

Gospel Standard Strict Baptists

Who are the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists? Wherein do they differ from the Dutch Reformed churches?

In the Netherlands, they do not have any congregations. However, in the United Kingdom, North America and Australia do they exist. Also, in Grand Rapids is a small congregation of the Strict Baptists, the Zion Baptist Church. At the same time, there exists a bond between them and the conservative Reformed churches. At the time that Rev. Stehouwer of Grand Rapids was still alive, there was contact between him and Rev. De Leeuw. The reason is that there is thought similar on the area of spiritual experience. This means, the way in which God converts a person. Quite often, sermons of the Strict Baptists are read from the Dutch pulpits in reading services. Another interesting bond is this. Both members of the Strict Baptist churches and the Netherlands Reformed Congregations (NRC) are part of the TBS (the Trinitarian Bible Organisation is a sister organization of the GBS in the Netherlands). Also, the names of certain ministers are well known. Think of Bunyan and his Pilgrim's Progress, Philpot and Warburton. Another well known theologian is Dr. John Gill. He has written a commentary on the whole Bible. The Strict Baptists came into existence around the time of Bunyan. That is in the 1630ths. Your question may be, why are they called "strict"? This word is a shorter version of "restricted". They have a restriction on who may be members of the congregation and who may partake of the Lord's Supper. This is not for everyone. Only those who are baptized as adults are permitted.¹ This baptism is only for those who can confess to know God in their heart. The Strict Baptists had to deal with some challenges. At the end of the 18th century, writes Andrew Fuller (1754-1815), "The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation." This booklet is troublesome for some prominent ministers. Mainly William Gadsby battles with this issue. Therefore, he begins to publish a magazine in 1835, the *Gospel Standard*.² Many desire to reach this magazine. One year later, the magazine gets another editor. This young man just separated from the Church of England. His name is John Charles Philpot (1802-1869). The magazine adds some pages where preaching occasions are printed. The preachers are only those that feel a bond with the doctrine of this magazine. Since the year 1860, churches that feel a bond with this magazine are called the *Gospel Standard Strict Baptists*. Interestingly, this magazine is still printed every month in our days. This is almost in the same form as when it started. But what are some elements wherein these congregations differ with the Dutch churches? In general, there are five. Three are less important, the latter two are bigger differences.

In the first place, Strict Baptists think different about *baptism*. In the Netherlands, we are used to baptize children. It is possible that an adult is baptized when he or she became member of the church at a later age. However, with the Strict Baptists *only* adults are baptized.³ The person first has to do confession of faith. Hereafter, the minister baptizes him by immersion. In this way, he or she becomes member of the congregation. With this, the person is also allowed to partake of the Lord's Supper.

Another difference is *church structure*. In the Netherlands, we are used to various denominations. Think about the Netherlands Reformed Congregations⁴ and the Restored Reformed Church. These are connected by an official structure. There can be decisions that affect the whole denomination. These decisions are made by ministers and elders coming from all parts of the Netherlands. Such meetings are called Synods. The outcome are applicable to the whole denomination. Also, the denomination has

¹ After feedback, a better way to put it: Only those who have done confession of faith, after their conversion are permitted. This could also be young people under 18 years old.

² In feedback, one said that the son of Rev. Gadsby began to publish the magazine, not William Gadsby.

³ After feedback, a better formulation might be, Only those that are able to confess true faith are baptized. This might be teenagers.

⁴ Note: This is the name used in North America. In the Netherlands, they are called the Gereformeerde Gemeenten (Reformed Congregations).

another advantage. Let's say that there arise difficulties in a local congregation. There is quarrel between an elder and a church member. In such cases, the national denomination is able to intervene. In this say, peace will be restored. On the other hand, the Strict Baptists use a different structure. There is no national denomination, but individual congregations. This structure is similar to that of the Old Reformed Congregations (not: in the Netherlands, the OGG).⁵ Also, the consistory of the Strict Baptists looks a bit different. In the Dutch churches, the consistory exists of elders, deacons, and possibly a minister. However, the Strict Baptists have no elders. The consistory exists of a minister and "deacons." In other words, what an elder does in the Dutch congregations, is the duty of a deacon for the Strict Baptists.

A third difference is *what is sung* in the worship services. The conservative wing within the Reformed churches only sing Psalms. This can be the Psalter of Dathen or that of 1773. However, the Strict Baptists use since 1814 the *Gadsby Hymnbook*. These hymns are not all written by Gadsby, but mainly composed of existing hymns. This book has 1156 hymns in total. Most tunes are similar to the Psalters in the NRC. But how does a hymn look like? Here an example.

#401 – Author: Isaac Watts

1. How long, O Lord, shall I complain
Like one that seeks his God in vain?
Canst thou thy face for ever hide,
And I still pray and be denied?

2. Shall I for ever be forgot,
As one whom thou regardest not?
Still shall my soul thy absence mourn,
And still despair of thy return?

The fourth difference is the *offer of grace*. This is a bigger difference. The Strict Baptists do not believe in an unlimited offer of grace. The preacher only offers grace to *sensible sinners*. The call to savingly believe or repent is only to them. The reason is that an unconverted person has no power in himself to repent. If the preacher would call them to do this, then he says that the hearer has some good in himself. However, this is because of man's total depravity totally excluded. But sensible sinners have received God's grace in themselves. Therefore, they could be called to savingly believe and repent. In the Articles of Faith, they write, "**We believe that the invitations of the gospel are spirit and life. These are *only* means for those who by the blessed Spirit feel their state as sinners, and see the need for Christ as their Savior.**" (GS, Art. 24). The reason to restrict the general offer is explained in another article. They say, "[Some] preachers today address unconverted persons or all in the congregation without distinction. They call them to savingly repent, believe, receive Christ, or do any other act in which the person depends on the new power of the Holy Spirit. This is, on the one hand, suggest that there is power in the creature. On the other hand, this is to deny the doctrine of personal salvation."⁶ Strict Baptists do believe that the gospel needs to be *preached* in all the world. However, this differs from saying that the gospel has to be *offered* to all without distinction.

The last difference is not that well known. They believe that the *gospel is the rule of life* for the true believer. In the Dutch churches, we say that the believer is to live according to the law of the Lord. This is the law that was revealed in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20). The Strict Baptists, however, believe that this rule of life is the "gospel." On their website, they write, "**We believe that the believer's rule of life is the gospel. This is not the law of works, given to Moses.**" This is different from the willingness to live according to the law, with a difficult word *anti-nomianism*. They write, "**Some have this [the gospel as the rule of life] understood incorrectly. They call this 'antinomianism.' But our belief is that the gospel contains all that is in the law. However, it is a much higher standard.**" Practically, this makes very little difference. Again, they write, "We do not believe that the law is the rule of life. But in practical terms, there is none of the people in England that keep the Sabbath day

⁵ More information about the OGG: <http://oudgereformeerdegemeenten.nl/gemeenten.php?srt=Oud%20Gereformeerde%20Gemeente>

⁶ Articles of Faith: <https://www.gospelstandard.org.uk/GospelStandard/media/gS/Articles.pdf>

stricter than we do. To live according to our high calling is an indispensable element of our most holy faith.”⁷ This is indeed true. Anyone who has been in contact with members of the Strict Baptists of England know that they live according to the Word in clothing and lifestyle.

With this, you have a little overview of the similarities and distinctions with our Strict Baptist friends.

⁷ Website of the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists: <https://www.gospelstandard.org.uk/About-Us-2>