in our denomination underscore our weakness and the urgency of the problem.

While rejecting paedocommunion, we have been enlightened to the fact that our baptized children are members of the church of Jesus. How can and must we utilize their gifts for their benefit and also the benefit of the body of Christ? This is breaking new ground for many of us and demands creativity, even while we carefully remember to safeguard the doctrine of the church as taught in the scripture and elucidated in our standards.

What follows is a partial list of suggested implications of the doctrine of the covenant which we offer as help to each session in the task of bringing our young members to full covenant responsibility in the church of Jesus Christ.

1. Encourage parents to be responsible for their children's education. The education of our children is first of all the responsibility of the parents. That education is biblically characterized as a perpetual display of covenant faithfulness in word and life (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). Sessions must be more effective in overseeing the spiritual maturity of all family members. For example, when sessions do family visitation the elders may ask, "Are family devotions being faithfully led in our church homes by covenant heads of households, and are the children learning the catechism and memorizing scripture?" Sessions must be ready to assist in this vital ministry of our parents.

2. Encourage sessions to create opportunities for our young people to serve the Lord and his church. For example, they might assist the deacons in their ministries of service and mercy by cutting lawns for the elderly, painting the house of a needy person, etc. Our children could also go with an adult and pass out evangelistic material. In these ways, the idea of kingdom service and kingdom joy will be inculcated in our children's hearts from an early age.

3. Encourage our children to participate in the more "informal worship times" of the church by allowing them to request songs, to voice prayer requests, etc., and even to pray in times of group prayer. Our children should be allowed to experience the reality of God answering their prayers. This one way that God builds our faith.

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4. Encourage parents to worship together at church as families with their children. Worship is the gathering of covenant families and individuals to praise God. Consequently parents should be encouraged to have their children present in the public worship service. The practice of children being excluded from the worship service by edict of the session should be forbidden. Excluding our children not only robs the church of their contribution to worship (Psalms 8:2; Matthew 21:15,16), but also teaches them that they are not members of the body of Christ. It forbids them from hearing one of the means of grace, that is sermons based on God's Word. How will they hear unless a preacher proclaims the word of God to them (Romans 10:13-15)? To further children's understanding of the Word, pastors should be encouraged to remember that children are members of the church and should be able to understand the basic thrust of the sermon. Children's sermons and/or word lessons based on the sermons can be helpful. Through the oversight of their teachers, young people should be encouraged to take notes on the sermon and, later on in the Lord's Day, to review the content of their notes with their parents.

5. Encourage our children to make profession of faith before the session at a time when their understanding of the gospel is no more and no less than what the session would require of a credible adult profession of faith. No longer can we determine a fixed age for that profession. Each child must be examined individually when ready, as determined by parental and sessional observation. Children should be given the opportunity to break from their regular Sunday school classes to attend Inquirer's, Membership, or Catechism classes; which help them prepare for giving testimony of their faith before the session.

It should be recognized, in connection with item #5, that moving the age downward from any traditional age to a move individualized time would create at least two problems:

- (a) It afterward obligates the church to an effective discipling ministry; and
- (b) It necessitates that the church address the age of voting in congregational meetings. The former problem is one that each session should be reviewing periodically as it evaluates the church's overall teaching ministry to new and less spiritually mature people coming into the church from pagan or less than reformed backgrounds. The second matter could involve a change in the OPC's constitution regarding voting age in congregational meetings.

V SUMMARY

Two aspects of the doctrine of the covenant are fundamental to considering its implications for young members. The first is its two-sided nature, in that God instituted the covenant unilaterally during its continuation man must respond in obedience to keep it bilaterally. This two-sidedness is reflected in the covenantal sacraments: baptism is basically unilateral, whereas the Lord's supper is basically bilateral. The second fundamental aspect of the covenant is that it's outworking is determined on the basis of the external evidence of public profession of faith and credible lifestyle. Both of these aspects have significant implications concerning the observance of the Lord's supper, profession of faith, and assumption of covenantal responsibilities by young members of the church.

Concerning the observance of the Lord's Supper, this committee finds that the advice of the 55th GA that not age, but rather confessing/discerning/remembering/proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ is required to participate in the Lord's Supper, is not inconsistent with the Larger Catechism #177. Both imply the necessity of public profession of faith as prerequisite, and both deny the paedocommunionistic argument that excluding children from the table is equivalent to discipline without benefit of due process. Furthermore, covenant children, even before they participate in the Lord's Supper and assume full church membership responsibilities, already enjoy many privileges by virtue of their association with the covenant fellowship. At the same time, churches should be actively encouraging their covenant youth not only to enjoy their privileges, but also to

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prepare themselves for responding to the covenantal demands of faith, repentance, and obedience. This committee therefore concurs with the GA decision not to implement the practice of paedocommunion.

With regard to profession of faith, this committee finds that a "two-tiered" view of church membership, one for covenant children and another for adult believers, is untenable in light of the doctrine of the covenant. A correct understanding of this point leads to the following three theses: children of believing parents who are baptized are indeed members; the church has a responsibility toward all of its members, including those who have not yet made profession of faith; and profession of faith by baptized children is not an act of entering the church, but of continuing in it. Furthermore, there is sound Scriptural-covenantal basis for requiring public profession of faith, and with its discussion of this basis, this committee believes that Protest #4 to the 55th GA has been addressed.

Finally, regarding the implications of the covenant for assumption of full church responsibilities, this committee offers a partial list, which could be profitably implemented by congregations. This list includes: encouraging parents to be responsible for their children's education; encouraging sessions to make opportunities of service for young people; encouraging covenant children to participate in the church's informal worship times; and encouraging children to prepare for a timely profession of faith before the elders. This committee does note that allowing professions of faith at lower ages (depending on an individual's maturity of faith) will obligate the church to continue an effective discipling ministry and to make a decision on the age for voting in congregational meetings. The latter decision, if it leads to a decoupling of the ages for profession of faith and voting would also entail changes in the Form of Government. This committee has come to no conclusion whether such decoupling should be discouraged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That presbytery view this report as fulfilling the request to the presbyteries by the 54th General Assembly "to study the implications of the doctrine of the covenant for the observance of the Lord's Supper, public profession of faith, and the assumption of full covenant responsibilities by young members,"
2. That presbytery send this report to the other presbyteries of the OPC for their study and interaction.
3. That the Candidates Under Care of the presbytery be requested to poll the sessions of the churches of presbytery and compile a bibliography of effective devotional aids that are currently being used in the homes of the churches for family worship. And that the Candidates Under Care also be asked to discover how the churches of presbytery are presently involving the covenant children in the life of the church, and to compile a list of the suggestions, with the Candidates Under Care to do this work under the supervision of the presbytery's Committee on Christian Education until a final report can be submitted to the presbytery at the 1990 Fall Stated Meeting.
4. That each session of the churches of the presbytery be requested to interact with this document and respond with comments to the Candidates Under Care in preparation for their report.
5. That the presbytery request the Committee on Christian Education of the General Assembly to publish a document dealing with the issues raised in this report, particularly focusing on how parents can live covenantally faithful lives before their children and how children ought to see themselves as privileged and responsible members of the covenant community.
6. That your committee be dissolved.

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Respectfully Submitted,
Gerald S. Taylor, Chairman
Jack J. Peterson
James W. Van Dam

On a substitute motion, presbytery continued the Committee to Study the implications of the Doctrine of the Covenant for Our young People in order for the committee to augment its report to include a section on preaching covenantally.