

2015/2: Hanko's Straw Fortress
A critique of the book, "We & Our Children," by Herman Hanko
(Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1981)

by BS Poh

First published: 1994.

This edition: 2015

Preface: This article was first published in the hardcopy edition of the Gospel Highway, Issue No. 3, 1994. The substance of the article was incorporated into the book, "The Keys of the Kingdom: A Study On the Biblical Form Of Church Government", published by Good News Enterprise, in 1995. That was the age of the desktop computer, when the laptop and the internet were beginning to see the light of day. It did not seem too long ago. In the two decades that have passed, a number of individuals have questioned me on the concept of "covenant children" held by our paedobaptist brethren. A recent inquiry spurred the reappearance of this article, with the end-notes a little updated. May it help all concerned parties to come closer to the truth of Scripture on the subject.

Foreword: Baptists have always maintained that the word "baptism" in the Bible actually means "immersion", and that only believers are to be so baptized. Paedobaptists, however, claim that infants born to believers should also be baptised, and sprinkling is an acceptable mode of baptism. Paedobaptists have always accused Baptists of not understanding "Covenant Theology" which undergirds infant baptism. David Kingdon wrote his book, "Children of Abraham", to show that Reformed Baptists have always upheld a true Covenant Theology that is consistent with their view on baptism. Herman Hanko wrote the book, "We & Our Children", to refute Kingdon. Of necessity, the present article is technical in nature. The reader is urged to read it through slowly and carefully. The content can be followed even if the two books in question have not been read.

Hanko's Straw Fortress

It would not be difficult to make a detailed critique of Hanko's book, "We & Our Children". The exercise would be a tedious one. Time and effort are better spent doing something more basic and positive in the advancement of the gospel.

However, it would be irresponsible to leave this book unaccosted. First published in 1981, it continues to be widely circulated despite the fact that the book it attempts to refute, "Children of

Abraham” by David Kingdon, is long out of print. Kingdon’s book was published and reprinted in 1973 and 1975, respectively.¹

When first published, Kingdon’s book was severely censured by Dr. John R. de Witt in the Westminster Theological Journal (1975). Kingdon had effectively responded to de Witt’s strongly worded review in Reformation Today, No. 39 (1977).² To our knowledge, Hanks’ book has not been responded to.³

Questionable Methodology

The general approach adopted by Hanks is opened to question for a number of reasons.

First, he assumes a narrow definition of the word “Reformed” and a broad definition of the word “Baptist”. To him, the “Reformed” are those who, “while adhering to the truths of Calvinism, developed also the whole federal idea in the theology and the organic idea in the covenant (p. 11).” In other words, those who hold to the continental confessions of faith are alone “Reformed”. Those who hold to the Westminster Confession he calls “Presbyterian”. While he acknowledges that “there have been a significant number of Baptists throughout the post-Reformation history of the church who have taken a different position on these questions (of Arminian soteriology and premillennial dispensationalism)”, Hanks is intent on lumping the Reformed Baptists with the Arminian Baptists. His claim is that Calvinistic Baptists and Arminian Baptists have in common this characteristic: “both hold to an individualistic conception of salvation in particular and of God’s dealings with men in general (p. 12).” From his narrow definition of who are the “Reformed” he can make the guarded statement, “I do not know of a single Reformed theologian of note who maintains that the children of believers are saved (p. 48).” In his book, Kingdon was dealing with paedobaptists of all shades, and of necessity had to range over their views generally. Hanks, on the other hand, wished to engage Kingdon on his (Hanks’) own terms, by his own rules!

Secondly, Hanks is fond of making sweeping charges and assumptions of his opponent’s position. He charges Kingdon of “implicit dispensationalism”, but fails to prove that. Statements like “Kingdon fails to understand the true nature of the Old Testament economy” abound. To Hanks, only two positions are possible: either one holds to the “Reformed” position of upholding the unity of the Bible, or one is a dispensationalist who treats the New and Old Testaments as disjointed. It does not occur to him that there is a third position, that of Reformed Baptists, which maintains the unity of the Bible as well as recognizes the progressive and cumulative nature of biblical revelation. In fact, the quarrel of Reformed Baptists with the paedobaptists is that they hold to a “flat theology”. Paedobaptists err by equating the Old Testament with the New, while dispensationalists err by exalting the New above the Old. This is not to say that men like Hanks totally ignore the progressive nature of revelation. They do recognise the principle, but in an inconsistent way, and begin to hedge when results of biblical studies do not favour their preconceived ideas!

Thirdly, Hanks has the habit of interspersing his arguments for infant baptism with statements and doctrines which the Reformed Baptists themselves would affirm, thereby unfairly insinuating that Reformed Baptists do not hold them. He would then make an assertion of the paedobaptist position as though that is a proven fact. For example, in chapters 1 & 2, arguments that Reformed Baptists would have no problem with are given first: there are different administrations of the one covenant of grace; the Old Testament administration of the covenant was in types and shadows; the essence of the covenant and the promise of the covenant remained the same; believers in the Old Testament and the New Testament constitute one church. The sudden assertion is then made of *identifying* circumcision with baptism (pp. 40-41)! It is claimed that Kingdon had admitted to this identity, when in fact he had only claimed the existence of an *analogy* between them. An *analogy* is different from an *identity*. Another example of Hanks's dubious approach will suffice. Hanks expounds at length Galatians 3 in a way that is totally acceptable to Reformed Baptists (pp. 109 ff.), concluding with the statement: "So then the children of Abraham in every age are those who are of faith...If Christ is the seed, centrally, of Abraham, then it is also true that all those who belong to Christ are also seed of Abraham whether they be Jew or Greek, whether they live in the old dispensation or the new. And belonging to Christ, they are all heirs according to the promise (p. 118)." The seed of believers have thus far been correctly identified as those who are of faith, those who belong to Christ. The sudden twist is made when Hanks asserts infant baptism by assuming a different definition of the seed of believers, taking it now to mean all children born to believers!

Questionable doctrines

These are as far as the general methodology goes. We now consider the crux of Hanks's arguments for infant baptism. Three interlinked doctrines are proposed: baptism in the New Testament is to be equated with circumcision in the Old Testament (chapter 2); God saves by the line of generations (chapter 3); and, God saves His people by dealing with them as an organism (chapter 4).

Baptism and circumcision

The dubious method employed by Hanks to identify baptism with circumcision has been mentioned above. He admits throughout that the promises given by God to Abraham belong to "the dispensation of types and shadows" (pp. 37, 45). He quotes favourably Herman Hoeksema that "circumcision belongs to the time of shadows" (p. 41). Yet, he adamantly *identifies* circumcision with baptism! Hanks believes that in the Old Testament, "the reality was there...under the form of the type..." (p. 38). If the "was there" is understood figuratively, in the sense that the type was a sign, or pledge, of the reality, there would have been no problem. This is not the case with Hanks, however. He takes the "reality" as literally there, but covered, or camouflaged by the sign! He can do that only by using the word "reality" in the qualitative sense of "being real, true, not false". That, surely, is not the correct way to use the word in the context of discussing "types and shadows".

Properly speaking, in theology, types and shadows point to some definite, inward, spiritual fulfilment in the future. It is the fulfilment that is known as the reality. The reality was promised to Abraham. It had not been realised yet at that time. The promised Messiah had not come. Calvary was still future. Just as hope that is seen is not hope, so also promise that is realised is not promise (Rom. 8:24). If the reality was there already, there would have been no need for the promises. See

Galatians 3:15-18 and Hebrews 11:13. Louis Berkhof said this of types: “A type always prefigures something future...it is necessary to have due regard to the essential difference between type and antitype. The one represents truth on a lower, the other, the same truth on a higher stage. To pass from the type to the antitype is to ascend from that in which the carnal preponderates to that which is purely spiritual, from external to the internal, from the present to the future, from the earthly to the heavenly.”⁴

The newness of the New Testament administration is emphasized in Hebrews 8:7-8. The *old sign* of circumcision was for the purpose of indicating membership in the Old Testament community of God’s people, namely the nation of Israel. The *new sign* of baptism is for initiating a believer into the New Testament community of God’s people, namely the visible (local) church. The old sign was a *type*, which *foreshadowed* the New Testament reality of regeneration (Col. 2:11-12). Regeneration, “the circumcision of the heart”, is symbolized by the totally new sign of baptism. The *outward sign* of circumcision cannot point to the *outward sign* of baptism. By definition, the antitype that answers to the type must be a spiritual, inward reality. The physical land of Canaan pointed to the spiritual church of Jesus Christ. The physical seed of Abraham pointed to the spiritual seed of Abraham. The physical blessings given to Abraham and his physical descendants pointed to the spiritual blessings of all those who come to faith in Christ. Circumcision must point to the spiritual, inward reality of regeneration. It is not possible to equate baptism with circumcision.

Salvation along generations

The next doctrine proposed by Hanks is that God saves by the line of generations. By this is meant that God saves believers *and their seed*. In a confusing manner, he acknowledges that not all children of believers are saved (pp. 48-49). At the same time, throughout chapter three, he affirms that God does save the children of believers.

That God does save the children of believers no one would deny. The question is, does God save them simply because they are born to believers? Is natural descent the cause of their salvation? Hanks would give the correct answer, “No!” to these questions. He affirms that only elect children are saved, and they are those for whom Christ died, and that they are saved by God’s sovereign grace (p. 49). Why then posit the idea that God saves by the line of generation, as though natural descent is the *cause* of salvation? If taken as the *cause* of salvation, the doctrine of “God saving by the line of generation” is wrong and heretical! There is only one way of salvation, and that is by the grace of God through faith in Christ.

Hanks’s basic problem lies in his failure to distinguish between the *cause*, the *ground*, the *means*, and the *scope* of salvation. The cause of salvation is the grace of God. The ground of salvation is Christ’s finished work on the cross. The means of salvation is faith that comes by the hearing of the gospel. The scope of salvation covers the elect from all nations.

We discuss first the *scope* of salvation. Genesis 17 is not the only passage that records the covenant God made with Abraham. The seed of Abraham mentioned in Genesis 17:7 must not be interpreted as the direct descendants of Abraham alone, much less as infants. The verse has to be interpreted in the context of the whole covenant made with Abraham, and in context of all the records of that

covenant. In fact, we would go farther and say that it has to be interpreted in the context of the covenant of grace as revealed in the whole Bible. The covenant with Abraham is, after all, only one expression (or administration) of the covenant of grace. Comparing Genesis 17:7 with Genesis 17:2, 4; 12:3; 22:18; 26:4; and 28:14, we come to the conclusion that the seed of Abraham, who are to receive the blessings of redemption, encompasses believers from all nations. Romans 4 and Galatians 3 show us that all who have the same faith as Abraham are his seed. Romans 4:16 and Galatians 3:29 show that the seed of Abraham mentioned in Genesis 17:7 is not limited to just Jewish believers but includes also believers from other nations. The scope of salvation encompasses elect from all nations.

Paedobaptists have generally posited a sharp dichotomy between pagans who hear the gospel for the first time and the children of those who are already believers. To the former, the gospel is to be preached. To the latter, Christians truths are to be taught. The former need to repent and believe in Christ before they are admitted to the covenant community, the church. The latter are considered to be in the covenant community already and only needs to be educated and disciplined. This is the view held by Hanks (pp. 84, 96, 98). The problem with such a view is that it, in effect, teaches salvation by works. The children of believers need to be *educated* into the kingdom of God instead of saved by the hearing of faith! Hanks would insist that only elect children are saved, and that they are saved by God's grace. But his view on the children of believers minimizes the universality and seriousness of original sin, and under-emphasizes "justification by faith". It has been forgotten that the watchwords of the Reformation were "sola scriptura", "sola gratia", and "sola fide" (Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone)!

When we correctly differentiate the *cause*, *ground*, *means* and *scope* of salvation, we are able to understand correctly Acts 2:38-39, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." The *cause* of salvation is the grace of God in election: "as many as the Lord our God will call". The *ground* of salvation is the finished work of Christ: hence, "in the name of Jesus Christ". The *means* of salvation is "repent,...and be baptized", on hearing the gospel proclaimed. The *scope* of salvation is "you, your children (meaning the subsequent generations), and all who are afar off". The "children" mentioned in Acts 2:38 are not "the immediate children of believers", much less "infants born to believers". God saves the children of believers, but He also saves the parents of believers, and their grandparents, and their more distant relatives, and their friends and neighbours!

We repeat: the *scope* of salvation must never be confused with the *means* of salvation. Also, no amount of emphasis on the *cause* (God's grace) and the *ground* (Christ's death) of salvation should be allowed to eclipse the *means* (repentance and faith) and the *scope* (elect from all nations in all generations). Acts 2:38-39 occurs, after all, in the context of Pentecost, the beginning of a new era in which the Great Commission is to be carried out (Acts 1:8), and in which the prophecy of Joel is being fulfilled: "And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21)." In today's jargon, we would say that God saves from among all, in space or time. God saves from among those who are afar of as well as those who are near. God also saves from among those of the future generations, not just from the present generation. That, we maintain, is the correct interpretation of Acts 2:39.

The doctrine that “God saves His church and establishes His covenant in the line of continued generations (Hanko, p. 49)” is, at best, a red herring, and at worst, a distortion of the gospel.

Organism of the covenant

The third doctrine proposed by Hanko is that “God saves His people by dealing with them as an organism.” This is put forward to justify the inclusion of infants of believing parents as members of the church. Let us analyze Hanko’s procedures. Three basic steps are involved.

First, he proposes the idea of an organism, giving the definition: “an organism is an organized and unified system, composed of many diverse parts, but united by a common principle of life (p. 78).” Various examples are given of what constitutes an organism: the church, the human race, nations, and cities.

In the second step, Hanko transposes the nation of Israel directly upon the church of the new dispensation (pp. 81-84)! The assumption has been made that Israel is the same organism as the church, which, in a sense, it is. But he fails to give due allowance for progression and fulfillment. He begins by acceptably stating that Israel was a *type* of the church of Christ. But he identifies the antitype with the type, so that the external features of the type – including a mixed membership – are transported into the antitype. The butterfly has been identified with the caterpillar, without due allowance given to the process of development! All the Bible passages quoted by Hanko to support the idea of mixed church membership in fact teach the contrary: the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor.12), the church as the vine (Jn. 15), the figure of the olive tree (Rom. 11); and the parable of the wheat and tares (Mt. 13).

In the third step, Hanko extends the idea of a mixed membership to the covenant of grace (pp. 85-90). Here, he confuses the *administration* of the covenant with the covenant itself. He was obviously referring to the administration (the manifestation, or outworking) of the covenant when he says,

“As the covenant develops in all time, the covenant develops in such a way that, born into the covenant lines, there are both elect and reprobate. Or, to put the matter slightly differently, the purpose of God in sovereign predestination is realized in such a way that election and reprobation cut through the line of the covenant (p. 85).”

Laboriously, he attempts to swamp the reader with many trite and irrelevant examples (the flow of the river Mississippi, a stalk of wheat, a field of wheat, Heb. 6:4-8). In the next breath, he unmistakably claims that the *covenant of grace* itself includes the reprobate! He says:

“But the question still remains: why does God will that all the children of believers be baptized? We have already answered that question in part. We have answered that children as well as adults are comprehended *in the covenant of grace*. Believers and their seed are saved. And the seed of believers are saved as children. God has promised that He will gather His elect from us and from our children – and from new believers and their children when new branches are grafted into the

olive tree. But we know that all children of believers are baptized. And we know that these children are not all elect.” (Italics added. The “all” in this last sentence was actually placed before “these children”. We have changed its position so as to convey what we think Hanko meant to say.)

“So it is *within* the covenant. *Within* that covenant are both elect and reprobate seed (p. 89).” (Italics added.)

We would register the strongest protest against such a construction of the covenant of grace. In charity, we would take it that Hanko had not been too careful to differentiate between the *administration* of the covenant and the covenant itself, which he did earlier on in his book (p. 36). He nevertheless enters dangerous ground by suggesting that the covenant of grace itself encompasses both elect and reprobate seed. That would be a serious perversion of the covenant, for, *per definition*, the covenant is the arrangement whereby God through grace alone has bound Himself to save man from the just consequences of his sin. The covenant of grace does not comprehend the reprobate. The various *administrations* of the covenant do. The administrations of the covenant are the arrangements through which the elect are called out of the world into the kingdom of God. This is true in the old administration (the old covenant) as well as in the new (the new covenant).

We are not given to know who are the elect and who are not. Only those who have come to faith may know that they are elect. We are to proclaim the gospel to all alike. “We are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing. To the one we are aroma of death to death, and to the other the aroma of life to life (2 Cor. 2:15-16).” In the same family, there may be those who are saved, and there may be those who are lost. God often uses the salvation of one to beneficially influence the others in the family (1 Cor. 7:14; 1 Pet. 3:1-2). Some of those so influenced might come to salvation in Christ. In these ways, the *administration* of the covenant grace encompasses the elect and the reprobate.

It bears repetition that while the *administrations* of the covenant comprehend the reprobate as well as the elect, *progressive development* must be recognized in them. According to prophecy, Israel will give way to the visible churches of the New Testament dispensation. The type will give way to the antitype. Israel as a nation consisted of the reprobate and the elect. The new covenant community is to be made up of people who have “a new heart, a heart of flesh, with a new spirit within them (Ezek. 36:24-28)”. They will have God’s law in their minds, written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). In practice, we cannot avoid the unwittingly admittance of some who are unregenerate into church membership. But that is different from the deliberate admittance of the unregenerate into church membership, which the paedobaptists have been doing, and which Hanko is advocating.

In his zeal to discredit the Reformed Baptists, Hanko misrepresents their position and claims that they fail to properly take into account the truth of total depravity (p. 96). He goes to the extent of saying, “Total depravity, after all, means that one who is totally depraved is not only completely devoid of the grace of God, *but such a one is actively opposed to the things of God.*” (Italics added). The conclusion drawn by Hanko is that those who are actively opposed to the things of God are not to be given Christian instruction, while others who are not actively opposed to the things of God,

and are receptive to Christian instruction, are to be considered converted already. Children of believers are such, according to Hanks. But this is a frightening distortion of the doctrine of total depravity. It is no wonder that those of Hanks's communion have been charged with the age-old error of Hyper-calvinism!⁵

The *total depravity* of Calvinism means that there is a total inability on the part of man to gain, or contribute to, his own salvation. The "total" is a reference to the *extent* of his person that is depraved, not to the *degree* of his depravity. And it is in regard to his *salvation* that the totally depraved man is unable to do anything about, not in regard to his reception of biblical instruction. The children of believers who are receiving Bible teaching are as totally depraved as the children of pagans. Children, whether of believers or pagans, who are able to sing psalms and hymns, and pay outward allegiance to the worship of God, are totally depraved. When converted, they remain totally depraved. Their nature is changed by degrees to become holier and holier by the Holy Spirit, but that is different from saying they have ceased to become totally depraved.

Conclusion

Hanks has failed to refute the Reformed Baptist understanding of covenant theology. His complicated, confusing, and even erroneous arguments will only serve to give a false sense of security to the members of his, and other like-minded, churches. The members of these churches will be made to think that the Baptist position has been demolished, and theirs upheld. They will think it a waste of time to find out what exactly the Reformed Baptists believe. In effect, Hanks has succeeded to surround paedobaptists with a fortress that appears formidable. That fortress, however, is not impregnable. It is only made of straw!

Notes:

1. Some used copies "Children of Abraham," by David Kingdon, are on sale at www.Amazon.com. Readers might be interested in another book on the subject entitled "Infant Baptism & The Covenant of Grace," by Paul K. Jewett (Eerdmans, 1978). Books on Covenant Theology from the Baptist perspective are easily sourced out on the internet.
2. A Review Reviewed, David Kingdon, <http://www.searchingtogether.org/articles/kingdon/review.htm> Accessed on 2 May 2015
3. The book "We & Our Children," by Herman Hanks (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004) is still in circulation.
4. "Principles of Biblical Interpretation," by L. Berkhof (Baker, 1990), pp. 145, 147.
5. David Engelsma has attempted to refute the charge of Hyper-Calvinism levelled against those who deny "the free offer of the gospel", in "Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel" (Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1980). Tom Wells has shown the fallacy of the arguments against "the free offer of the gospel" in a booklet entitled, "Notes on the Free Offer Controversy," available from The King's Chapel, 7365 West Chester Road, West Chester, Ohio 45069, USA.