

The background features a large, stylized orange illustration. On the left, a sword is depicted diagonally, pointing towards the top right. On the right, a shield is shown, partially overlapping the sword. The shield has a circular design with several smaller circles inside. The entire illustration is rendered in a solid orange color against a white background.

SWORD AND SHIELD

A REFORMED MONTHLY MAGAZINE

*Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee,
O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help,
and who is the sword of thy excellency!
and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee;
and thou shalt tread upon their high places.
Deuteronomy 33:29*

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THOMAS

Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. — John 20:24–29

Christ had risen indeed! Reports of the resurrection came to the disciples, and some saw the Lord. Terrified soldiers had fled from the grave that they so vainly had been guarding. Their lies and loyalty were secured with money from the chief priests.

Jesus appeared to the women, and they worshiped him and held him by the feet.

Jesus appeared to Mary. “Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended,” he lovingly told her. Mary had a misconception of the resurrection of Christ that would not have been helped by touching Christ.

John and Peter raced to the tomb, and they saw the place where the Lord had lain. They saw the undisturbed grave clothes and the napkin neatly folded and laying in the corner of Jesus’ tomb.

Two on the road to Emmaus talked with Jesus. This stranger opened to them the scriptures, showing them from Moses and the prophets that the Christ had to first suffer these things and then would rise the third day. With their hearts burning the two men had listened to the familiar and comforting voice of this stranger until at dinner—after he took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them—they caught a glimpse of him, and then he vanished from their sight. They raced back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples.

It had been a glorious—perplexing—but glorious day. The fact of the resurrection was slowly impressing itself on the minds of the disciples.

Then they gathered in the upper room that Sunday evening, the doors being locked for fear of the Jews, wondering what all those things meant.

And there Jesus appeared. He came into the room. “Peace be unto you,” he said to his terrified disciples. These were not the words of a polite and cordial greeting, but

they were the gracious words of the disciples’ justification preached to them by the Lord himself that Sunday evening to soothe their troubled souls. Peace is the benefit of Christ’s cross. He was delivered up to the cross by God on account of our offenses and was raised on account of our justification, and we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. “My children, have ye any meat?” he asked the troubled group. And he ate a little piece of honeycomb and some fish. “See my hands and see my sides,” he said to the disciples. “Do spirits have flesh and blood?” he asked. He upbraided them for their unbelief because they believed not those who had seen him after the resurrection. And he caused the disciples to understand the law, the prophets, and the psalms concerning his death and resurrection.

But Thomas!

One was missing! “One of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.”

Thomas had missed the appearance of the Lord. After the other disciples told Thomas about the Lord’s resurrection, Thomas uttered those shocking words of unbelief: “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

You must have a picture of Thomas.

We are not interested in Thomas as such.

We are interested in Thomas because scripture teaches us about salvation through the salvation of Thomas.

Thomas was one of the twelve disciples whom Jesus Christ had hand-picked to follow him and to learn from him and whom Jesus commissioned to go to the lost sheep of the household of Israel.

His names, both Thomas and Didymus, mean *the twin* and probably also mean the *smaller* one of the two. He was the weaker, smaller, and lesser of the twins. We read nothing of his twin. The Lord sometimes saves one

brother and not another. That is his sovereign right. He did so with Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, and perhaps he did the same with Thomas and his twin.

But these names tell us nothing of Thomas' spiritual character.

Rather than by his names, Thomas revealed himself when he spoke. Out of the heart the mouth speaks.

Scripture says in John 11:16, "Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellowdisciples, Let us also go, that we may die with him." After recently leaving Judea because the Jews had been ready to stone Jesus, he informed the disciples that they were going back to Judea to see Lazarus and to wake him from his sleep. Then Thomas, of all the disciples, said, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." One could say that this revealed gloomy Thomas, or pessimistic Thomas, or earthy Thomas. But his statement shows about Thomas that he was not afraid of death for Jesus' sake. It was not death as such that was a problem for Thomas. It was not even the death of Jesus that was the problem for Thomas; he did not shy away from a good fight. The good fight as far as he was concerned redeemed the death.

Thomas' statement also shows that as far as he was concerned, if Jesus would die, then Thomas might as well die too and that he thus saw the death of Jesus as the end. The statement shows further that Thomas believed that he would be with the Lord wherever he went, also into death. Thomas loved the Lord deeply.

It was also Thomas who had responded on the eve of the crucifixion, the night in which Jesus was betrayed, to Jesus' instruction to his disciples: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know" (John 14:3-4).

Thomas contradicted the Lord: "Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). The cross and the resurrection were the farthest things from Thomas' mind as the way to eternal life, but he knew that he would be where the Lord is; Thomas would be near to Jesus, and Thomas would know the way.

And it is important to understand Thomas' absence from the disciples on that Sunday evening when the Lord first appeared to them. For Thomas, if Christ was dead, why even gather together? The one who had been the very bond of their fellowship was gone, and so the group was done.

So Thomas missed the appearance of the Lord. The reason is not specifically stated in scripture, yet the reason is not hard to surmise. The offense that had caused Thomas, along with the other disciples, to abandon Christ in the garden still lodged stubbornly in Thomas' heart. The root reason was unbelief. His unbelief is to be explained by his carnal conception of Christ, his coming, his work, and his kingdom and also by Thomas' carnal

conception of himself. In his own eyes he was not truly a sinner whose salvation consisted in God's justifying the ungodly. Thomas seemingly understood less than his father Abraham, who had understood that God justifies the ungodly and thus that the promised seed had to die and be raised again for the justification of his people. Abraham had seen Christ's day afar off and was glad, for through Christ Abraham had seen the salvation of himself and of all his spiritual children gathered from many nations. But Thomas was blind to all that through unbelief. The death of Christ was the end of Christ, and that death could not have come in a worse way: Christ willingly had been crucified on the accursed tree.

After Christ had appeared to the disciples, they came and told Thomas, "We have seen the Lord."

Understand what those few words meant. The disciples told Thomas about what they had seen. "We have seen Christ's body. We have seen the nail prints in his hands and his feet and the spear hole in his side. We have seen Jesus himself in his resurrection body and not a spirit. Jesus terrified us at first but comforted us with the gospel of peace. Salvation is accomplished. All the things spoken by Moses and the prophets have been fulfilled. We have seen Jesus alive—strangely different, otherworldly, glorious, hidden and revealed, here and there, glimpsed and gone. But Jesus is alive. He is able to appear here and there, to come into a room whose doors are firmly locked. He materializes and then is gone again. Yet he ate with us, spoke with us, and commissioned us to preach this gospel."

And they said, "We have seen the Lord!" Not Jesus, but Lord. That word *Lord* is the truth of the resurrection. Jesus is absolute Lord over all. He is revealed as Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He is crowned with glory and honor. He is David's greater son with his greater kingdom. By grace he is the Lord particularly of the church. He is the only head and king of his church, which is his body and his bride, for whom he laid down his life and about whom he said that the gates of hell cannot prevail against her.

By the resurrection Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power: power over all things, power over death and hell and the grave, and power to justify and to save. Oh, he has power to give life to whomsoever he will and the power to withhold life, power to forgive and to bind, and power to carry out God's eternal counsel and purpose for the salvation of his chosen church and for the destruction of the kingdom of darkness.

The gospel of the resurrection that the disciples preached to Thomas was a gospel of peace. It was the gospel that Jesus had been delivered over to the cross because of our offenses and that he was raised for our justification. Yes, that is the gospel. The gospel is Jesus Christ, the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. It

is a gospel that the church, in the apostles, is commissioned to preach to every creature: Jesus is risen. The Lord lives and reigns. He who believes and is baptized shall be saved. He who believes not shall be damned!

But Thomas responded, "I will not believe."

The disciples had seen the Lord, but Thomas had seen things too. He had seen many things. Thomas revealed to us that when the Bible says that the disciples all forsook Jesus and fled, they did not totally run away in a physical sense. John and Peter trailed Christ all the way to his trial. John was at the foot of the cross. So all the disciples had to have been near the scene. There at an appropriate distance from Christ, Thomas had seen many things. He had seen Christ be captured and give himself up! Thomas had seen the soldiers nail Christ to the cross. Thomas had seen the soldier thrust a spear into Christ's side, for Thomas mentioned these things in his unbelief: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Thomas' problem was exactly that he saw only those things and what they revealed to the eyes of man, that is, Christ had suffered a total defeat. The cross, the nail prints, and the spear thrust say nothing but total defeat to the unbelieving man. The cross is scandalous to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks.

Do not say doubting Thomas. He was not the quintessential skeptic.

Do not say pessimistic Thomas. He was not the perpetually glass-half-empty man, always looking on the bad side.

Doubting Thomas or pessimistic Thomas looks at Thomas' problem as a natural one; he merely needed more time or more instruction. But his problem was a profoundly spiritual one.

He was unbelieving Thomas.

The precise character of his unbelief was that he would see and touch first and then believe, as though faith comes by seeing and touching, and thus as though faith in the resurrection of Christ is in the power of man's investigation, in the power of man's intellect, and in the power of man's touch and sight. Thomas put faith in his own power, motivated by the power of his intellectual apprehension of the scene that he took in through his senses. It was as though the knowledge of Christ, the cross of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ comes by man's ability.

"Unless I see, I will not believe," said Thomas. Monstrous, shocking, astounding unbelief.

Unbelief is always astounding. Astounding in its boldness, ignorance, and hardness. Thomas was unbelieving in the face of that glorious gospel of the resurrection that had been preached to him by the disciples.

Thomas drove home his own unbelief. Out of that unbelief he spoke. "Unless I should see the nail prints in his

hands; indeed, unless I should thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. I will certainly not believe." Thomas was speaking out of unbelief's understanding of a resurrection too, that is, it is a mere return or coming back. If a crucified Christ came back, he would have to bear his stigmata.

And Thomas' adamant insistence on his own unbelief was saying that he would not believe that Christ's death had any value whatsoever. Thomas would steadfastly maintain that Christ's death was worthless and vain and that it was not the way to bring God's kingdom. Thomas would deny that by his death Christ had purchased righteousness, holiness, and eternal life for his own and had opened wide the doors of the kingdom of heaven that the righteous might enter in with joy. Thomas would not believe that Christ had paid for Thomas' sins by that death and that through Christ's cross Thomas had peace with the living God. Thomas would not believe that the cross was God's but believed that the cross was the work of men who had overcome Jesus, and what was worse, it appeared that Jesus had let them do that to him. Thomas would not believe that God's righteousness, grace, and wisdom were manifested in the cross. Thomas would not believe that the cross was the victory over the world, sin, darkness, hell, death, and the grave and the only ground and foundation of salvation. He would deny what Christ himself had shouted from the cross: "It is finished!" Because for Thomas Christ's cross was worthless and vain, Christ was also not the living Lord. Whatever became of him, Thomas knew not, but raised he was not, for he had been crucified!

Thomas had to have been utterly miserable, a prisoner of his own stubbornness and hard heart and blind to the miracle of his own salvation that the resurrection of Christ proclaimed.

The Lord had to appear to Thomas. God draws his elect irresistibly in spite of their unbelief.

Eight days passed between that outburst of unbelief and Thomas' conversion.

Jehovah had seen all and heard all.

Thomas was gathered with the disciples in the upper room. The doors were shut, and the Lord appeared in the room and said, "Peace be unto you."

Then he turned to Thomas and spoke.

That was Thomas' salvation!

The resurrected Christ Jesus, Thomas' Lord and his God, came and spoke to him. That was the deliverance of Thomas from his unbelief. It was not Thomas' own seeing that saved him. It was the Lord through his voice who called Thomas from his unbelief to faith and who used Thomas' sight to do so. Christ's voice is what made the difference. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. And the Word of God had spoken.

And Christ presented himself for Thomas' inspection: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach

hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.” Thomas could have touched Christ, stuck his fingers into the nail holes, and put his fist into Christ’s side, so that with his hands and eyes he could have grasped the objective fact of the resurrection, and he would have remained unbelieving because the resurrection of Christ, the power and glory of that resurrection, is not received by the senses of sight and touch but by faith.

The Lord called Thomas to faith.

And what a changed Thomas!

Out of his faith he spoke as formerly he had spoken out of his unbelief. Gone were the obstinacy and the stubborn insistence on sight and touch, and a confession flowed out of his heart and mouth that indicated that he had grasped the truth and power of the resurrection by faith.

“My Lord and my God!”

So few words but so full of meaning.

When Thomas said those words, he was acknowledging not only who Christ is and what he had accomplished through his cross and resurrection but acknowledging also his profound awareness of his own sinfulness, his knowledge of the utter impossibility of salvation in himself, and that he understood that through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he had died and was risen in Christ. Thomas understood at that moment that he had passed from death into eternal life, that he was a partaker of everlasting righteousness and an heir of the new heaven and new earth, and that he was being governed by the living Lord Jesus Christ through his Spirit and word.

Thomas’ confession was a declaration about the cross of Christ and Christ crucified.

He who apprehends the resurrection, or rather is apprehended by the resurrected Christ, apprehends the power of the cross first of all. He is not scandalized by the cross. He glories in Christ crucified. Thomas was glorying in his crucified Lord with the nail prints in his hands and the spear thrust in his side, as the one who was the Lamb slain from all eternity in the counsel of God and manifested at the cross of Calvary to make known a righteousness that is without the law. Christ’s humiliation remains forever his glory, and the marks of his crucifixion are the marks of the victor and the conqueror. The resurrection declares that the cross was the perfect work of God to earn and merit salvation for Christ’s people. The resurrection declares that at the cross of Christ, God was in Christ reconciling his people to himself. The resurrection declares the cross to be the fulfillment of all God’s promises, the death of sin, the taking away of reproaches, and the one perfect sacrifice for sin and redemption.

Thomas’ words were a confession about Christ.

For Thomas confessed that Christ was his Lord and his God. That is the gospel of the resurrection of Christ—not only that he lives or that he is returned to this life, but also

that God made him both Lord and Christ. Thomas saw Christ in a whole new light—as God who had become flesh and who had entered into death itself and arose as the conqueror of sin, death, hell, and the grave and who thus made himself Thomas’ Lord because he had purchased Thomas as his own peculiar possession. The resurrection declares Christ to be Lord: Lord of his church, Lord of the nations, and Lord of all. The resurrection declares Christ to be God: God of God, Light of Light, and true God of true God, so that it was impossible that he should be holden of death. The resurrection declares that Christ has passed beyond the possibility of death and has brought immortality and eternal life to light.

Such was the transformation wrought in Thomas by his brief encounter with the Lord, that he became an entirely new man whose sight was no longer restricted to what he could see with the eye of the body, but who saw by the eye of faith the things of God’s eternal kingdom of which he was sure that he had a part. He was saved at that moment from the terrible prison of his own unbelief, transformed in his heart and mind, justified, and glorified by the words of the crucified and risen Lord.

Thomas believed!

Not because he saw, touched, or handled the Word of Life, but because the Word of Life came to him, spoke to him, and called him to faith from unbelief, transfixing him by the vision of Christ’s glory apprehended then by faith.

This was the Lord’s rebuke of Thomas: “Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet believe.”

Understand what the Lord said to Thomas. Because you saw, you believed. The Lord worked in Thomas by his seeing. I think that Thomas did not take the Lord up on his command to touch him. I know it was a command of Christ, but I believe the Lord was rebuking Thomas and did not demand Thomas to touch him. Besides, the Lord said only that Thomas had seen. He saw. That was the Lord’s accommodation to Thomas. The voice of the Lord worked with Thomas’ seeing to give him faith, but it was faith that the Lord gave to him.

Seeing, he believed; and believing, he was saved.

The seeing of Thomas—or if you insist, the touching of Thomas—did not allow him to apprehend the power and the truth of the resurrection of Christ. The Lord gave faith to him. The resurrection belongs to that which eye cannot see and ear cannot hear and what has never entered into the heart of man to conceive. The truth, power, and glory of the resurrection of Christ is known only by faith. The power of the resurrection of Christ comes into the soul of man only by faith. Faith is salvation. Faith is joy unspeakable in the knowledge of that resurrection. Thomas saw and believed. He was ready then to be an eyewitness to the glory of Christ wherever Christ would send him.

So Christ spoke of those who have not seen and yet believe. Christ himself gave to Thomas a prophecy of the innumerable throng of his people who will hear and believe.

They will never see on this earth the risen Christ. There is no possibility of their seeing him, for Christ has passed into heaven to appear in the presence of God for his people. Christ will not be seen by human eyes again until he appears on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, and then there will be no more time to believe.

That is why they are blessed who have not seen and yet believe. They need not see the risen Lord. They need only to believe. Not by seeing but by believing is the way the resurrection of Christ and the resurrected Christ are known. And faith does not come by seeing but by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.

And that is their blessing. Blessed are they who see not

and yet believe. They are blessed in their faith. Their faith is a blessing to them. Just as Thomas' faith was to him a gift of the risen Lord, so their faith is to them a blessing. A most glorious blessing because by that faith they, as Thomas, apprehend the truth and power of the resurrection of Christ as the power of God for their salvation. By that faith they are partakers of the life and blessedness of the risen Christ. Their faith is their salvation and joy unspeakable and full of glory. Blessed are those who do not see, have not seen, and yet believe.

That is you and that is me and that is all God's people in this dispensation. They see not and believe. Some here and some there. But they hear Christ; and hearing, they believe; and believing, they are saved.

—NJL

FROM THE EDITOR

By the time you receive this issue, spring will be upon us, and the time draws near when the church traditionally remembers the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ every Sunday in the Reformed Protestant Churches when we hear the gospel proclaimed. But we are not averse to a special time of remembering the great work of God in Christ for us and for our salvation. Christ was delivered over by God to the death of the cross because of our offenses, and Christ was raised again by God because he had justified us in the cross. God has forgiven us and our spiritual seed all our sins. He manifested his love for us in Christ, his Son. God opened wide the doors of the kingdom of heaven so that the righteous may enter in. Christ defeated sin, death, hell, the grave, and all the powers of darkness. He fully accomplished all his will and counsel for the salvation of his beloved, elect church. He gained for his people the gift of the eternal Spirit, whom he has shed abroad in our hearts. We glory in nothing save the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The truth of the cross and resurrection causes the church of Christ and the true believer to rejoice and to shout for joy. It is that truth that *Sword and Shield* is committed to writing.

In this issue Mr. Eddie Ophoff writes in *Running Footmen* a thoughtful meditation titled "The Black Brook," in which he dwells on the power of the suffering and death of our Lord. Rev. Tyler Ophoff in *Understanding the Times* gives us an article in which to consider the two-fold effect of the preaching of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially over against those who were attacking that preaching and who so recently left us. The days are

evil. The time about which the apostle warned is coming to pass: "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:3–4). Thus we hear with ever-increasing urgency the calling of the apostle: "I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (vv. 1–2). Rev. Luke Bomers continues his informative and edifying series on the Old Testament sacrifices, and Rev. Jeremiah Pascual writes on the fall of man and the glory of the promised seed.

We have two contributions this month. Mr. Garrett Varner continues his analysis of the creeds with an article on the lyrical and beautiful Athanasian Creed, so called not because Athanasius wrote it but because it proclaims the doctrine that he so doggedly confessed and defended. Mr. Michael Vermeer submitted an article that considers the false and odd notion of the antithesis that is circulating about and is infecting many.

We pray that the Lord will speed the contents of this issue to your hearts and that you will be refreshed in your souls, like the earth is refreshed by the gentle showers, and that the sweet aroma of the truth will fill your senses with pleasure, as the spring rains fill our senses with the delightful scent of petrichor.

—NJL

UNION WITH CHRIST (7): FAITH

This series of editorials is examining the application of salvation to the elect children of God. The essence of this salvation is union with Christ. In that union the elect receive all their salvation as a single whole. Thus all the various benefits of salvation received in this union are simply the riches of Christ that come to the elect as part of that union.

Faith in the Conscience

Among the treasures given to the elect in Christ is faith. In essence faith has been described already in this series. *Faith* is the spiritual bond between the elect sinner and Jesus Christ. By means of this spiritual union, the elect become one plant and one body with Christ. Their union with Christ by faith is simply the manifestation of the union that the elect always have had with Christ from eternity in election. Scripture frequently refers to faith when it describes the relationship of the elect with Christ as being “in Christ.” So we read in 1 Corinthians 1:30: “Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.” We also read that Paul said that he was “found in [Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phil. 3:9). Here the apostle describes union with Christ as faith.

Though we call this union faith, we must never forget that the secret and mysterious power and strength of that bond is the Spirit of Christ. We do well to remember the lovely line in the Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper:

By his death He hath taken away the cause of our eternal death and misery, namely, sin, and obtained for us the quickening Spirit, that we by the same (who dwelleth in Christ as in the head, and in us as His members) might have true communion with Him, and be made partakers of all His blessings, of life eternal, righteousness, and glory. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 271)

If we compare the connection of the elect with Christ to the mysterious connection that some member of the body—for instance, a finger—has with the body, then the connection is faith, and the Spirit is the life who flows

through that connection; maintains the connection; and produces all the life, energy, and activity that flows through that connection as directed by the head.

Faith as a bond comes to expression in the soul of the believer. An infant has faith as really as the adult. So too does the old or sick person on a bed of affliction who has ceased fundamentally all conscious activity. Faith remains. Yet, what is the expression, the conscious expression, of faith in the soul of the believer? What is faith at the level of the consciousness? When we say that we believe, what do we mean by that? We are saved by faith. So what is this faith? Scripture gives no clearer description than the faith of Abraham, the father of all those who believe. And to explain faith we turn to that description:

16. Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,
17. (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.
18. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.
19. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb:
20. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God;
21. And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. (Rom. 4:16–21)

This text is a description of the faith of Abraham. It is a description of his faith as it is an expression of the whole soul. If a man is an unbeliever, he is that with his whole soul. If a man is a believer, he is that with his whole soul. His whole soul-life—his thoughts, desires, will, aspirations, and the like—is affected by faith. For this reason the apostle describes faith in Romans 4:12 as walking in faith: “The father of circumcision to them who are not

of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.” The apostle is not saying that faith is our walk of life. Rather, he is saying that faith *affects* the whole life, so that faith may be said to characterize our walk. We walk in faith, or we walk in unbelief.

The apostle has established that faith is imputed for righteousness. He has established that in the case of Abraham and showed that this was also true of Abraham’s seed, of David too. Because faith is imputed for righteousness, those who are of the law are not heirs of the promise. If they were heirs, then faith would be made void, and the promise would be made of none effect. The law brings wrath because the law makes sin exceedingly sinful. If promise and blessing would come to those who are of the law, one could not speak about promise and faith because those of the law have no promise and thus do not need faith. They need only their works. And if they would be perfect in their works, they also would be righteous before God and heirs of the promise by works.

However, whenever we talk about promise and faith, let us not hear from the law. Promise does not have respect to man’s works. Promise concerns what God will do. No works are needed. Faith is counted for righteousness. And because faith is counted for righteousness, righteousness comes to the righteous by grace and not works. And thus exactly because the promise excludes the law, the promise that Abraham would be heir of the world is sure to all the seed. And so Abraham is the father of all who believe.

As Abraham’s faith was imputed to him for righteousness, so our faith is imputed to us for righteousness. Faith is imputed for righteousness whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, whether one is a physical descendent of Abraham or a sinner of the Gentiles. Faith counts for righteousness. The characteristic that made Abraham unique was that he believed God, not his circumcision, obedience, or repentance. That faith is imputed for righteousness. That is the thought of the apostle thus far in Romans 4.

An Important Question

What is faith? That is a very important question. That is an important question for all personally, for if Abraham is your father, your faith and his faith must be the same.

Besides, the importance of that question cannot be overstated because the answer determines your interpretation of scripture at every level and in every passage, for scripture frequently points out the necessity of faith. “Without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Jesus frequently said to those whom he healed that their faith had made them whole. “Jesus said unto him, Go thy

way; thy faith hath made thee whole” (Mark 10:52). “He said unto her, Daughter, be of good comfort: thy faith hath made thee whole; go in peace” (Luke 8:48). The gospel itself comes with the command to believe and warns the unbeliever that he stands exposed to the wrath of God and everlasting perdition. The Heidelberg Catechism in answer 84 teaches that the kingdom of heaven is opened

when according to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, whenever they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God, for the sake of Christ’s merits. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 118)

What is faith?

How you answer this question also determines your doctrine of salvation. That too cannot be overstated. The antithesis between the doctrine of true faith and the doctrine of false faith is easily stated. Faith is either man’s act or God’s gift wholly and completely. The Arminian, in whatever stripe he appears in history, always has taught faith as man’s act—that is, faith is an activity of the soul of man manufactured out of himself in which he decides to trust God and believe his promise. And that definition of faith as man’s act has served the purpose of the doctrine that God offers salvation to all and that man distinguishes himself from others by his act of faith. The Arminian frequently covers his doctrine by appeals to grace. So he says that man performs this by grace, but the essential doctrine remains: Faith is an act of man that brings into his possession the offer of God.

The Protestant Reformed Churches have this doctrine of faith. Faith is man’s act and not God’s act. So also the ministers and professors speak of *active faith*. By that they do not mean faith as an activity of the whole soul. Rather, they mean what man manufactures in himself in response to the gospel. Faith really is man’s response to the gospel. Faith is what man produces by the grace of God; by that active faith, as they say, man brings into his possession all the promises of God that are offered in the gospel. It is an Arminian conception of faith. The result of this doctrine of faith, as pointed out by the Canons of Dordt, is a new and wicked doctrine of justification that is as much a doctrine of justification by works as Rome’s doctrine:

The Synod *rejects* the errors of those...who teach that the new covenant of grace, which God the Father, through the mediation of the death of Christ, made with man, does not herein consist that we by faith, inasmuch as it accepts the merits of Christ, are justified before God and saved, but in the fact that God, having revoked the demand of perfect obedience of the law, regards faith itself and the obedience of faith, although imperfect, as the perfect obedience of the

law, and does esteem it worthy of the reward of eternal life through grace.

Rejection: For these contradict the Scriptures: Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood (Rom. 3:24, 25). And these proclaim, as did the wicked Socinus, a new and strange justification of man before God, against the consensus of the whole church. (Canons of Dordt 2, error and rejection 4, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 165)

And it is all fine and good to damn that conception of faith as false and the gospel that teaches it as a false gospel, but we must describe faith as scripture does in Romans 4 concerning Abraham's faith.

Abraham's Faith

Romans 4:16–17 are one sentence. The thought is that Abraham is the father of us all before God whom he believed. "Before him [God]" means *in the sight of God*. Abraham is the father of us all in the sight of God whom Abraham believed. There is between the main portion of each verse a parenthetical clause in which the apostle quotes from the Old Testament promise in Genesis 17:4–5: "I have made thee a father of many nations." According to that promise, in the sight of God, Abraham is the father of all who believe.

First, that Abraham is their father in the sight of God means that according to the determinate counsel of God, Abraham is the father of all who believe. In the counsel of God, God determined and beheld Abraham as the father of all believers. That is what the name Abraham means: *father of many nations*. Abraham really was and is in the counsel of God the father of believers. Abraham is the father of believers because out of all nations God appointed many to faith and salvation. Abraham believed in the counsel of God as determinative in the salvation of himself and his seed. He believed that among the human race God had made a distinction between those who were his seed and those who were not his seed. Before God, in the counsel of God, Abraham was the father of believers.

Second, that Abraham was before God the father of all believers means that Abraham was that in his own consciousness and experience. This explains everything about Abraham and his whole history. He left Ur of the Chaldees; he dwelt in Canaan as a pilgrim and a stranger; he strove for that promise; and he willingly offered up his son Isaac in that conviction of his heart and mind that he was before God the father of a spiritual corporation of believers drawn from all nations. Faith was a certain conviction in Abraham.

That conviction went against everything that Abraham

could see and every human calculation that he could make. What was Abraham's situation? God had given to him a promise: Your seed shall be as the stars of heaven; you will be a father of many nations; and you will be heir of the world. All these are essentially the same promise. But when Abraham contemplated himself and his situation as that promise of God came to him, all that seemed impossible. He was dead as regards bringing forth a child and certainly as regards bringing forth many children; and Sarah, the mother of the promise, was likewise dead.

However, Abraham staggered not in unbelief, for he was fully persuaded that what God had promised, he was able to perform. Faith is full persuasion of the fulfillment of God's promise.

Some say that the faith of Abraham simply was that he believed what was impossible; thus he believed what flew in the face of all human observations and calculations. But this is not true. It is not the sheer fact that what is believed is improbable or impossible that constitutes faith. I can say that I believe that purple unicorns exist. This flies in the face of all human observations, but this is not faith.

Rather, Abraham had a promise from God, and Abraham stood before the God who had made that promise. Abraham was before that God by faith, and by faith Abraham saw God and lived before him. Only in light of God and the promise that God makes can we speak of faith. Abraham had the word of God that something was true; that God had determined and beheld that promise in his counsel; and that when he spoke to Abraham of his promise, God had revealed to Abraham what was true in God's counsel. Faith is to hold for true God's promise when all human calculations, observations, and evidences say that the promise is impossible!

The apostle explains this in verse 18: "Who against hope believed in hope." "Hope" is *the expectation that God will fulfill his promise and do what he says that he will do*. "Against hope" means *that in the face of all human calculations and observations, hope was utter vanity*. Abraham hoped when there was no hope. When he looked around, there was no way the promise could be fulfilled. In that hopeless situation he had an undying and unshakeable hope. That is the mark of faith. All else is unbelief.

Only when there is no hope and in that situation there is unshakeable hope, do we have faith. Where a man can manage by his own strength, intellect, reason, and resources, there is no faith. Faith is the very opposite of working for the promise and relying upon one's own resources to fulfill that promise. In that sense faith is doing nothing for the promise. Faith is resting in the God of that promise and a casting off of all trust in self.

So the apostle describes Abraham's "against hope"

believing “in hope.” He did not believe in hope in the sense that hope was his object. Rather, in hope he believed. In the face of what appeared hopeless, he had hope and believed. He believed before God that he was the father of many nations.

The apostle continues to describe faith in verse 19: “Being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb.”

There is something of a question about the word “not” in the phrase “he considered not.” Some say that the word “not” does not belong there. It does not matter to me whether “not” is there, for the meaning is the same. Abraham did not allow the deadness of his body and the deadness of Sarah’s womb to be that upon which his mind fixed as the ground of his hope! That is the meaning. One can say that two ways: Abraham did not consider his own body then dead, which would mean that he did not rest on that thing as a reason for hopelessness. Or one can say that Abraham considered his body and Sarah’s body and understood that they were dead, but he did not see that as a hindrance to the promise. Both have the same basic meaning: The external situation and the impossibility of the promise in light of that situation did not cause Abraham to lose hope, but in hope he believed God.

Does this mean that faith refuses to look at the visible and tangible things that one can see, touch, taste, hear, and feel? Does faith turn away from the present facts and situation? No. Abraham fully faced the facts of his and Sarah’s situation. Those facts had been staring him in the face for nearly twenty-five years. In unbelief he had tried to overcome those facts. But in faith he did not consider that those things were an obstacle to what God had said that he would do. Abraham saw the situation with his eyes as it really was and did not sugarcoat it, but that did not weaken his faith.

One would be tempted to say that faith would weaken and shrink in the face of mounting difficulties, as facts pile up against the promise and the situation appears hopeless, as Abraham’s situation did. But in the face of the mounting impossibility of the promise, Abraham was strengthened in his faith. Exactly because there was no hope in himself or in Sarah for the fulfillment of the promise and because he was faced with the impossibility of the promise and did not lose hope, his faith showed itself.

Faith does nothing for the promise. Faith gives glory to God that he performs the promise. In Romans 1 the apostle had described man under the wrath of God as not giving glory to God as God but changing his glory into an image and a lie and making a god after the imaginations of man’s heart. Faith gives glory to God by believing

that what he promised, he will certainly perform. Faith lets God be God. Faith becomes nothing in the face of the promise and gives glory to God as the one who will perform that which is impossible for man.

Faith in God

Faith does not lose hope in the face of the impossibility of the promise, but faith is a firm conviction and full persuasion that God will do what he said, because faith knows God. Faith has as its object God, the living God. Faith does not have as its object so much the promise itself but the God of the promise. The promise is the word and holy oath of God about what he will do. And faith receives that promise and understands that promise. Yet the object of faith is the living God. So scripture in Romans 4 repeatedly emphasizes about Abraham’s faith that he believed God.

The knowledge of God that faith has is not a general and indistinct knowledge that God exists, that he is, and that he must be worshiped. The knowledge of God that faith has is that God calls the things that are not as though they were and that he raises the dead.

In summary form faith knows God as God alone. Faith knows God as God and as God has revealed himself. God must tell us who he is and what he is like. We cannot conceive of God truly in our minds, for that conception is always a lie. Such is man’s sin when he beholds the eternal power and Godhead of God. Man holds the truth of God in unrighteousness and fashions for himself and worships an idol of his own vain imaginations. But God dwells in a light unto which no man can approach. God is infinitely exalted above the creature and all the creation. He alone is what he is, and he is the I AM THAT I AM. He is not, contrary to all speculative philosophy, the first cause or the cause of all causes. If God were a cause, man could come to God through his thinking and logic and conceive of God in his mind as he does all other causes. God is not in any sense the ultimate one. He is not simply ultimate, but he is infinite and infinitely exalted in his being and in all his thoughts and ways. He is infinite in his glory and in all his perfections. He is infinitely holy, righteous, good, and true. He is infinitely sovereign, powerful, gracious, and merciful. He is the exalted one who must stoop to enter heaven itself and to make the earth his footstool. And because God revealed himself, Abraham knew him as God.

Abraham knew two things about God.

First, God is the one who calls the things that are not as though they were. He is then the one who is and possesses his being eternally. He has no beginning but is eternal. By him all things consist. Thus too he conceives of all things. They are eternally in his thoughts and are

perfect before him. He gives existence to those things by calling them. He speaks, and it is done. He speaks, and all things receive their being from him. What is eternally in his conception and what is eternally before him, he creates. When the apostle says that God calls the things that are not as though they were, this, of course, refers to creation. There was nothing but God; and out of himself he called all things, and they were. He said, "Let light be; let the seas and the dry land appear; let all the seas bring forth fish and birds; let the land bring forth the plants and animals," and they all were. But understand that the thought of Romans 4:17 is that this is who God is, and this is how God operates. He calls the things that be not as though they had being. If we call something, it already must have its being. But God operates by his mighty power to give existence to what does not have being. God is not the God of evolution. Evolution is sheer unbelief and atheism and the denial that God is and that he calls the things that are not as though they were.

Second, Abraham knew that God is the God who quickens the dead. God gives life to the dead, or he makes the dead to live. This is, as it were, the highest form of calling the things that are not as though they were. In his work of recreation, God raises the dead. Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 1:27–28:

27. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;
28. And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.

Paul is speaking of our salvation. In the matter of our salvation, we "are not" because in Adam all died. God raises the dead. That is what Abraham believed. He believed in the total depravity of man and that God raises the dead to spiritual life.

We must understand what death is. Death is damnation. Death is God's sentence that he executed upon the whole race of mankind. The dead are thus legally and rightly dead. God pronounced a sentence upon them and carried that sentence out, so that all men are bound in the power of death and are worthy of eternal condemnation. Then that God gives life to some of them means that he gives righteousness to the unrighteous. He justifies the ungodly. In their justification he gives to them the right to eternal life. And having justified them, he gives to them eternal life. To raise the dead is not merely to bring them back to this life or to the life that they had previously in Adam, but God gives eternal life to them. He gives to them life with himself and in his covenant and in the heavenly and eternal city of light.

He is that God. He does this. He is not merely willing to do this, but he also does this. It is in God to call the things that are not as though they were and to give life to the dead.

That God Abraham believed in; thus he hoped against hope. He staggered not in unbelief when God said that Abraham would be the father of many nations. Abraham gave glory to God that what God said, he was able to perform.

Abraham's faith is our faith. Our faith rests on that God. We believe him in all his words and promises to us because he is the God who calls the things that are not as though they were and because he is the God who raises the dead.

Giving Glory to God

And what did Abraham believe that God would do? Abraham believed that God would perform his promise! The promise is simply what God says that he will do. The promise absolutely excludes what man must do. The promise is what God will do out of his own will and counsel as that counsel comes to and is revealed to man in God's word. The promise always has reference to the action of the living God.

The promise is also always essentially the same in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The promise clothes itself in different forms and expresses itself in different words, for the promise is very rich and glorious. But the essence of the promise is always the same. The essence of the promise is always of a seed, and that seed is Christ. The essence of the promise is Christ and the salvation that is in Christ.

God first gave the promise to Adam and Eve when they stood trembling in the garden. God said to the serpent, "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed" (Gen. 3:15). God extended the horizon of that promise in Noah when God encompassed the whole creation with the rainbow and promised that the seed would be heir of the whole world. And God said to Abraham that his seed would be as the stars of heaven and as the sand by the seashore innumerable, and God told Abraham that his seed would inherit the land of Canaan.

The apostle interprets that promise of the seed and of Canaan to mean that Abraham would be the heir of the world: "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith" (Rom. 4:13). For the fulfillment of the promise, it is not important what happened to that earthly land. There was an important typical fulfillment of that promise in David and Solomon, but even that fulfillment was

short-lived and incomplete and looked forward to a different day. The issue never was what would happen to the earthly land of Canaan. The land of Canaan stood for the world that Abraham would inherit. Not a strip of land but the world was his inheritance, not the world as we now see it but that world as the whole world will be raised from the dead and recreated by the power of God through the righteousness of God and as that will usher in a new and an everlasting age. In that age the world will be inhabited by all those who are the spiritual children of Abraham.

And if Abraham was to be heir of the world, then he had to have a seed. The promise always came to Abraham as a promise to him and his seed. Thus that promise always referred to Christ, the seed in whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.

All external things testified that Abraham would never have a seed, for he and Sarah were dead. And Abraham believed God that what God had promised, he would do. Abraham believed God that he had a seed. Abraham believed first that from him Christ would come. That is the first reference of the seed. Abraham believed that Christ would come and that through Christ the righteousness of God would be established.

Thus Abraham believed also that through that righteousness he would be the father of many nations, whom God would also raise up from the dead through the righteousness of Christ. So in the face of all testimonies to the contrary, Abraham said, "I am the father of many. I am the father of many whom God in his counsel ordained in Christ to righteousness and eternal life in Jesus Christ, God's Son."

Therefore Abraham also believed that God would raise Christ from the dead, for there was no way to establish righteousness and eternal life apart from the death and the resurrection of Christ. Abraham believed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in whom Abraham himself and his seed would be justified. And thus he said, "I am the father of many." He did not know how God would accomplish that, but he believed God and gave glory to God that what he had said he would fulfill because he is the God who calls the things that are not as though they were and who raises the dead.

And Abraham's faith is our faith.

He is the father of many, and we are in Christ the many. If we are Christ's, then are we Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. We say in the sight of God that we are righteous and we have eternal life and we are heirs of the world.

Yet everything testifies to the opposite. The testimony of our consciences in the face of the law is that we daily increase our debts with God and that we are damned. The testimony of our lives is that we are dead and dying. Every creak of the bone and every ailment of the body testify to that fact. We are cast out of the world and made sinners and criminals. We are in the valley of the shadow of death, and there is no way out in our power.

And the faith that God has put in our hearts turns away from that testimony of the external and rests on God alone, the God who does raise the dead in Christ. Abraham could only see Christ's day afar off, and Abraham rejoiced in that day because it was his salvation. He had but a fleeting and dim word from God concerning his heir.

We have the full and complete revelation of God in Christ. Abraham looked forward in hope to that day, and we live out of the hope of that day and look forward to the day when God will bring to pass the complete resurrection and renewal of all things in the new heaven and new earth where righteousness will dwell. This is the God of our salvation. On him alone the Christian's hope rests. In him alone the Christian believes. The Christian's conviction that God's word is true; his assurance that what God promises, God will perform; and his full persuasion that everlasting righteousness and eternal life are his for Christ's sake is faith.

That faith is not a religious feeling that is manufactured by the Christian in his own soul. That faith is wholly the gift of God to him in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit so that God gives to him that conviction, assurance, and full persuasion, and he rests in the living God.

Faith is not man's doing or activity or a condition for the reception of the promise, but faith is a doing nothing for the promise.

By that faith—faith alone—we are justified. To justification we turn next time.

—NJL

Men that had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do.—1 Chronicles 12:32

THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL AND ITS TWOFOLD EFFECT

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. — Isaiah 55:11

For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: to the one we are the savour of death unto death: and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? — 2 Corinthians 2:15–16

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. — Hebrews 6:4–6

Introduction

This article was originally a doctrine class given for the instruction of the members of First Reformed Protestant Church. The intent of the class was to give instruction regarding the preaching of the gospel and how it carries out the eternal will of God, to address the charges that have come against the preaching, and to explain the reality of the rejection of the gospel. The occasion for the class was the doctrinal controversy that had troubled First church for the better part of a year, which controversy culminated in schism, men's rejecting the gospel, and half of the congregation leaving the Reformed Protestant denomination. Through this all the Lord preserved his church by his Word and Spirit against the fair words and vain speeches of ungodly men.

As I considered all the objections and opposition that the church has faced, there was one unifying subject: All the opposition centered around the preaching of the gospel. The word of God has gone out of God's mouth from Sunday to Sunday in First Reformed Protestant Church, but those who opposed that word attempted to make the pulpit ineffective and to diminish the message of Jesus Christ from his ambassador. There were attempts to sow doubt and foment rebellion against that word. Lest anyone think that I am interested in defending my name and reputation, I am not. This ultimately has nothing to do with me. My name is already mud, and men revile it. They cast it out as an evil thing. Blessed are you when men shall revile you and say all manner of evil against you falsely. But the attacks moved from the irrelevant sphere of my name and reputation into a rejection of Christ and

his gospel. If the attacks remained solely against my person, then we would have no need for this doctrine class.

It is the preaching of the gospel against which man rages and which word never returns to God empty. It is the preaching of the gospel that is a savor of life unto life and a savor of death unto death. It is into the sphere of the gospel wherein men had been brought and from which they turned away, of whom God says that it is impossible to renew to repentance. The preaching of the gospel always accomplishes God's eternal purpose of gathering the elect and hardening the unbelieving and reprobate, especially in the sphere of the covenant.

Cain and Abel were both in the sphere of the covenant. They were both in the church. They were brought up in the same home, heard the same word, and had the same parents. You could say that they went to the same church, school, and catechism classes. They both heard the word of the gospel that God had delivered to Adam and Eve in the garden. One believed, and the other did not. Abel was elect, and he received that word of promise and believed in the bloody Lamb that was slain for the remission of sins. Cain was reprobate, and he brought to God of the fruit of the ground, his own works. And Cain slew Abel, seeing that Abel's works were righteous. God's elect are appointed to believe, and the rest believe not because they are not of Christ's sheep.

The only scriptural explanation that the word of God gives for why men left the Reformed Protestant Churches is election and reprobation as both are carried out by the preaching of the gospel. Does that mean that I am calling this man or that man reprobate? or judging a man's eternal

destination? No. A believer can walk in a lie for a time. I do not doubt that at all. The believer has a flesh in which unbelief, carnality, and rebellion sit in the closest proximity to the new man in Christ. The believer can fall lamentably as David and Peter did and lose a sense of God's favor for a time. The believer can live in that unbelief and carnality until the Holy Spirit renews him. God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election, never wholly withdraws his Spirit. God preserves in his people the incorruptible seed of regeneration, and by his Word and Spirit, he effectually renews them to repentance. But they will be renewed. They will repent. Should they not be renewed, they will perish in their sins, revealing that they were never of God's sheep. All of the opposition we faced centered around the preaching of the gospel, which carries out God's eternal will. Always there is a twofold effect.

The Idea of This

What is the gospel? It is important to define terms. It has been alleged that we do not know what the gospel is and that we have some fictitious opinions about it. Negatively, the gospel is not about you. It is not about your working or efforts. It is not even about what you do by God's grace. This is the definition: The gospel is the good news or glad tidings of salvation in Jesus Christ. God delivered that good news in Genesis 3:15 to trembling Adam and Eve in the garden. God gave his promise that he eternally conceived of, spoke, and realized there. The gospel is one thing: Jesus Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23).

Therefore, the content of the gospel is the promise. God's promise is that eternal decree of God whereby he swore by his own name, for he could swear by no greater. He promised to save his people from their sins. His promise is his holy oath. As God, he is powerful and almighty to realize his word of promise. Jesus Christ as the way of salvation for damnable sinners who are fallen hopelessly in sin is the good news. Jesus Christ is the promise of God. All the promises of God are yes and amen in him. All throughout the Old Testament, God further elucidated that promise. That promise was of an eternal king with an eternal kingdom. That promise was of the mediator who reconciled man to God. By promise God would establish his covenant between himself and his people in Christ.

Sometimes scripture speaks not of a singular promise but of plural promises. When scripture does that, it is teaching the richness and depth of the promise. First, the promise is *Christ for you*. I mean that Jesus Christ, as the historical realization of the gospel, came to this earth on behalf of his people for the purpose of saving his people. Christ came in your flesh as very God and very man, united in the one person of the Son of God. Christ came under the law and was made a curse for you. Christ came while you were yet God's enemies and reconciled

you to God. Christ lived a life unto God the Father in which Christ perfectly loved God and was consecrated to the glory of God's name. Christ saved you from your sins, accomplished your righteousness, merited eternal life, warred against sin, and earned a perfect victory. All salvation is finished in him. Salvation is wrapped up in the person, natures, words, and works of Jesus Christ.

The promise is also *Christ in you*. I mean that Jesus Christ, as he ascended into heaven, received the Holy Spirit, and Christ poured out his Spirit upon the church, so that his church receives all the riches that are in Christ. This is the clear teaching of scripture in Acts 2:39: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." Scripture simply equates the reception of the Holy Spirit and the promise. *Christ in you* is regeneration, calling, faith, conversion, justification, and sanctification. Those are the riches that are in Christ that come into your possession when you receive the promise of the Holy Spirit. When you receive those blessings of God, you have received the promise. The promise therefore does not include merely the objective accomplishment of your salvation, but the promise also includes the conscious experience of your salvation. It includes the application of salvation to the elect sinner. That is the realization of the promise in you.

It has been charged that the Reformed Protestant Churches do not preach sanctification. But the Reformed Protestant Churches preach sanctification properly. The charge stems from the idea that in sanctification we are no longer talking about what Christ did, but we are talking about what man must do. The issue for those who make this charge is that we preach that man does not have a part in his sanctification whereby he gains something with God by his works, and we ascribe the blessing of sanctification exclusively to God. God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit breaks the power and dominion of sin in you and renews you according to the image of Christ. Sanctification is a work of God on your condition. All the believer's good works and acts of obedience remain strictly fruit. The Reformed Protestant Churches do not deny sanctification, but we preach that God sanctifies his people and that sanctification remains entirely outside the will and working of the sinner. Sanctification is a blessing of God that he gives when he realizes his promise in you. He makes you a holy people, the fruit of which is that you walk in all the good works that God has eternally determined.

The gospel of promise must be preached. The prophets, apostles, evangelists, and ministers are heralds or ambassadors of that good news of the promise. They bring a message from the king to his people. The preachers do not bring their own messages or wisdom, but they bring what God has revealed—nothing more and nothing less. The message is simple: Jesus Christ crucified. In

that message God reveals his profound love for his people and unfolds his eternal mystery of salvation for the salvation of his people that he has chosen in love.

The preaching is the official, authoritative proclamation of the gospel by the instituted church through her officebearers in the service of the word of God through Christ. The preaching stands in the service of the word alone. Such preaching is carried out officially in the church through her ministers whom she calls and sends. The preaching is not merely about Christ, but Christ himself comes and preaches to his church. The preaching is not merely a message concerning Christ, but Christ comes to deliver his message. Christ's voice is the only voice ever heard in his church. The preaching does not come from the will of man. Christ preaches in his church with authority. He says, "This must be believed; this must be rejected."

God is pleased to use the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). The preaching is the wisdom of God. Man says about the preaching, "It is foolish." Man counts it ridiculous. Man sees only a man. Man hears only a man. Man decides that he can take or leave the preaching. If a man likes what he hears, he says that it was Christ speaking. If a man does not like what he hears, he says that it was only a man speaking and dismisses the word. But the foolishness of preaching is God's wisdom.

The preaching when it comes in the church authoritatively and officially is not at all the word of man. "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). The preaching is not inspired, of course. That is not the meaning of the text. Neither is it that every word of every sermon is perfect. But it means when that word is expounded, taught, and applied faithfully, then it is God's word to his church at that particular time. This text is conclusive for the truth of applications in sermons. At best there has been some resistance to the applications made in the preaching at First church; at worst the applications have been rejected as the word of man. The fact is that if the application flows out of the text and is applied to the congregation, that application is God's word too, and it may not be rejected. That application is the word of God to the congregation.

I cannot explain the depth of 1 Thessalonians 2:13. How is it that the minister prepares all week in his study and when he walks up to the pulpit on Sunday, the Spirit uses that man as an instrument to feed both the minister and the congregation? When I started preaching regularly while in seminary, I asked myself the question, "How am

I going to be fed?" I prepared all week. I knew what was coming. I knew the text. That is part of the deep mystery of the preaching. It is not just for the congregation. The minister has to be strengthened and fed too. He has to be built up by the Spirit of Christ. Often the minister goes to the pulpit totally empty after being battle-bruised and weary from a long week of fighting against his own sin, the devil, and the world. And God fills him up. We are so carnal, and always our flesh wants to make the preaching a carnal thing. We see Reverend so-and-so, and we do not like how he said this or how he did that. It is very easy to criticize the preaching if we view it carnally. But the preaching of the gospel is the very word of God and not the word of man.

The gospel is also that God took you into his covenant fellowship in Jesus Christ. The covenant is the spontaneous relationship of fellowship and friendship in Jesus Christ. All of Christ's work is for the purpose that you might have and experience fellowship with God. Christ brings you to the Father. Christ is the new and living way through the veil into the holy of holies and the presence of God. Christ's name Emmanuel, meaning *God with us*, is a covenantal name. In Christ as your head, on the basis of his work as mediator of the covenant, he reconciled you to God. That is the gospel of your salvation. To be made a member of the covenant means that you have received salvation. The end or the goal of all things is the covenant, in which God will dwell with his people eternally.

The negative aspect of the covenant is enmity, or the antithesis. God made you his friends and therefore also made you enemies with the world. The gospel is also the preaching of the antithesis. God put enmity between you and the world, between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Warfare results from the enmity that God placed. Jesus Christ warred on your behalf against his and your enemies. After I spoke at the Reformed Believers Publishing annual meeting this past October, there was a low murmur that my speech was not the gospel. Something supposedly was missing from that speech. Apparently I was supposed to say, "Jesus Christ fulfilled the antithesis." But the charge that my speech was not the gospel is not true; that God made you his friends and therefore enemies of the world is the gospel. That has been determined in eternity and was established at the word of the cross. The cross of Christ was the culmination of his warring against your enemies: sin, death, your flesh, the devil, the grave, and the lie. Christ went down into the pit of hell for your salvation. And he came out of the grave utterly victorious when God raised him. Christ accomplished your warfare and pardoned all your sins.

However, the negative response to my speech led to the positive development of the antithesis in my theology. That response drove me to the word of God and the confessions. One particular aspect of development was

the calling of the antithesis as it flowed out of the gospel of the antithesis. That calling was developed in the closest connection with the third doctrinal section of the Reformed baptism form. The baptism form is an incredible form. You can test all a man's doctrine against that form. The third section speaks of our part in the covenant. It does not speak of us being a party with God. There is only one party, and that is God's party. But our part in the covenant is the life of good works and thankfulness that God gives to his people. Still, this part is not about you, but it is about God and what he works in and through you. God works in you to will and to do of his good pleasure. It is a privilege that God gives to you a part in the covenant. It is impossible that one who is justified by faith alone and united to Jesus Christ does not bring forth fruit. For Christ is the living vine, and we are the branches, and his life flows through us.

Both the positive and the negative of the covenant and the antithesis are expressed in the baptism form. We are admonished of and obliged unto new obedience. We are exhorted and commanded positively to cleave to God; to trust in him; to love him with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength; and to walk in a new and holy life. We live lives consecrated unto God. We live lives of good works, which are done according to the law of God, out of a true faith, and to the glory of God. That is our part. We are called to that part, being made friends of God in the world and standing as his friend-servants.

Negatively, the baptism form commands and exhorts that we forsake the world and crucify our old natures. First, I briefly note that repentance is found here in the third part of the form as a fruit of faith. Crucifying the old nature is repentance. Second, that exhortation to forsake the world is the calling, demand, and command of the antithesis. We are called to forsake the world of sin, apostate Christianity, and friends and family who live in unbelief. *Exclusive rebukism* is a made-up term that men are trying to place in our mouths. I think that they could have found something that rolled off the tongue better. Regardless, they must grapple with the third section of the baptism form and attempt to wedge their man-centered theology into it that allows them to live entirely how they want. The believer always, in every sphere of his life, is a servant of his sovereign friend. His sovereign friend is holy. The lie is profane and unholy. If a believer's friends and family hold to a lie, they are the unfruitful works of darkness. The calling is to have no fellowship with them but to reprove (bring to light and expose) the darkness by the light. That is the clear word of God in Ephesians 5:11. Let the opponents of our doctrine wrestle with that text. There is room for sanctified wisdom in what manner the word of God is to be brought by the believer. Do not use that as an excuse to put away God's

word, but God reveals in the circumstances surrounding one's relationship if positive instruction can be brought or if a sharp reproof and a call to repentance are necessary. The circumstances may vary, but the calling remains the same. And never is the relationship itself the end or goal but God's glory.

The preaching of the gospel carries out God's eternal will of election and reprobation. Canons of Dordt 1.8 is the Reformed confession's teaching on election. Election determines not only who God's people are but also the content of what God bestows upon them. They are elect; therefore, God draws them into his covenant and gives to them life. He gives to the elect the riches that are in Jesus Christ, and God saves the elect for the demonstration of his mercy and the praise of his glorious grace.

Canons 1.15 is the Reformed confession's teaching on reprobation. Reprobation is the definite appointment of certain persons to destruction. It is a pity that we have a poor translation of article 15. We have the carryover translation of the Reformed Church in America. The article in its present reading smacks of single predestination. In the original, however, the article is strong on double predestination. God does not reprobate men by simply passing them over. He eternally damned them, and his wrath eternally stood on them. They only ever perish in the world. On the ground of man's sin and unbelief of the gospel, God sends them to hell. God loved Jacob, and God hated Esau before either did good or evil.

The gospel carries out that eternal decree of double predestination. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to those who believe (Rom. 1:16). The main point of the apostle Paul in Romans 1:16 is that the gospel is the power of God. Because it is a power, the apostle was unashamed of it and was ready to preach it in Rome. *Power* is the ability to accomplish some purpose. The gospel is the power of God to accomplish his purpose to save his elect people. The salvation the apostle has in view is the justification of ungodly, elect sinners. God sends the gospel whithersoever he wills for the purpose of his eternal will for the salvation of his people. Implied in that the gospel is a power of God unto salvation is the truth that the gospel is also the power of God unto the damnation of the reprobate.

Both election and reprobation glorify God. That is made explicit in 2 Corinthians 2:14–17:

14. Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.
15. For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish:
16. To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?

17. For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.

The word of the gospel comes to God's elect, and it is a savor of life unto life. The same word of the gospel comes to the reprobate, and it is savor of death unto death.

Before God man is nothing but a festering, putrid, stinking object. Man is not sweet and savory, but he is disgusting to God and is a wretched smell that wafts up to God's nostrils. But then comes the sweet savor of Christ. Christ is a savor infinitely sweeter than the sweetness of Adam in the garden. That is because in and through Christ there is the knowledge of God. Christ knows God. Christ declares God. Christ exegetes God to us. Through Christ the believer knows how indescribably lovely and good God is in the sending of his Son to hell for you. Is there anything sweeter than that? We have that knowledge of God only through the revelation of himself in Jesus Christ.

The savor is in those who perish and in those who are saved. Both are facts. Men are perishing, and men are being saved. There are men and women who through the gospel come into the closest contact with the sweet savor, Jesus Christ, with the only result being that they become deadlier than they were before. The truth of the matter is that the sweeter the thing you give to the wicked, the more wicked he becomes. Christ with all his divine and heavenly flavor works death unto the reprobate. That is the way it has been all throughout history, and that is the way it is now. But in those who are saved, Christ is the sweet savor of life unto life. The elect child comes to church alive in the Lord, and hearing the gospel, tasting that the Lord is gracious, he leaves church more alive in Christ. In those who are perishing, in those who are being saved—in both the word of the gospel through the apostle is a sweet savor.

That word of the gospel is a savor *unto God*, which means that the twofold effect is pleasing to him as the realization of his eternal will. We like to present the matter as if someone can be neutral over against the gospel. With every sermon that is preached, two things infallibly are happening. The elect child of God increases a little more in the knowledge of God, and the reprobate man perishes a little more. And the sweet savor of Christ, whether it kills or whether it quickens, is always a sweet savor unto God. It is as such because it always accomplishes God's will.

You hear in 2 Corinthians 2:14–17 an echo of Isaiah 55:11: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” Isaiah told Israel that the word of God never returns unto him void. The word that goes forth in the preaching of the gospel comes out of God's mouth—not a man's mouth—and that word never returns to God void or empty. The word of God goes forth either unto

hardening or to making tender. Every word God speaks accomplishes his eternal good pleasure of election and reprobation. No man has a neutral reaction to the gospel. Man either believes it or rejects it. And that response of man is the direct result of God's eternal will. But either way the gospel shall prosper in the thing whereto God sent it. That is the comfort for the poor preacher. He is killed and abused for Christ's sake. Men hate Christ, and they hate the preachers for preaching Christ. The deepest reason for that hatred is that they hate God. For all things are unto God, and he is the ultimate end of all things, both in heaven and in hell.

Men are called and separated unto the gospel to preach it. As far as the preacher is concerned, he would like to be a savor of life unto life to his whole congregation. Not one preacher enjoys being a savor of death unto death. But the minister bows his head to God's will, brings the word of God, and spreads the savor of the knowledge of God in Christ. For the minister knows that God will prosper the word, realizing his purpose and accomplishing his eternal will, for the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It is a sweet savor of life unto life and a sweet savor of death unto death.

Lastly regarding the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of the gospel opens and shuts the kingdom of heaven as one of the keys of the kingdom. In the matter of the keys, we tend to underestimate the preaching and to overestimate discipline. The kingdom of heaven is opened and shut not only by Christian discipline but by the preaching of the gospel too. The gospel is declared and publicly testified to every believer, that whenever he receives the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all his sins are really forgiven him of God for Christ's sake. Christ comes through his church and opens to his people the kingdom of heaven. He throws open the gates of heaven.

On the contrary, it is declared and publicly testified to every unbeliever and such as do not sincerely repent that they stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted. The preaching of the gospel, which pierces through man, does what Christian discipline often cannot do. Man often can maintain just enough religious piety to escape the formal discipline of the church, but he cannot escape the discipline of the preaching of the word of God. God himself exposes hypocrites in the church through the preaching.

There is an objection to this truth of the preaching that goes like this: “You may not pray Psalm 59:13, that God might consume our enemies in his wrath. God's wrath is only on the reprobate. Therefore, you are calling me and everyone outside the Reformed Protestant Churches reprobate. You as a shepherd must only pray for our repentance.” The objectors must grapple with God's word throughout the psalms and with Lord's Day 31, which, answering how the kingdom of heaven is opened and shut

by the preaching of the gospel, states that those who do not believe that gospel “stand exposed to the wrath of God and eternal condemnation, so long as they are unconverted” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 118). The reality is that God’s word came to men, and they rejected it. My word and your word as a church is that all who have left us stand exposed to God’s wrath and to eternal condemnation for their wicked sin of schism in attempting to divide the body of Christ here in this place and destroying in God’s house. They left a true church of Jesus Christ. You simply cannot hedge and make excuses for them. Do not take away from what God’s word clearly reveals. If you believe that this congregation is a true church and that the pure gospel is preached here according to scripture and the confessions, then all who have left us God has set outside the kingdom of heaven, and they stand exposed to the wrath of God.

Slandorous Charges Refuted

There are slanderous charges centering around the preaching of the gospel. The first is that the preaching is comfortless. *Comfort* is the knowledge and assurance of a great good that stands antithetically over against a great evil. Comfort is a good so great that it affords the one who possesses it unspeakable joy and peace. Comfort is a good so great that it overcomes the evil. Comfort is a good so great that the evil stands in the service of the good. The result of possessing this great good is that a man can bear evil happily.

Christ comes and speaks in his church to war against the lie and against sin, and that is comfort for God’s people. The evil in the congregation needed to be brought into the light. The light needed to shine on that darkness. The gospel stands at the center of that. Christ shone the light of his truth against the wickedness of man. Christ came for the sake of the truth, for he is truth. You as God’s people are engaged in a mighty conflict. Christ comes to tell you that you have the victory. And to encourage and strengthen you in the spiritual battle, Christ comes to arm you for that warfare.

Men did not like that warring and denied the reality that the church was engaged in spiritual warfare. They did not like the sharp sermons and the applications. They wanted the pulpit to shut up about the controversy that our church was facing, and they began slandering the preaching as comfortless.

The next charge is that the pulpit is abusive. The preaching made men nothing. It was especially in the sermon “The Carnal Church” that the word of God came and was applied in the sharpest possible way. God in that sermon said that the congregation was carnal and babyish. Many received that word and loved it. They rejoiced in Jesus Christ as their perfect savior over against their nothingness. Some bristled and railed against that word,

claiming that they were not carnal or babyish. They would not allow Christ to make them nothing.

Also, when the law is strictly preached, it makes you nothing. The law serves the gospel in that way. The law serves the gospel in emptying you, showing you more and more your sinful nature, and driving you to Christ for righteousness by faith alone. Properly preached, the law empties you of all your piety, works, and religiousness. You and I must be made nothing. In Galatians the law is called a schoolmaster, and it is not a kind one, but it is cruel. That is the first use of the law. It is not supposed to make you feel good. It is supposed to empty you. But if man thinks he is something, and the law comes and makes him nothing, then man will cry out that the preaching is abusive.

I imagine the charge of the preaching being abusive also centers around tone and manner. “The minister did not say things in a nice or pleasant way. The minister was ranting. His tone was not what I wanted. His manner was poor.” My tone and manner, however, are not the standard of my preaching. My tone and manner do not drive away the sheep. The truth cannot ever drive away the sheep. The Lord did not make me a nice, pleasant man on the pulpit. He made me a fiery preacher. All my vehemence is for the truth of God and against the lie that opposes Christ. Do not mistake the minister’s vehemence for anger. I do not preach angry. I testify here and now that I am happy and content with God’s will. Yet with every sermon I preach with urgency, concerned with the eternal destination of your souls.

The third charge is that the sermons are Christless. I do not have much to say here. The pulpit preached Jesus Christ crucified as the only way of salvation. There was never a sermon without Jesus Christ. Neither was anything you do made the way unto a blessing or fellowship. Nor did I create a law regarding the calling of the antithesis, but I grounded it firmly in the law starting at Lord’s Day 33 on true conversion all the way to Lord’s Day 44.

However, I understand the charge this way. The minister in the preaching did not meet some checklist that men had in their minds. The minister has to say this thing, that thing, and the other thing; then it is the gospel. I have to hear these special words, or it is not the gospel. In the case of the antithesis, the magic words were that Jesus Christ fulfilled the antithesis. And then that was supposed to release men and women from the calling to be at war; they could go and socialize with the world without ever bringing God’s word to bear on sin, and they did not have to feel guilty. The gospel declared in the preaching that God is everything and man is nothing. I never preached anything different than that. Those who make the charge that the preaching is Christless did not hear in the preaching the Christ they wanted and desired. They wanted a nice Christ and not the Christ of the scriptures.

The final charge against the preaching is that the preaching is Spiritless. The charge is that because I use material from *The Triple Knowledge* and from sermons by Rev. Herman Hoeksema and Rev. Nathan Langerak, I am Spiritless, and thus there is no gospel preached at First Reformed Protestant Church.

This charge of plagiarism—theft—is proof to me of carnality in how men view the preaching of the gospel and the word of God. They view it as some earthly good to be appropriated and stolen from the neighbor for earthly gain. The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 42 speaks of God's gifts and earthly possessions and that we do not take them for ourselves in hatred of the neighbor for God's sake. In the gospel a man is not speaking, but it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. When I listen to Hoeksema and Langerak, I am not hearing the man but the Spirit of Christ. I hear the truth, which cannot be stolen.

This action on the part of the minister is legitimate. First, 2 Timothy 1:13 teaches, "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." This was the apostle Paul's instruction to his spiritual son Timothy: to hold fast the form of sound words. "The form of sound words" first means the doctrine that Paul taught Timothy. But second, it means the very expressions, words, and phrases that Paul used. Sound doctrine has a form, or literally it has a pattern or a copy. That form itself is passed down. How the sound words are even spoken is passed down. I do not have to come with a new definition of justification. I simply take what Reverend Hoeksema wrote in *Reformed Dogmatics*. I do not need a new definition of faith, but I take what was taught to me in seminary.

The apostle continues, "Which thou hast heard of me." Timothy was to learn from the apostle's mouth, and this refers to the entirety of the sermons and lessons that Paul preached and taught. Timothy learned from Paul by listening to him preach, and Timothy preached that himself. And Paul adds "in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus." The very act of Timothy's teaching what he had heard from Paul was in love for the flock and for Jesus Christ. Timothy taught to the congregation what Paul had taught him. To hear the truth, to have the truth deposited in you, to believe that truth, and to teach it that way to God's people are acts of faith and love. And Timothy was to "hold fast" and not to depart from the pattern, system, and form of Paul's instruction.

Second, 2 Timothy 2:2, the classic text for seminary instruction, says, "The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men." Again, what Timothy heard from Paul, he was to teach—not only the doctrine but the form and phrases of the doctrine. What Timothy preached and committed to others was the "same," even the same form, that he

had heard and received from the apostle. Timothy did not speak anything different. The truth never changes.

The inspired writers of the New Testament took extensively from the Old Testament. The apostles were taught by Jesus Christ himself. Timothy learned everything he knew from Paul. Calvin took his theology from Augustine. Hoeksema took his theology from Calvin and Kuyper. Reverend Langerak took his theology from Hoeksema and Engelsma. The theology that I have learned and am still learning is taken from Reverend Hoeksema and Reverend Langerak. I do not preach anything new and novel. The truth has not changed. This charge of sin cuts the minister off from the church of all ages and is a rejection that the Spirit leads the church into all truth. The truth is simply deposited and passed down from age to age to the next generation. The very work that I am doing is the work demanded of me as a theologian and preacher to take the truth and bring it a higher state of development. In order to develop it, I first have to fully grasp it.

Paul adds "among many witnesses." Those witnesses, when they heard Timothy preach, would have heard the same things that Paul preached. They would have said, "Timothy's doctrine and the form of his doctrine is the same as Paul's." And the congregation would have rejoiced that there was nothing new and novel in Timothy's preaching but that God had deposited in Timothy the same doctrine and form of doctrine as Paul's through the teaching of Paul as spiritual father and Timothy as spiritual son.

Lastly, 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." All that I have explained does not preclude "rightly dividing the word." The word has to be divided and cut up and fed to the congregation, so that they understand it. The word has to be put in a form such that the congregation can grasp the concepts and be fed that nourishment of the gospel. Nothing at all is taken away from the spiritual science of biblical interpretation whatsoever. The minister puts in the time and energy exegeting the word of God and drawing out the Spirit's sense and meaning in a text. The exegete applies and uses the spiritual-grammatical-historical method of interpretation in his labor to draw out and cut up the meat, so that the congregation can feed on Jesus Christ. And the text says "unto God." The minister ultimately stands before God in all his labors, depending upon him and waiting upon him. The minister listens to the Spirit, waits upon the Spirit, and meditates in prayer and throughout the day on the text.

Practically now, the fact is that in his first few years as a minister preaching through the Heidelberg Catechism, the minister preaches *The Triple Knowledge* and develops and applies what he reads to what the church is facing. He begins to develop and expand. That is right and proper. The minister is learning on the job how to teach. It is

not realistic for a minister on day one to simply open the Bible and craft masterful sermons. He has to learn what to look for and how to exegete.

Proving to you that this is not new or novel, in an interview with the editor of the *Beacon Lights*, Rev. Bernard Woudenberg said,

[Prof. Herman] Hanko was a year ahead [of me in seminary]. So we made our first sermons, and in January we preached in Oak Lawn. A few weeks later, HH [Herman Hoeksema] said to us, “Each of you has to go to Hull for six weeks. Who’s going first? (laughter). We said, “We only have two sermons!” So he went to his file cabinet and started digging around. “You can use this one, you can use that one, no, better not use that one, use this one.” So we went away with a pile of his sermons.¹

Woudenberg continued by saying that it was their first year, and they had little seminary instruction. I also had two years in seminary and was sent out. I have to learn, grow, develop, and study the speaking of the Spirit in the preaching. Our fathers rejoiced and freely acknowledged that they continued in and built upon the foundation of their fathers. They were not ashamed of their instruction and openly acknowledged their reliance upon it. This charge of taking material from my spiritual fathers in my own preaching is an attack on the gospel by attempting to make the sermons a lie, and therefore a word that man does not have to listen to and can depart from.

The Living Reality

The living reality of all these charges is that men hated the preaching. They hated the sermon preached on October 20, 2024, titled “The Carnal Church.” They hated the word of God as it came in the pulpit of First Reformed Protestant Church and in the denomination. They were determined to make that message ineffective, sow discontent with the ministers, and snatch the word away in the back of church and in their gatherings.

Hebrews 6:4–8 is a sobering passage in the word of God that we do well to note. How do we explain this text? The text speaks of men who were once enlightened, that is, they received the light of the gospel. Intellectually they understood the truth of the word of God. They apprehended its importance. They even tasted of the heavenly gift—not that they possessed it, but they tasted it. These men were partakers of the Holy Ghost. Still more, they tasted the good word of God. The word of God, which is good because of the blessed promise of eternal life. They tasted the powers of the world to come, that is, the glorious kingdom in which Christ is Lord and in which all his people

reign with him over all things. The text therefore does not speak of true believers, but it speaks of men in the church of Jesus Christ who have come very near the kingdom of God, have apprehended intellectually the kingdom of God and its blessings, and have tasted of the powers of salvation without ever having a spiritual part in the kingdom.

That this is true is evident from the rest of the text, which says that after these men have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance. Spiritually, this means that it is impossible to make a new man out of an old man, to change the natural man into a spiritual man, to change an unbeliever into a believer, and to change the unregenerate into the regenerated Christian. The text says that it is impossible for those men to be renewed again unto repentance.

The text does not mean to say that these men were true, converted believers, and now they are not. But the inspired writer has in mind their former state as they appeared in the church. They were members of the church. They made grand confessions. They brought meals. They spoke the same language of faith. Yet they only ever had an outward show of repentance. And now they have definitely fallen away even from that outward show. They have become unbelievers. They have become part of the antichristian kingdom. They have become wicked outwardly now too. The text says that it is impossible to renew again unto repentance those who so fall away from their apparent former membership in the body of Christ.

The case of these men therefore is hopeless. Their falling away is final. They can never return. It is impossible for man because man cannot bring himself to repentance. It is impossible for God, not because he is not powerful but because he is not willing. They have become manifest as reprobates. Therefore, reprobation is the deepest cause of both their falling away and the impossibility of bringing them again to repentance.

For God’s elect, God’s people never come so close to the kingdom and then fall away deeply and hopelessly. The elect can never fall away. Only the reprobate—in order that they become manifest as profane—are ever placed in such a relationship with the church and the kingdom of heaven. And then God actually makes them manifest as antichristian. Verse six says that they crucify Christ afresh. They despise Christ and treat him as a criminal. They round Christ up and set him again before earthly judges to try him, which is what men are doing right now. They blaspheme Christ and his gospel. They put Christ to an open shame. They take part with the enemies of Christ.

The writer of the text gives an illustration in verses 7 and 8 of a field. If no rain came upon the ground, then neither the good seed nor the thorns and briars would ever become

1 Mark H. Hoeksema, “Interview with Rev. Bernard Woudenberg (1),” *Beacon Lights* 76, no. 2 (February 2017): 10.

manifest. But through the rain—the word of the gospel—the good seed is manifest as the good crop, and the bad seed is manifest as thorns and briars. For the wicked that rain is a savor of death unto death, and for God’s elect it is a savor of life unto life. That is the sobering exegesis of Hebrews 6 for the church of Jesus Christ. That is the explanation of those who reject the preaching of the gospel.²

And so the question must be asked. Why are you here? Why did you stay? Why have you not gone away like the others? Why do you not also depart? Will ye not also go away?

60. Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this [Jesus’ teachings to the Jews in the synagogue that unless you eat and drink him, you have no life in you], said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?
61. When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you?
62. What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?
63. It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.
64. But there are some of you that believe not. For

Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.

65. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.
66. From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.
67. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?
68. Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.
69. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. (John 6:60–69)

You are not here because of something in you. It is not due to your will, intellect, or abilities. Your flesh hates the truth. Your flesh hates the gospel and Jesus Christ. Your flesh squirms at the hard words that it deems offensive. The only reason you are here is that you were given to Jesus Christ by the Father in election. You were appointed to believe the gospel. God loved you, and the fruit of his love for you is that you love him. You hear Christ and see the power of the Spirit. And you rejoice in the preaching of the gospel and its twofold effect.

—TDO

OUR DOCTRINE

Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.—1 Timothy 4:13

SACRIFICES (9): THE *OLAH*, OR BURNT OFFERING

If his offering be a burnt sacrifice... — Lev. 1:3

Its Unique, Doctrinal Emphasis

It is now time to consider the meaning and significance of the different kinds of Levitical sacrifices. We have been considering these sacrifices as they were means by which God taught the gospel to his old testament church. That these sacrifices taught Israel the

truth of the gospel is the explicit teaching of the Reformed creeds. Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 6 teaches that the holy gospel of the mediator was “represented by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law.” Belgic Confession article 25 teaches that the testimonies of the ceremonies and figures of the law “confirm us in the doctrine

² This is the exegesis of Rev. Herman Hoeksema in *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 2:171–75.

of the gospel” because “the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 89, 55).

More specifically, we have been considering these sacrifices in light of their overarching doctrine. As I have already stated in a foregoing article, there is a specific, heavenly doctrine that ties all the bloody sacrifices together: vicarious satisfaction.¹ *Satisfaction* means that God’s justice against the sinner receives all that it is due. Negatively, satisfaction of God’s justice involves full payment for the debt of sin by sustaining the punishment of God’s wrath against sin. Positively, satisfaction of God’s justice fulfills the demand of God’s law by so loving God that God receives all the love that he requires. Simply stated, *satisfaction* means that God says to the sinner, “It is enough. You have suffered the eternity of my infinite wrath against your sin, and you are perfectly righteous before me.” *Vicarious* satisfaction means that another has stood in the sinner’s place by God’s sovereign appointment to act in the sinner’s behalf and to make such satisfaction for him. That substitute is Jesus Christ the Lord. Altogether, the bloody sacrifices gave to Israel a shadowy picture of the Lamb who was slain before the foundation of the world because he was ordained of God to make vicarious satisfaction of God’s infinite and immutable justice for elect sinners whom God eternally loves.

If vicarious satisfaction is the specific, heavenly doctrine that encompasses all the bloody shadow-sacrifices, why did the wisdom of God ordain *four* kinds of bloody sacrifices? Why did not God give to Israel only one kind of bloody sacrifice to bring to his altar?

In answer to this question, first, we may say that when God gave to Israel four kinds of bloody sacrifices, he was reminding Israel of the utter inability of these sacrifices to perfect anyone or anything. God never gave to the Israelites one sacrifice that answered to all their miseries and needs, for God was teaching the Israelites to look beyond the blood of bulls and goats to the single sacrifice of his Son that would perfect them forever.

Second, we may say that when God gave to Israel four kinds of bloody sacrifices, he was showing forth the manifold blessings that belong to vicarious satisfaction. To each kind of sacrifice, God assigned a peculiar emphasis in order that the Israelites might understand all that was necessary to bring them out of their misery into his holy fellowship. Just as the Spirit deemed it necessary to have four separate gospel accounts in the New Testament scriptures to show forth the profound depth of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, so God deemed it necessary to have four separate kinds of bloody sacrifices to show forth all the saving richness of vicarious satisfaction.

How are we to elicit the peculiar emphasis of each kind of bloody sacrifice? We do so by examining the unique name, requirements, occasion, and rituals that belonged to each sacrifice. Men did not name the sacrifices; God did. And when God names someone or something, his word reveals its essence. In addition to the unique name that God ascribed to each kind of Levitical sacrifice, each sacrifice was further distinguished from the others according to what God required, when God required it, and what he required to be done to it. If we examine these four things, then we can discover the peculiar emphasis of each sacrifice.

Let us consider then each of the Levitical sacrifices, following the order that God recorded them in the first seven chapters of Leviticus.

We begin with the burnt offering.

Under the overarching doctrine of vicarious satisfaction, the burnt offering emphasized the pure, vigorous, and perpetual zeal of consecration to God that God’s justice requires. The burnt offering brought the positive demand of God’s moral law to the foreground. The law of God—which law is by no means a dead letter or an external code but the living will of God that surrounds the moral creature every moment of every day—positively requires this: “Continue in me without wavering. Continue in me without departing in any aspect of your life. Continue in me every second with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Continue in perfect love for God out of a perfect heart and through a perfect nature.” And that burnt offering, while on the one hand testifying that man could never meet that demand, also testified to what it took for the fulfillment of that demand by the seed of the woman who crushed the head of the serpent.

Its Law

The burnt offering is the oldest sacrifice recorded in scripture. It is entirely possible that Abel’s offering in Genesis 4:4 was a burnt offering, although the first recorded instance is in Genesis 8, when Noah offered burnt offerings after the flood. God ordered Abraham in Genesis 22 to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering, and then God provided a ram as a substitute. And in Exodus 10 Pharaoh forbade the Israelites to bring all their cattle with them into the wilderness to offer burnt offerings, bringing upon himself the final plague.

The burnt offering was also the most common sacrifice. When God gave his ceremonial law to Israel, he required that there always be a burnt offering upon his altar in a state of immolation.

In Leviticus there are two separate passages that detail the law for the burnt offering. The first passage gives the

1 Luke Bomers, “Sacrifices (2): Their Overarching Doctrine,” *Sword and Shield* 4, no. 1 (June 2023): 26–32.

basic procedure that the people of Israel had to follow when they brought burnt offerings to the altar and is outlined in Leviticus 1:3–9:

3. If his offering be a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish: he shall offer it of his own voluntary will at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD.
4. And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.
5. And he shall kill the bullock before the LORD: and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.
6. And he shall flay the burnt offering, and cut it into his pieces.
7. And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire upon the altar, and lay the wood in order upon the fire:
8. And the priests, Aaron's sons, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the fire which is upon the altar:
9. But his inwards and his legs shall he wash in water: and the priest shall burn all on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD.

Since the peculiarities of this first passage have been well summarized by Dr. Cornelis Van Dam, I quote him at length:

If a bull was not used, but a sheep or a goat, the same basic procedure was followed (Lev. 1:10–13). It was only with the offering of a bird that modifications of this basic procedure occurred (Lev. 1:14–17). Except for the skin (which God in his mercy granted to the priest, Lev. 7:8), the entire animal went up in smoke to God. This was the only offering to do so. Indeed, the Hebrew for the burnt offering is literally “that which goes up” (עֹלָה, cf. Judg. 6:21; 13:20; 20:40; Amos 4:10).

With respect to the frequency of this sacrifice, one must distinguish between those brought voluntarily and those legislated. Leviticus 1 has in view a voluntary burnt offering. People were free to go to the Tabernacle and bring a sacrifice to God, for example, in thanks for his mercies or for the paying of vows. Think of Psalm 66:13–15. “I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, Which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble. I will offer unto thee burnt sacrifices of fatlings, with the incense of rams; I will offer bullocks with goats.”...

Besides the voluntary burnt offerings, there were also those requested by God in his law. From the Mosaic law it is obvious that this sacrifice was the one most frequently offered. The legislated burnt offerings are as follows.

1. Every day a male lamb had to be offered as a burnt offering in the morning and another male lamb in the evening (Ex. 29:38–42; Num. 28:1–8).
2. Each sabbath day two additional lambs were to be sacrificed (Num. 28:9, 10).
3. At the beginning of each month (the New Moon), two young bulls, one ram, and seven male lambs were to be sacrificed (Num. 28:11–14).
4. Each day of the Feast of Passover—Unleavened Bread, the same sacrifices as with the New Moon (Num. 28:16–25).
5. At the Feast of Weeks (Feast of First Fruits) again the same as with the New Moon.
6. At the Feast of Trumpets, one bull, one ram, and seven male lambs (Num. 29:2–4).
7. On the Day of Atonement, one bull, one ram, and seven male lambs (as at the Feast of Trumpets) as well as the special burnt offerings for the atonement which was one ram for the high priest and one for the people (Num. 29:8; Lev. 16:3, 5, 27).
8. On the Feast of Booths a variety of burnt offerings were to be sacrificed. On the first day, thirteen young bulls, two rams, and fourteen male lambs (Num. 29:12–16). With each successive day of the feast, the number of bulls decreased each day by one until on the seventh day there were seven bulls; the number of rams and lambs remained the same (Num. 29:17–35). On the eighth day, there was to be one bull, one ram, seven male lambs (Num. 29:35–38) just as at the Feast of Trumpets and Day of Atonement.
9. Burnt offerings were also required at various purification rituals; after childbirth, a lamb had to be sacrificed (Lev. 12:6–8); after cleansing of male bodily discharges or of abnormal female discharge of blood, a turtledove or a young pigeon (Lev. 15:14–15, 29–30); after defilement during a Nazarite vow, a turtle dove or a young pigeon (Num. 6:10–11); after being cleansed from leprosy, a male lamb or a turtle dove (or young pigeon) (Lev. 14:10, 13, 19–22).

It is quite clear that the burnt offering permeated the life of Israel. Life could not be imagined without it. To miss the burnt offerings was a catastrophe. (Cf. Dan. 8:11–13 where the tribulation coming under Antiochus IV is pictured in terms of the removal of the burnt offering.) For those interested in numbers, the total number of

burnt offerings alone for one normal year was one hundred thirteen young bulls, thirty two rams, and one thousand eighty six lambs. That was the minimum number of burnt offerings that had to be offered to the Lord at the Tabernacle or Temple.²

The second passage for the law of the burnt offering is directed toward the priests and outlined in Leviticus 6:8–13:

8. And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying,
9. Command Aaron and his sons, saying, This is the law of the burnt offering: It is the burnt offering, because of the burning upon the altar all night unto the morning, and the fire of the altar shall be burning in it.
10. And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and his linen breeches shall he put upon his flesh, and take up the ashes which the fire hath consumed with the burnt offering on the altar, and he shall put them beside the altar.
11. And he shall put off his garments, and put on other garments, and carry forth the ashes without the camp unto a clean place.
12. And the fire upon the altar shall be burning in it; it shall not be put out: and the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order upon it; and he shall burn thereon the fat of the peace offerings.
13. The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out.

Here is what Dr. Van Dam wrote regarding this second passage on the law for the burnt offering:

This legislation does not deal with the voluntary burnt offerings, but concerns the daily burnt offerings that were the responsibility of the priests. One can think in this context also of Exodus 29:38–39, 42. “Now this is that which thou shalt offer upon the altar; two lambs of the first year day by day continually. The one lamb thou shalt offer in the morning; and the other lamb thou shalt offer at even: This shall be a continual burnt offering throughout your generations at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the Lord: where I will meet you, to speak there unto thee.”

The continual burnt offering meant that fire had to be kept burning constantly on the altar. This point

is mentioned five times in Leviticus 6:8–13. The voluntary burnt offerings would have helped keep that fire going, but if not, wood was to be used.³

Thus ends the law of the burnt offering.

Its Ascension as a Sweet Savor

Just as the heavens declare the glory of God, day unto day uttering speech and night unto night showing knowledge, so too the burnt offering was a powerful testimony of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Day unto day and night unto night, the burnt offering lay upon the altar in a state of immolation, ascending up into heaven as a perpetual declaration of the richness and perfection and absolute sufficiency of the Lamb who was slain from before the foundation of the world.

It did not matter what day it was or what time of day it was, the burnt offering was always ascending toward God in heaven. What we call the burnt offering, the Jew called *olah*, which simply means *to go up*. Having named this sacrifice thus, God directed the focus of his people to that very visible and uninterrupted stream of smoke that went up into heaven and filled his throne room.

That smoke had a distinct smell.

“The priest shall burn all on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice [*olah*], an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD” (Lev. 1:9).

Smell is a powerful sense.

Smells can trigger a rush of long-forgotten memories. With a quick whiff of a hearty stew baking in the oven, one can be whisked back decades to fond memories of Sunday coffee at the grandparent’s house.

Smells can influence a person’s behavior toward another. A well-showered and perfumed person is much more pleasant to be around than someone who walks about in miasma of body odor because he uses a deodorant stick much less often than he should. Words spoken from a washed mouth are much easier to be heard than words carried on the scent of morning breath.

Smells can have a mighty impact upon one’s mood. Having to sit in a vehicle where a dirty diaper has diffused throughout the cabin is much less relaxing than lying on the couch next to a lavender-scented candle.

And smells can determine whether one decides to put something into his mouth. It is incredibly difficult to

2 Cornelis Van Dam, “The Burnt Offering in Its Biblical Context,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 7, no. 2 (1991): 196–98, <https://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/02vandamjournal72.pdf>. I changed the Van Dam’s scriptural quotations from the Revised Standard Version to the King James Version. Though I quote Dr. Van Dam because I find his overview to be clear and simple, I utterly reject some critical aspects of his doctrine. For example, he teaches that man came up with sacrifices out of a God-given desire to have communion with God again after the fall: “The burnt offering is that which goes up (עָלָה) to God. Thus the motivation for sacrifice is to give a gift to God. We do not read of a divine command that people had to start sacrificing. So apparently, if we can argue from silence, man came up with it” (198). This is an entirely modern and liberal view of sacrifices. Over against this view, I insist that as much as God gave to his elect people the fulfillment of all sacrifices in Jesus Christ, so God gave its shadow to the patriarchs and to Israel.

3 Cornelis Van Dam, “The Burnt Offering in Its Biblical Context,” 204.

ingest durian without first pinching one's nose shut. But one welcomes the scent of bacon frying on a griddle.

The burnt offering, in its ascent unto the presence of God, was a sweet savor that filled his nostrils. The burnt offering was an ongoing memorial of something that filled his heart with gladness. It was a fragrance of something that inclined him to his people. It was an aroma of something that perpetually set him at rest. It was a savory odor of something that he desired with each inhale. As blind Isaac immediately recognized the scent of his eldest son and as the Shulamite's lover detected the fragrance of Lebanon upon her garments, so also God recognized the distinct scent that arose from the altar, and it delighted him.

And day unto day and night unto night, Israel had God's testimony that he smelled a sweet savor by that visible and uninterrupted stream of smoke from the burnt offering.

What a mighty testimony that was to the elect sinner in Israel!

For man by nature does not emit a sweet savor or aroma of rest. The natural man is corrupt. The natural man is a corpse, a bag of maggots, and rotten to the core. Man is as putrid-smelling as an outhouse baking in the summer heat.

If Jacob feared that the Canaanites and Perizzites would gather themselves to destroy his household because of how his sons' actions against Shechem made them to stink among the inhabitants of the land, how much more should not the sons of Adam fear what God will do when their stench billows up into heaven? Will he not quickly arise to cast them out of his presence into the burning trash heap of Hinnom?

But this is what God said to his people: "That burnt offering is a sweet savor within my nostrils. That smell brings to mind a very warm memory. That smell stirs up mighty affection within me. When I smell that uninterrupted stream of smoke that ascends into my presence, I am at rest."

What was the substance of that aroma that continually pleased the most high majesty of God? What was the essence of that fragrance that, like a bathroom spray, it not only nullified the terrible odor of his people but also filled the camp of Israel and heaven with its pleasing scent?

It was not an apothecary blend of myrrh and frankincense. Neither was it the odorous compounds leaving the flesh and fat of the animal upon the altar, for that smoke was but a shadow. The substance of that aroma was the entire life of the Lord Jesus Christ, from the moment of his incarnation until the willing giving of himself unto the death of the cross. What warm memory does that

smell bring to God's mind? It is the decree of God's covenant for the perfect revelation of his glory! What stirring affection does that smell continually arouse in God's heart? It is the eternal love that he has for his people in Jesus Christ, who belong to him as his adopted sons and daughters!

Such is the powerful scent imparted by the life of Jesus Christ, a life that was wholly given in perfect consecration to his heavenly Father. For, as the apostle said, he "hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour" (Eph. 5:2).

Its Perpetual Consumption

What set apart the *olah* of the Lord Jesus Christ as a sweet-smelling savor unto God was his burning zeal for the will and glory of God. It was that burning zeal to which the disciples bore witness in the temple and remembered that it was written, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up" (Ps. 69:9; John 2:17). In holiness Christ was *consumed* with the honor and glory that God was due.

That is obedience. Obedience is that God is your all in all. Obedience means that you are consumed by the thought of God. Obedience means that you are consumed with the desire for God's honor and glory by doing the will of God. Obedience means that the covenant of God is everything to you because that covenant of God is everything to God. Obedience means that your whole life ascends toward God and that all your affections are set on things above and not on things on earth. Obedience is with heart and mind, soul and body, to be undivided in the fear and service of the glory of God.

And that consuming desire of the Lord's entire life to be holiness unto his Father in heaven was what the burnt offering uniquely emphasized in its ritual and its occasion.

It is certainly true that in the burnt offering there was atonement for sin and expiation of guilt. The blood of the animal that was sacrificed for a burnt offering was spilled during slaughter, and that blood was presented to God at the altar. Yet the presentation of that blood to blot out sin was uniquely emphasized by a different kind of sacrifice, the sin offering. For whereas the blood of the burnt offering was sprinkled at the base of the altar, the blood of the sin offering was smeared upon the horns of the altar. Instead of the presentation of the blood, what stood out in the burnt offering was its entire consumption upon the altar in a state of immolation.

The *entirety* of the animal was burned upon the altar. God called the burnt offering not only *olah* but also *kalil*, which in the King James Version means *whole, entire, complete*. Unlike other kinds of sacrifices where a portion of the flesh was distributed to the priest or portions were

given to both the priest and the offerer, every portion of the animal for the burnt offering was laid upon the altar. Every part of the animal—the head and the fat, the entrails and the legs, and all the other sectioned parts of the animal—was laid upon the altar.⁴

God required that because the unique emphasis of the burnt offering was this: whole consecration in holiness unto God! If the life-long holiness of the Lord Jesus Christ was to be adequately represented as a shadow, then every part of the animal had to be laid upon that altar in its own order, just as Christ would order and arrange his entire life in burning zeal for God.

And lo! How Christ was continually and utterly consumed in that holiness!

Upon that altar in the earthly sanctuary, there was always an animal in the state of consumption. When the burnt offering of the morning was reduced to nothing by burning, then another took its place in the evening. And when the latter was also reduced to nothing, there was another to take its place the next morning. Always there was a burnt offering being reduced to ashes and going up in smoke. In that constant state of consumption, there was continual loss.

And such was but a dim—a *very* dim—picture of the ongoing loss of the Lord's entire life as he was consumed by his burning zeal for God's will and God's glory.

That loss is succinctly stated by the apostle in Philippians 2 in those sterling words: "[Jesus] made himself of no reputation" (v. 7).

Who made himself of no reputation? He who is "in the form of God" (v. 6). The form of God is God's divine being. The form of God is the totality of qualities and powers that make God to be God and distinguish God from the creature. The form of God is his perfections that he possesses in himself to the infinite degree. That Jesus Christ is in the form of God means that he is the only good and ever-blessed God. He is eternal. He is omnipotent. To him belongs all glory. To him belong all divine prerogatives. But "being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men" (vv. 6–7).

What that means is that the Lord—before whom the whole world must fall down and worship—said within himself, "Though I am God, that is not going to hinder me from incurring the loss of becoming a man. Though I am eternal God, that is not going to hinder me from becoming a finite creature of the dust. Though as God, I am perfect and in need of nothing, that is not going to

hinder me from becoming utterly dependent upon God."

What loss!

That is not all the loss that the Lord incurred in his life that was consumed in holiness to God. As utterly astounding as it is that he who is God became a weak and beggarly creature, he did not become a king or a rich man or a popular man. But he said, "Though I am God, that is not going to hinder me from becoming a servant." He to whom all service is due became a servant. He to whom belongs all glory and honor and dignity took upon himself the lowest position that a man has ever held in the earth.

What loss!

But not even that exhausts the holy loss of the Lord, for "being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). He said, "Though I am the eternally begotten Son of God, who dwells eternally in the warm and loving embrace of my Father, that is not going to prevent me from enduring his infinite wrath at the cross." The chief part of all that loss that Christ assumed by becoming a servant was the loss of the right to be blessed by God. Christ's loss was to assume a lonely place under God's curse. Under that wrath Jesus Christ was obedient, obedient to the bitter and shameful death of the cross because that was the only way God's will could be done, his justice could be satisfied, and his everlasting covenant could be consummated. God had determined to make a covenant with a sinful and disobedient people. God's justice demanded that the sin and sinfulness of that people be punished. Thus Jesus Christ, in burning zeal for the glory of God, said, "Lo, here am I, Lord. Punish me." The Lord willed that with his own will. He desired it with his own heart. He thought it with his own mind. And he pressed everything that he was into that service of God.

All his life, he was utterly and perpetually consumed!

Its Matchless Strength

We must say more, for if the burnt offering was to be an adequate shadow of the Lord's ability to give himself as such a sacrifice of holiness, then the offering must have a reflection of the Lord's matchless strength.

And indeed, the burnt offering did. The requirement for the burnt offering was that it be of the male sex. The regular burnt offering that was sacrificed in the morning and evening was always a male lamb or kid. Though the type of animal for a voluntary burnt offering could vary depending on the wealth of the offerer, if the animal came from the flock or the herd, then it was always

⁴ The exception was the skin. "The priest that offereth any man's burnt offering, even the priest shall have to himself the skin of the burnt offering which he hath offered" (Lev. 7:8). Perhaps this was because of the impurities that clung to the skin. Or maybe this harkens back to the robes that God had provided Adam and Eve in the garden.

a male. The male sex stressed strength, as scripture itself bears witness: “The glory of young men is their strength” (Prov. 20:29). “Quit you like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13). The requirement for a male animal emphasized the matchless strength that was necessary for the Lord to give himself entirely unto God.

Here we confess how miserably weak we are. Oh, yes, scripture exhorts us, “Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1). And if Christ dwells in you, then his mind becomes your mind and his will your will. But is it not also the case that to will is present with us, but how to perform that which is good we find not? The good that we would, we do not. And the evil that we would not, that we do. The believer’s confession in Lord’s Day 12 is that “I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of His anointing; that so I may confess His name, and present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 96). But when we receive but a little drop of Christ’s Spirit, that Spirit of sweet consecration unto God, then we find how exhausted we become in the most menial of spiritual tasks. Against that Spirit rages our entire totally depraved flesh, and every member of our bodies fights tenaciously against that principle of holiness in our hearts. We are so wretchedly weak.

But the Lord was equipped with the Spirit without measure.

Matchless strength!

Out of Christ’s spotless nature, there was pure strength to say no to God’s no and yes to God’s yes. In that strength of nature, there were two words that adorned Christ’s entire noble life: resist and persist. All the assaults of the devil Christ resisted. And in spite of every antagonism, snare, temptation, and voice that assaulted him from among men and devils, Christ persisted. He persisted in matchless strength to overcome the devil and evil. In that matchless strength Christ battled and seized the very gates of hell—bar and all—and put them upon his shoulders and carried them upward toward the hill of Calvary in order to make an open show of all principalities and powers. It was strength to wrestle that serpent, to seize him by the neck, and to crush his head while enduring that terrible, venomous bite.

Christ persisted at Golgotha, dripping in bloody sweat

as he toiled in holiness unto God. Christ persisted along the *via dolorosa*, as he staggered under the infinite weight of his people’s debt that was heaped upon him. He persisted as his body was nailed to the accursed tree, resisting that stupefying draught in order that he might devote all the senses of his soul to the experience of that curse. He persisted when the wrath of God met him that Friday afternoon and drowned him in the very torments of hell. And that matchless strength became exhausted, so that when the blackness dissipated, he could only pant out one word: *Dipso*—“I thirst.”

And having ascended into heaven, Christ continues in matchless strength for our sakes and in holiness unto God, blowing the gospel trumpet throughout the earth, drawing all his people unto himself, making ceaseless intercession with the Father in our behalf, so that the fullness of the Godhead may dwell in him and be imparted to us through his Spirit. With his everlasting strength Christ binds the strong man of the house and then spoils his goods in the hearts of every one of his elect people, so that they through him are more than conquerors in every aspect of their lives.

Matchless strength!

As a Voluntary Offering

What a shadow that uninterrupted stream of smoke from the burnt offering was! Whether the elect Israelite was mindful of the fact that the burnt offering lay upon the altar in a perpetual state of immolation and went up to God on high, the truth was that God always smelled a sweet savor, was ever mindful of his covenant, and was graciously inclined toward his people in eternal love.

When an Israelite brought a burnt offering into God’s courts of his voluntary will, that was a mighty confession of faith. On the one hand, that Israelite acknowledged the truth that without holiness, no man shall see the Lord. On the other hand, that Israelite acknowledged before God his own utter inability to be holy as God is holy. By that offering the Israelite gave testimony to the certain knowledge and assured confidence that in the promised seed God always had a sweet savor fill his nostrils and that God was well pleased with him for the sake of Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son.

—LB

Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife.—Proverbs 17:1

THE KNOWLEDGE OF MAN (3): THE FALL OF MAN AND THE GLORY OF THE PROMISED SEED

In the first installment of this series on the knowledge of man, the truth was set forth that man once walked with God in paradise. How glorious! How blissful it was when man walked with God as the friend-servant of Jehovah in the garden! Only Adam and Jehovah could have described how blissful that covenant fellowship was between God and man. Though earthly, it was indeed blessed beyond compare. No one besides Adam could have accurately described the experience of being the first man in paradise.

Man was created in the image of God, yet man was not God. Man was not equal to God in paradise, but man reflected God's image. Though Adam was made perfect, it is undeniable that he was not perfect in the highest sense. Adam was perfect in only an earthly sense, and he had to guard himself from falling into sin. Adam was lapsible.

God had established covenant fellowship with Adam in paradise, and as a result Adam communed and walked with God. God is always first, and man is dependent upon God. Adam's pre-fall state was insufficient to initiate or achieve greater life and covenant communion with God, even by Adam's best works. He was just a man and nothing but a man. While I agree with Hoeksema, who wrote that Adam "lived a higher life, the life of God's covenant in the fellowship of his friendship,"¹ Hoeksema was stating the fact that Adam was living a higher kind of life in comparison to the living creatures that roamed the earth. The viewpoint is the higher life in paradise—the earthly garden of Eden—but not beyond that. To go beyond that realm, Adam would have had to receive greater life, which things "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man" (1 Cor. 2:9), and which things are only possible in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Certainly Adam lived with God, but Hoeksema's statement is not in any sense suggesting that Adam by his own obedience could have attained greater life and

communion with God. Adam had no power to do that. Only God could give Adam that kind of life, whether yet in paradise or finally in the new heaven and earth. Adam was a mere man, regardless of what state he was in.

In the second installment of this series, we saw that this mere man almost immediately manifested his lapsible nature. Adam was perfect but able to sin. When Satan entered paradise, the man who was called to keep the garden listened to Satan's lie and fell almost instantly. "A wicked doer giveth heed to false lips; and a liar giveth ear to a naughty tongue" (Prov. 17:4).

Because of his transgression, Adam was expelled from paradise and barred from communing with God at the tree of life. While Adam was in the garden, that tree testified to him that what he needed was God alone. Jehovah was Adam's wisdom, strength, nourishment, blessedness, knowledge, holiness, and righteousness. Adam left God and all his good gifts in exchange for knowing good and evil. "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18).

After the fall Adam had to beg from the ground for his provisions because of sin. The man who at one time had rested perfectly in God in the garden was cursed to work all his life until he returned to the dust. One simple act of sin ruined everything Adam had.

Adam plummeted so badly in the fall that all his posterity was left in spiritual ruin, and he was destitute of hope in his inescapable misery. All mankind inherits Adam's guilt and corruption. There is nothing left for man but death in every sense. The life man has after the fall "is nothing but a continual death" (Form for the Administration of Baptism, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 258).

Nevertheless when Adam fell, he did so according to the eternal counsel of God in Jesus Christ. The fall happened not by chance but by the sovereign determination of Jehovah. While Adam's sin was a transgression of God's

¹ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Jenison: MI, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2015), 1:101.

probationary law, it was indeed inevitable according to God's eternal good pleasure.

Adam had to sin, so to speak. He had to sin according to the perfect determination of God. Adam and paradise were only ectypes of higher realities, of Jesus Christ and the consummation of all things in the new heaven and new earth.

Adam and paradise had to die so that Jesus Christ might be the firstfruits of those who sleep, so that in all things he might have the preeminence. Those who sleep had to be buried so that Jesus Christ might stand triumphantly over their graves. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55).

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us and regain the blissful seat.²

Surely God's justice had to be satisfied regarding fallen man, but God immediately gave his grace to him so that the first Adam's personal fall into sin was not meant for his eternal damnation but for the revelation of the anticipated covenant promise of redemption for those who belong to the last Adam, Jesus Christ. God graciously revealed his covenant promise to Adam in the curse upon the infernal serpent. There we see that the first man had to decrease so that Jesus Christ might increase. In the way of sin—oh, how dreadful and shameful that way is—we see the embracing arms of the Lord, glorifying himself even in the pitch-dark places of his elect people's misery, attesting to his electing love to save and redeem them while the majority of the human race perishes. The entrance of sin into the world was nothing but a passageway for his people's salvation and God's inscrutable and ineffable way of saying, "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:20–21). The fall happened in order to glorify Jesus Christ in the salvation of his people.

In the ruin of man, Adam only was to blame. His damnable deed made all that was good and fair beyond repair. Man plunged headlong into the pit of sin and death along with his posterity.

As all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and are deserving of eternal death, God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish and delivering them over to condemnation on account of sin (Canons of Dordt 1.1, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 155).

If it were not for God's good pleasure to reveal Jesus

Christ, the fall would have been the end of the human race. Apart from God's grace, the elect are by nature a people beyond repair, and their state is totally hopeless and impossible. But God's grace in Jesus Christ is far greater. God's grace in Jesus Christ is grace upon grace. God's people were saved by grace with the anticipation of the coming of the seed of the woman.

The fall inevitably served Jesus Christ; God ushered Christ into his work of redemption through the darkest way of sin, so that he might gloriously come as the light of the world. "The god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:4). This world had to fall into a dark pit so that Jesus Christ only could shine with the radiant glory of the Father to perform salvation and damnation.

God is glorious in everything he does in eternity and in time. Eternally God seeks his glory in everything he does. When sin originated from the heavenly spirits and part of the host of angels rebelled against the majesty of God under the leadership of Satan, and when that sin was introduced into the world, God was not passive. God did not sit idly on his throne, waiting to react to whatever event might happen in heaven and on earth. God is ever active. Amid all apparently independent actions and energies in heaven and on earth, God actually moves and acts in undisturbed majesty. He controls and determines the course of every aspect of history above and below. God always is performing all things according "to the praise of the glory of his grace" (Eph. 1:6). Satan and his host rebelled against God, and while their purpose was to overthrow God's authority and might, their rebellion unwittingly served God's glory. The psalmist makes plain in the second psalm that any attempt of rebellion against Jehovah and his Christ is vain:

1. Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?
2. The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed, saying,
3. Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.
4. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the LORD shall have them in derision. (Ps. 2:1–4)

God always receives the glory that he desires and he deserves, for he "sitteth in the heavens." Satan's rebellion was indeed a rankly blasphemous act. Satan wanted to glory in his own strength and wisdom, but God never gives his glory to anyone.

² John Milton, *The Annotated Milton Complete English Poems*, ed. Burton Raffel (New York, NY: Bantam Dell, 1999–2008), 153.

That God never gives his glory to anyone also holds true with the fall of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve despised God's glory and trusted in themselves. Their ears, eyes, hearts, hands, and mouths connived with Satan to overthrow God's majesty. "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished" (Prov. 16:5). Jehovah sits in the heavens, and the glory infallibly belongs to him alone. All things are aimed at the glory of God.

God's glory is his lofty desire and pleasure to always seek his praise, according to which he beholds himself as praiseworthy and beautiful in everything he does. Regarding the creatures, God's glory is the end of all things in life and in death and in all eternity. The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks and answers: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."³

Moreover, the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches that all things visible and invisible—angels and men—were made for the glory of the triune God:

It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create or make of nothing the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.⁴

But God's goal is not just his glory, but his goal is also "the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:6). Despite the strong rebellion of Satan and man, God displayed his glory in a way that superseded all conceivable beauty. Praises shall always be paid whenever that glory appears. God's pursuit of his own glory implies that he manifests himself in all beauty. God's glory is praiseworthy. The content of God's glory is the implication of all divine perfections. The eternal majesty of God and his infinite wisdom are clearly seen as exclusive perfections of Jehovah in his glory. Fully adorned with divine perfections, God is to be served by his creatures and worshiped by them. "Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come before him: worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness" (1 Chron. 16:29). "O worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth" (Ps. 96:9). "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined" (Ps. 50:2).

No one can escape the truth of God's praiseworthy glory and the duty to adore him as the glorious God. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, the very essence of his creatures is to reflect God's glory, to serve God's glory, and to adore God's glory.

From the viewpoint of the fall, man consciously despised God's glory. Man was not blameless. He made himself a vessel of dishonor. But in light of how God created man—for God's glory and enjoyment—whether in the way of sin or in the way of obedience, man was created to serve that glory. "A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps" (Prov. 16:9). God remained glorious and praiseworthy even when Adam fell. God did not need any recognition of his glory from a mere creature; God was glorious even in the way of sin. God was determined to glorify himself regardless of what means he was using.

Why does God have such a deep affection for his glory? Because God in himself is praiseworthy. God is gracious. *Grace*, aside from being an attribute of God and his power to save, means *beauty*. God's beauty is praiseworthy.

When Paul says in Ephesians 1:6 "to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved," he means that the purpose of all things is not just the glory of God but also the glory of God's grace. What is being displayed by God in the creation and in his sovereign control of all things is the glorious grace of God to the end that his grace might be praised.

That grace and beauty of God that is being displayed is Jesus Christ, his Son, who is "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person" (Heb. 1:3). God is seeking his own glory for the praise of his grace because that grace is his beautiful face, and that beautiful face is Jesus Christ. The Lord declares, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus Christ is the express image of God. For this reason the image of God in Adam had to fail because Adam was not the express image of God. The image-bearer of God in paradise had to fall into sin because he was not *the* image of God. The fall paved the way for the express image of God. This became evident when right after the fall Jesus Christ was revealed as the seed of the woman. Jesus Christ is the ultimate image of God that God seeks.

The image of God!

The face of the living God!

The grace!

The beauty!

The salvation of his people!

Adam fell into sin, but the fall was directed by God in such a way that it served the very purpose of salvation. Jesus Christ was the end of all things. Since we are elected in him and accepted in the beloved "before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4), even the rebellion that

3 Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 3:676.

4 Westminster Confession of Faith 4.1, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:611.

happened in heaven and entered our world, which same rebellion our first parents committed by the instigation of the devil in the fall, serves our salvation as it is established in the person of Jesus Christ.

To the praise of the glory of God's grace!

Though man failed to glorify God in Jesus Christ, nevertheless God meant that failure, fall, transgression, and rebellion for the glory of his name in fulfilling salvation by and through Jesus Christ. God receives the glory that is due to his name.

God saves his people in spite of the fall, for in saving them lies the revelation of his glory. The fall not only underscored destruction but also salvation because Jesus Christ was meant to be glorified by God himself through the fall.

God directed the steps of man by his eternal counsel to glorify his Son, which counsel we cannot approach by either our thoughts or our imaginations. We cannot fully comprehend how God for his glory ordained the entrance of sin by the fall while leaving man without excuse as he despised the glory that God eternally seeks.

But let us humble ourselves before this incomprehensible God, and out of darkness let us see Jesus Christ, rising as the "Sun of righteousness" (Mal. 4:2) "to give

light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (Luke 1:79). Light after darkness. *Post tenebras lux.*

What a paradox!

A divine paradox of sin and grace!

God's people are saved. Jesus Christ saved them, is saving them, and will surely save them. Rejoice! As David did in 2 Samuel 6:14, gird yourselves with a linen ephod and dance before Jehovah with all your might because salvation has come.

Nevertheless, keep in mind in all humility that though man now is saved and restored to the favor of Jehovah, he is yet insufficient. When will man be sufficient for anything spiritual and good? Man remains a sinner. He confesses from the depth of his heart, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). Even in his renewed state, man should never attempt to get even a shred of God's glory for himself. Man still depends on God. Renewed man is what he is only because of the grace of God. All minute aspects of renewed man's salvation are wrought by God for the sake of God's own glory in Jesus Christ.

This I will treat in the next article, the Lord willing.

—JP

RUNNING FOOTMEN

And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.—Leviticus 26:7

THE BLACK BROOK

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God,
in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth,
is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.—Psalm 48:1–2*

Jerusalem, situated on Mount Zion, was majestic in beauty and a defensible fortress. To the east of Jerusalem, running from north to south, lay the valley of Kidron, dividing Jerusalem and Mount Zion from the Mount of Olives. With the setting sun darkness and gloom from the shadows of Jerusalem's walls and Zion's peaks would creep over this ravine. Flowing along the bottom of the valley was a brook known by the Hebrews as the brook Kidron. To the Hebrews the name Kidron

meant *black* and *full of darkness*, and this for good reason. Scripture speaks of this brook in several passages.

In Leviticus 14:33–45 God instructed Moses and Aaron about what the priests were to do when the Israelites came to dwell in the land of Canaan and God put the plague of leprosy in a house. When a house was plagued with leprosy, after emptying the infected home and shutting it up for seven days, the priests were instructed to come back and inspect the home. If the plague had spread in the

house, the infected stones were to be taken away, the house was to be scraped, and both the stones and the scraped-off dust were to be cast into “an unclean place without the city” (v. 40). And if the plague came yet again, they were to “break down the house” and remove the stones, timbers, and mortar of the house and cast them into the unclean place (v. 45). For the city of Jerusalem, the valley of Kidron was such a place. Every unclean thing that was infected with or touched by leprosy would be cast down her sides. In the Old Testament leprosy was a picture of sin, and the casting of all the material that was infected with the plague of leprosy into Kidron was seen as the removing of sin and uncleanness from before the face of God.

The brook Kidron is also mentioned in 2 Chronicles 15:16: “Concerning Maachah the mother of Asa the king, he removed her from being queen, because she had made an idol in a grove: and Asa cut down her idol, and stamped it, and burnt it at the brook Kidron.” Godly King Asa, when purging the land of Judah of idols, took the idol that his queen mother had been worshiping in a grove and stamped and burnt the idol at the brook.

Another mention of the brook in scripture is during the beginning of the reign of Hezekiah over Judah. Hezekiah reopened the temple doors and commanded the priests and Levites to cleanse the temple because the worship of the Lord had been corrupted. “The priests went into the inner part of the house of the LORD, to cleanse it, and brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the temple of the LORD into the court of the house of the LORD. And the Levites took it, to carry it out abroad into the brook Kidron” (2 Chron. 29:16).

In 2 Chronicles 30, King Hezekiah issued a call to all the tribes to come to Jerusalem to keep the passover and turn unto the Lord. The faithful children of Israel came, and along with those from Judah, they carried away the altars that had been set up for false gods in Jerusalem. “They arose and took away the altars that were in Jerusalem, and all the altars for incense took they away, and cast them into the brook Kidron” (v. 14).

In Josiah’s reformation too the filth from the idol gods was taken from the temple and throughout Jerusalem and was cast into the brook.

4. The king commanded Hilkiah the high priest, and the priests of the second order, and the keepers of the door, to bring forth out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels that were made for Baal, and for the grove, and for all the host of heaven: and he burned them without Jerusalem in the fields of Kidron, and carried the ashes of them unto Bethel.
5. And he put down the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense

in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven.

6. And he brought out the grove from the house of the LORD, without Jerusalem, unto the brook Kidron, and burned it at the brook Kidron, and stamped it small to powder, and cast the powder thereof upon the graves of the children of the people. (2 Kings 23:4–6)

We see also in this text that the dead were buried in the valley of Kidron. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of this too in Jeremiah 31:40: “The whole valley of the dead bodies, and of the ashes, and all the fields unto the brook of Kidron...”

The temple was positioned on the east side of Jerusalem, and the waste from all the temple sacrifices would have been discarded in Kidron. Even the city’s sewage and excrement would have flowed down the valley and into the brook. Kidron reeked of filth, foulness, and death.

A more well-known mention in scripture of the brook Kidron is when King David crossed this brook during his flight from his insurrectionist son, Absalom. David had escaped out of Jerusalem in the unfavorable direction of the valley of Kidron. The rejection of David as king by the majority of Israel, who had chosen Absalom instead, had been humiliating. The aged King David had been betrayed by his favorite son. He also had been spurned by his foremost counselor, Ahithophel, who had joined with Absalom to get his revenge. It is written in 2 Samuel 16:23: “The counsel of Ahithophel, which he counselled in those days, was as if a man had enquired at the oracle of God.” Denied by many friends and with only a few by his side, we read of David’s crossing in 2 Samuel 15:23: “All the country wept with a loud voice, and all the people passed over: the king also himself passed over the brook Kidron, and all the people passed over, toward the way of the wilderness.” The weeping king crossed through the brook. David’s crossing was a foreshadowing. Another was to come and cross over.

There is an organic unity to the scriptures. The old dispensation and all of history culminates in the Messiah. The types and shadows that can be gleaned from the Old Testament are brought to their full realization in Jesus Christ. John 17 records what is often called the high priestly prayer of Christ. Christ had just instituted the Lord’s supper, and he made this prayer while he was yet with his disciples in Jerusalem. “These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee” (v. 1). After Christ had prayed this prayer,

“he went forth with his disciples over the brook Cedron, where was a garden, into the which he entered, and his disciples” (John 18:1).

The words “over the brook Cedron,” a small prepositional phrase that one might read right over, are found only in John’s gospel account. Jesus crossed over the brook, as this was the path to the garden of Gethsemane. The garden was on the hillside of the Mount of Olives, on the opposing side of the valley of Kidron from Jerusalem. At this time Judas, whom Christ would address as “friend,” was headed to the leaders to betray Christ. Like David’s counselor Ahithophel, who ended his own life after he betrayed David in favor of Absalom, Judas later also took his own life after his betrayal of Jesus. And just as the rejected King David had only a small band that stayed with him as he crossed the brook, so Christ crossed over the same brook with only the eleven disciples. Jesus, rejected by the world, walked through the darkness and gloom of the valley with the eleven, who also soon fled away. Christ had previously spoken to the disciples of Zechariah’s prophecy: “All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered” (Mark 14:27). Alone, Christ had to bear the wrath of God for the sins of his people.

In Jesus’ crossing of Kidron, we see our savior take up the filthiness of the waters of the black brook upon

himself, even while his holy soul loathed our iniquities. He walked through the cemeteries of the dead on the pathway to his cross and tomb, where he would claim the victory over sin and the grave and give to his people life. He willingly took on all our uncleanness, idol worship, false gods, false worship, and death. “I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me” (Ps. 69:2). In the garden he spoke to his disciples: “My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death: tarry ye here, and watch” (Mark 14:34). Carrying the burden of sin, bloody sweat was pressed from him in the garden. The cup of God’s wrath was full. The one who knew no sin carried the sins of his people to the cross. God smote his only-begotten Son in the hours of darkness while he hung on that accursed tree. “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). God cast Christ into darkness, removing his Son from his blessed covenant fellowship so that we might have all things in life and in death. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

—Eddie Ophoff

CONTRIBUTION

A STRANGE, NEW ANTITHESIS

When the Israelites came out of Egypt, they did so with a mixed multitude who caused the Israelites grief all the way to their entry into Canaan. The people had murmured against Moses before they even crossed the Red Sea, accusing God’s prophet of leading them into the wilderness to die. They accused Moses and desired the slavery of Egypt when they first grew hungry in the wilderness. When all their needs were miraculously supplied, they lusted for the leeks and garlic of Egypt. When they were given angel’s food, they loathed it and lusted for meat. The mixed multitude and the unbelieving Israelites who desired Egypt were to the distress of the church. By killing them in the wilderness, God delivered his church. “With many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Cor. 10:5).

Currently the days grow darker, and while the false church trumpets advances of her so-called Christianity, we are no longer in the days when the church can be counted as a multitude. Instead, we are as the generations just prior to Noah, when the church was being made ever smaller until only eight souls were saved by water. Even though a small number of individuals came into the Reformed Protestant Churches, with us was a mixed multitude who did not seek the heavenly Canaan but whose treasure is in this world. The church needed to be delivered from that mixed multitude, and she had no way of delivering herself. By a wonder of God’s grace, he sent out from his church those who never had any part with him and his church. “They went out from us...that they might be made manifest that they were not all of

us” (1 John 2:19). God is good, and his church has been delivered!

Now on their way back to Egypt, the leaders of a new fellowship of apostates have created a blog. With their inaugural post they express their love of the world by trumpeting their carnal doctrine of the antithesis.¹ They claim as their champion a certain Rev. Stuart Pastine, who was trained and ordained by the Christian Reformed Church and is emeritus in the United Reformed Churches. His doctrine of the antithesis is one that fits well within the Christian Reformed and United Reformed churches and their doctrine of common grace, by which they made common cause with the world. It was against that doctrine of common grace that our Reformed fathers trumpeted the doctrine of the antithesis. In doing so our fathers were charged with being Anabaptists, as the Reformed Protestant Churches are now being charged.

The article by Reverend Pastine is long, but his main argument is relatively simply stated: In the new dispensation, it is no longer the calling of “Israel” to “dwell in safety alone.” Instead, that calling is “abrogated” (repealed or done away) by the command to “go out into all the world” and preach the gospel. While in the old dispensation the church was at literal war with the world around her, “that specific, visible, and tangible representation of the kingdom and it’s [*sic*] antithesis...ended when our Lord was crucified.” Of course, there remains an antithesis, but according to Reverend Pastine the antithesis remains entirely spiritual. Pastine’s idea of a *spiritual antithesis* appears to be that the antithesis, while present, does not have a direct effect on personal relationships, unless one is dealing with the creature whom Pastine describes as a “known false teacher.” Such a false teacher the Christian must reject. But with all who are deceived by false doctrine, we must continue to build and seek personal and social relationships, waiting for and taking the opportunity to “pull them out of the fire.” Except with regard to false teachers, Christians are to make no “final judgments.”

Live Alone in Safety: A Spiritual Reality in the Old Testament

Reverend Pastine claims that the church no longer has the calling to “dwell alone in safety,” since this command was abrogated at the death of Christ. In making this claim Reverend Pastine acts as a destroyer in the church and puts any who will follow his teaching in grave danger. He does not interpret correctly the abrogation of the types and shadows as it applies to the antithesis, and as a result he comes

up with an entirely new doctrine of the antithesis. Over against the claim of Reverend Pastine, God does keep his church in safety, and he does so by her separation from the world. That separation had not been established by the law; therefore, that separation was not annulled with the rending of the veil and annulment of the ceremonial laws.

The types and shadows of the law in the Old Testament were not arbitrary institutions of God. They were physical representations of the spiritual reality of the antithesis that already existed in the old dispensation. God would have his church dwell alone. To accomplish that, he put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God would have his church dwell alone; thus the descendants of Cain rose up to seek and to kill Enoch. God would have his church dwell alone; thus he sealed all eight of the elect remnant inside the ark to save them from the wicked world. God would have his church dwell alone; thus he brought Abraham to Canaan to live in tents. Long before Israel was given the law, the calling of the church had been to dwell alone, in enmity against the world. Long before Israel had physical borders and used bronze swords, the church had been dwelling alone. Remember, the antithesis does not have its origin in the law, or even in the fall of Adam, but the antithesis first came in the command of God warning Adam against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The law of Sinai along with the institution of borders for the nation in Canaan were teachers to Israel, making the fact of her separation from the world so obvious that the Israelites saw it everywhere they went, and showing them that in this separation was their safety. However, it was not the case that Israel in the old dispensation had physical separation only by borders and swords or that her physical separation was replaced with a spiritual separation in the new dispensation. Rather, both the physical separation and the spiritual separation existed simultaneously, and the physical separation served the purpose of pointing to Israel’s spiritual separation. “For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God” (Deut. 7:6).

So what was the spiritual reality of dwelling alone that the fortified borders and bronze swords taught old testament Israel? The spiritual reality was that believers are not to seek fellowship with unbelievers. “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them” (Eph. 5:11). Do not *seek* fellowship. I state this very explicitly because *fellowship* is a noun. True fellowship exists between those who are united in Christ; fellowship is not something that is created by mutual parties. You do not and cannot create fellowship; God leads

1 Stuart Pastine, “The Antithesis in This Age,” *Under Grace*, February 8, 2025, <https://undergrace1.wordpress.com/2025/02/08/the-antithesis-in-this-age/>. The quotations in my article, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this blog post.

you to find it. While it is impossible for a believer to *have* fellowship with an unbeliever, it is possible for a believer, walking in a sinful way, to *seek* fellowship where there is none. Outside of Christ, a believer might try to live in fellowship with an unbeliever, but it will not work. When the child of God seeks fellowship where there is none, he ends up grieving the Spirit within him and pining in misery.

Old testament Israelites were called to live in their day-to-day lives as friends of God, in opposition to all that is not of God. It was not only the case that they were to guard their borders, but they were also to guard their relationships. The Holy Spirit pointed to a major source of the Israelites' problems in their wilderness wanderings when noting that as they left Egypt "a mixed multitude went up also with them" (Ex. 12:38). The intermarriage of the Israelites with the Egyptians was a source of constant misery. Throughout the rest of Old Testament history, Israel was constantly kicking against that calling to dwell alone. Even after the return of the captives in the days of Nehemiah, the church was bold in her relationships with the ungodly and needed to be reproved. The law itself pointed to this spiritual reality, making it clear that God's people should not spare their own families when it came to their unbelief. Rather God's people were to separate themselves from wickedness. Solomon taught his son that "a companion of fools shall be destroyed" (Prov. 13:20). As Paul wrote, "What part hath he that believeth with an infidel?" (2 Cor. 2:15).

Companionship with Fools

Against the spiritual reality of the antithesis in the Old Testament and the New Testament, Reverend Pastine encourages believers to seek "personal contacts, reasoning in homes, even social visits to maintain those personal contacts." His arguments for doing so are weak. Worse, he fails to deal with the strongest scriptural and confessional arguments against his position.

Reverend Pastine puts a great deal of weight on the fact that God no longer calls the races of the Gentiles "unclean." Because God directed the church in the great commission to bring the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike, this requires the church no longer to think of herself as living separate or alone. "What was previously set apart is no longer set apart." Reverend Pastine makes this not about the preaching of the gospel but about "associating with people who were formerly unclean." For Reverend Pastine this means that clearly we must not live separately from the world of sin and unbelief. Rather, we must associate, socialize, and maintain relationships with unbelievers for the sake of bringing the gospel.

The problem is that for all Reverend Pastine's parroting

the word "unclean," he does not actually deal with what the word means in the Old Testament. As a result, he completely misses the point when God said, "[Do] not call any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28).

God is holy, and God in his election of grace made Israel holy and set her apart for himself. As a result of her peculiar place as the possession of the Lord, Israel was to remain separate from the Gentiles, who were unclean by their nature. Israel was holy. The Israelites were no different from the Gentiles by nature, which God needed to show Israel through the ritual cleansing of the Old Testament. However, the Israelites were set apart positively as those whom God delighted to save. The Gentiles were unclean, set apart negatively as the reprobate whom God delighted to destroy. The gospel did not go to the Gentiles, except in rare cases to show Israel that a time would come when she would be rejected, and God would gather his church from all nations. As a rule the gospel only came to Israel, and as a rule the Gentiles were damned.

When God told his church not to call the Gentiles unclean, what he was telling her is that the old distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, holy and unholy, clean and unclean, no longer applied to the preaching of the gospel. That was the immediate context of the calling to Peter, and that was also the battle that continued in the early church: Will the Jews and Gentiles in the church be separated? Must the Gentiles keep the Old Testament laws? Should Peter eat separately from the Gentiles in Antioch?

When God told his church not to call the Gentiles unclean, he certainly was not getting rid of the separation between elect and reprobate that had been established in Eden. Reverend Pastine tries to maintain this, and he is careful to state that the great commission does not warrant "fellowship" or "agreement" with unbelievers. However, he claims it does warrant "contact," "personal contact," "social visits," "association," and "keeping company" with unbelievers. All of this is not only allowed, but it is also important and desirable because this is the way that we "teach and promote the gospel truth by word and deed." In this Reverend Pastine breaks the law—the law of cause and effect. It makes me think that Reverend Pastine, for all his writing about the antithesis, has never actually experienced the antithesis. He has no idea of what effect it actually has. Reverend Pastine is lawless. He breaks the law of reality.

When God established the antithesis between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, he did not call it *antithesis*. He called it "enmity," that is, hatred. God established hatred between the spiritual seed of the woman and the spiritual seed of the serpent. Yet Reverend Pastine pretends that a believer can befriend an

unbeliever, “promote the gospel truth,” and not have the effect that hatred is stirred up in the unbeliever against the believer. What unreality! God said that the word divides and creates enmity. Reverend Pastine says that the believer creates friendships so that he can bring the word. What unbelief! I can think of two possible explanations: Either Reverend Pastine does not understand the gospel, so what he brings to unbelievers is not the gospel and therefore creates no enmity; or Reverend Pastine knows the gospel, but he has never brought the gospel in all its sharpness to bear on unbelief.

Judge

After encouraging non-fellowshipping, social company-keeping with unbelievers, Reverend Pastine makes a curious exception. In order to stay in line with the biblical texts, he tells believers that they still ought to “separate from those who are known false teachers.”

Curious. I wonder, how does Reverend Pastine expect believers to know whether a person is a known false teacher versus a person merely being “deceived by false doctrine”? Are teachers only those who are ordained, or are they perhaps limited to officebearers? Or could a teacher in a school be considered a false teacher? Could a false teacher be a parent who teaches his children a false doctrine? Or could a known false teacher be anyone who lives by false doctrine, teaching it by his or her life? And who is to judge whether a teacher of false doctrine is a “known” teacher of false doctrine? Is this judgment to be made only by the church? Or may any believer make this “known” judgment? If we are to take such radically different behaviors, depending on whether one is a “known false teacher” or not, I would have expected Reverend Pastine to provide some guidance in this.

Contrary to his claim, there is no biblical distinction between “known false teachers” and those who are deceived by false doctrine. Reverend Pastine invents this distinction in order to serve his unbiblical teaching of the antithesis. He does so against scripture, which teaches that there is no such distinction. Rather than distinguish between false teachers and those who are deceived, the Holy Spirit regularly identifies false teachers as those who themselves have been deceived! Why did not all the Israelites obtain that for which they sought? Because “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” by God (Rom. 11:7). Indeed, the minds of all who do not believe, according to the Holy Spirit, have been blinded (2 Cor. 4:4). Every man who is carried away by false doctrine is deceived by it, because it comes from the father of lies, the deceiver. His deceit? Ye shall be as God. The only distinction that may be made, also according to these texts, is the distinction of election and reprobation.

Instead of giving guidance regarding when a person should be considered a “known false teacher,” Reverend Pastine does the opposite and encourages believers not to pass judgment. The believer “rejects the life of sin and the denial of God’s truth...but we do not...reject the sinners.” His reason is that any rejection of “the sinners...who remain in a false church...involves final judgment.” And final judgment “awaits the return of Christ.”

There is a leap here in the idea of “final judgment,” which is a failure in logic that invalidates his conclusion. Of course, we agree that when Christ returns on the last day, he will bring the revelation of God’s righteous predestination of sinners in the final judgment. However, the fact of a final judgment by Christ on his return does not negate the calling of believers to judge sin—and sinners—in this life. That impenitent sinners themselves are to be rejected should be abundantly clear from the following verses: “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed” (Prov. 13:20); “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject” (Titus 3:10); “I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17); and other passages of scripture. The judgment and rejection of impenitent sinners, however, does not imply or require that this judgment be “final.” Even the most powerful form of rejection of impenitent sinners, that of the judgment of the church in excommunication, is not considered a “final judgment” in the sense spoken of by Reverend Pastine. That most powerful judgment allows—no, even demands—the sinner’s repentance. I pass over the apparent exceptions in scripture of those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit, and for whom there may be a final judgment in this life. While there is life, there is hope of repentance. To judge the sin *and* the sinner does not in any way imply that one makes a “final judgment.”

Once again, Reverend Pastine wrongly divides the word of truth.

“Specifically Defined in Our Confessions”

Reverend Pastine thinks his doctrine of the antithesis is open for discussion because “the antithesis is not specifically defined in our confessions.” This is false on the plainest reading of the confessions, which are abundantly clear on the matter of the antithesis.

The Belgic Confession in article 28 calls all believers not only to join themselves to the true church but also to “separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 61). I do not know how the creeds can be clearer about the calling of believers to live apart from unbelievers. Over against this how can it be claimed that the calling

to live alone—separate—no longer applies in the new dispensation?

Reverend Pastine claims, as if it were as plain as day, that in the New Testament “no unbeliever can just walk into the true Israel.” He states this supposedly over against the fact that Old Testament Israel had physical borders and that one could physically step over the border into Canaan. This statement betrays a false view of the church, but the statement can be expected from someone who refuses to join the true church. Reverend Pastine should not need the creeds to show him that his statement is ridiculous. All he would need to do is to ask himself, what is “Israel” in the New Testament? The answer is obvious to all. The church! The Reformed creeds make it even more obvious. The whole article 29 of the Belgic Confession is given to help believers know the physical representation of the true church. It is a physical place that believers join, where they unite with each other in worship, the pure preaching is audibly proclaimed, the sacraments are purely administered, and proper discipline is maintained. The believer can have, must have, and does have a fervent desire to “just walk into” that true church. Many unbelievers also “just walk into” the true church, until the preaching of the word and discipline divides them away

from her. This true church is “easily known and distinguished” from the false church (*Confessions and Church Order*, 64). Reverend Pastine knows it and has been kicking against it for years. Why is he still apart from the church? He should just walk into it!

Reverend Pastine’s discourse on the antithesis is not beautiful, as it is claimed by the fellowship of apostates who have left the Reformed Protestant Churches. But his discourse is false doctrine in which he himself has been deceived and by which he deceives. He does not deal with the antithesis as it has cut through history since before the establishment of the law. He does not understand the spiritual reality of the antithesis in the Old Testament, and so he wrongly applies the abrogation of the law to the antithesis. He does not deal with the reality of enmity that was established by the antithesis since the days of Abel. He does not deal with the scriptural and creedal basis for the antithesis.

Reverend Pastine is a false teacher. He must repent of his false doctrine of the antithesis and begin to live in the truth.

“Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33).

—Michael Vermeer

CONTRIBUTION

THE MINOR CONFESSIONS (4): THE ATHANASIAN CREED

Introduction

The Athanasian Creed arose as a defense of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity over against ancient trinitarian and Christological heresies, particularly Arianism (which denied the full divinity of Christ) and Nestorianism (which improperly divided Christ’s two natures). I explained the ancient heresy of Arianism in the previous article in connection with the Nicene Creed. Although the Athanasian Creed is named after Athanasius of Alexandria, it is very unlikely that he had any part in writing the creed. The Athanasian Creed was likely created in the Western Church, with Athanasius’ name added later due to the creed’s firm support of the doctrine of the holy Trinity.

We receive the Athanasian Creed and the other ecumenical creeds as settled and binding not simply because the church formally adopted them as such but also because in them is contained the truth that may be known of God, “which except a man believe faithfully and firmly he cannot be saved” (Art. 44, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 15). This is also the context in which the Belgic Confession in article 9 mentions the Athanasian Creed along with the other ecumenical creeds of the early church:

Therefore, in this point [that is, in connection with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity] we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely, that of the Apostles,

of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which, conformable thereunto, is agreed upon by the ancient fathers. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 31)

History and Significance

The exact date and authorship of the Athanasian Creed is unknown. It is unlikely that Athanasius ever saw the creed, much less had a part in its being written. Although Athanasius played a crucial role in the formulation of the original Nicene Creed (AD 325), there is no verifiable evidence that he had anything to do with the writing of the Athanasian Creed, despite its being named after him. What little historical data we have on the Athanasian Creed leads us to believe that it may have arisen out of southern Gaul in the school of Augustine. However, this is merely speculation. The oldest surviving manuscripts of the Athanasian Creed date from the late eighth century, and it is unclear who actually wrote the creed. Furthermore, the creed addressed theological concerns that were not developed until after Athanasius had died, including the *filioque*, an issue that largely developed in the Western Church and was largely denied by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Due to its almost melodic cadences, the Athanasian Creed is believed to have been introduced into the public worship of the church for use as a song or chant. This is an opinion that I personally find fascinating because it makes the words of the Athanasian Creed something more than letters on a page. The biblical doctrine of the Trinity is a lively doctrine that inspires the heart that has been renewed by the Holy Ghost to spiritual adoration and reverence. There is no greater and no more glorious consideration for the human soul than to consider the truth of the triune God. The Athanasian Creed, therefore, is a lovely confession.

The Athanasian Creed has its unique place among the minor confessions not merely because of its melodic cadences and unique format, but also because the creed makes developments in certain fundamental areas of Christian doctrine, including the relationship that exists between the three persons in the Godhead, the distinct personal property of each of the three persons of the Godhead respectively, the procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son, and the union of the human and divine natures in Christ.

The first twenty-eight articles develop the biblical doctrine of the holy Trinity. We might consider the theme of the first portion of the creed to be “Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity” (Art. 27, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 13). That little phrase summarizes the whole doctrine of the Trinity as confessed by true believers in the early church and summarized in her earliest confessions.

This same doctrine of the Trinity was adopted by the Reformation churches and is defended by every true church of Jesus Christ today. The importance of these articles cannot be overstated.

Originally the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) appended to the Nicene Creed a series of anathemas against those who taught and believed doctrine contrary to the testimony of the creed. This section of anathemas was dropped in later editions of the creed and does not appear in the version printed in *Confessions and Church Order*. I prefer that the anathemas would have been left in our edition of the Nicene Creed. But I digress. What is important to note, however, is that similar language to the anathemas in the original Nicene Creed was used later in the Athanasian Creed and still remains in our edition. The articles to which I refer read as follows:

1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
2. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
44. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully and firmly he cannot be saved.
(*Confessions and Church Order*, 13, 15)

“The catholic faith” is a reference to the faith of the Christian religion taught in the sacred scriptures and summarized in the Christian confessions. As Reformed people we might refer to *the faith* more concisely as that which is necessary for a Christian to believe unto salvation, or the doctrinal content of faith. True faith, or the faith that saves, as opposed to all forms of false faith, believes the truth of God as he has revealed himself in the sacred scriptures and rejects all heresies repugnant thereto. All forms of false faith, which is unbelief, deny the truth of God and instead fashion a god after the thoughts and imaginations of man’s totally depraved heart.

The faith of the Athanasian Creed concerns the revelation of the one true God and our Lord Jesus Christ. More specifically, the faith of the Athanasian Creed concerns the reality that God is three distinct, divine persons subsisting within the one divine essence or being of God and that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, united in the one person of the Son of God. These two truths stand and fall together and therefore cannot be separated. That faith is the foundation of the whole of Christendom. Apart from that faith, man cannot be saved. Holding firmly to that faith, the church is saved. For that is the only faith that saves. Because in that faith God is God, and man is not God; in that faith Jesus is a complete savior, and man is nothing in salvation. There is no true, saving knowledge of God except through the

faith of Jesus Christ. It is the faith that has God—God as he has revealed himself through Jesus Christ—as its only object. That faith is the faith that saves because that faith at its essence is union with Jesus Christ.

In the creed salvation is confessed as utterly the work of God and not at all the work of man. That is the meaning of the first few words of the creed in articles 1 and 2: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 13). Implied here is the reality that there is indeed false faith. False faith does not have the triune God as its object but has man as its object. False faith always denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and therefore that in him—both perfect God and perfect man—there is perfect salvation. In this way false faith shows itself to be antichristian (1 John 4:2–3). Not so with true faith. True faith here is set over against all false faith.

The faith of the Athanasian Creed is not only believed, but it is also confessed. In that confession the church not only defends and promotes the truth, but she also condemns every lie and false doctrine that militate against that truth. The Athanasian Creed is a sort of battle cry or hymn of the church. The creed is a beautiful song with beautiful lyrics. Contained in those lyrics are the words of the church’s spiritual warfare as she stands antithetically over against all God’s enemies. Those enemies are many, but they all have in common that they deny the only object of the church’s faith, which is the one true God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. Concerning the confession of that God, we briefly consider the Athanasian Creed in this article.

One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity

The articles of the Athanasian Creed read like verses of a song and use a great deal of repetition. Repetition helps to firmly instill something in one’s mind and heart. The first section of the creed clearly demonstrates this point. Articles 7 through 20 use repetition to emphasize God’s fundamental oneness by applying several of God’s attributes indiscriminately to each of the three persons of the Godhead:

7. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Ghost.
8. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Ghost uncreated.
9. The Father infinite, the Son infinite, and the Holy Ghost infinite.
10. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Ghost eternal.

11. And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal.
12. As also there are not three uncreated nor three infinities, but one uncreated and one infinite.
13. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Ghost almighty.
14. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.
15. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God.
16. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
17. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Ghost Lord.
18. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.
19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge every person by Himself to be God and Lord:
20. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, There are three Gods or three Lords. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 13–14)

Early on, the Christian church had to contend with those who charged the biblical doctrine of the Trinity with teaching tritheism (the worship of three gods). Those opponents insisted that to teach that God is three is to deny God’s simplicity and would result in tritheism. That is a very serious charge. The Athanasian Creed admits to the seriousness of that charge when it says that we are forbidden by the catholic religion to say that there are three Gods or three Lords. There are not three Gods, but there is only one God. This is also the confession of the Belgic Confession in article 8: “According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is one single essence” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 28).

The oneness of God was announced to Israel at Sinai: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD” (Deut. 6:4). God revealed his oneness in his name Jehovah, or I AM (Ex. 3:14). He is

the one who exists of and by himself, the being of beings, the unchangeable, the eternal, the infinite God, the incomparable Holy One of Israel. He, therefore, is God alone. Two or more independent beings, each possessing infinite properties, would imply a contradiction in terms.¹

There are not three Gods but one God. There are not three infinities but one infinite.

We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God; and that He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the

¹ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd ed. (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), 1:201.

overflowing fountain of all good. (Belgic Confession 1, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 23)

There is only one God, whom we worship and serve. That one God is all his perfections, and all his perfections are one in him. God is his virtues. God is love, truth, holiness, righteousness, goodness, and wisdom. And in God those virtues are one in him, so that his love is his holiness, his goodness is his righteousness, his holiness is his grace, and so on.

Yet God also reveals himself as subsisting in three distinct persons. The Athanasian Creed insists upon this reality too when it says that we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge every person in the Trinity by himself to be God and Lord. The fact that there is a plurality of persons within the Godhead is revealed in the very first chapter of the Bible when God said, “Let us make man after our image” (Gen. 1:26).

Without proceeding any further, you must see the necessity of the plurality of persons in God from the fact that God speaks to himself. God counsels within himself. A God of one person cannot counsel within himself. That much should be obvious. And as if to make that point crystal clear, God said, “Let us make man” (Gen. 1:26). God, who calls the things that are not as though they were and raises the dead, unto whom all glory belongs, for the whole creation is his, reveals himself as “us.” More striking, then, is what comes immediately afterward when verse 27 says that “God created.” God’s name in the very descriptive Hebrew is most often given in the plural form: *Elohim*. That is the same word that is translated as “God” in verse 27. We read in Belgic Confession article 9, “From this saying, *Let us make man in our image*, it appears that there are more persons than one in the Godhead; and when He saith *God created*, He signifies the unity” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 30).

This plurality of persons is further demonstrated by the Angel-of-Jehovah passages in the Old Testament, in which the Angel of Jehovah speaks as God and is worshiped as God (Gen. 16:10, 13; 19:24). God reveals his threeness most clearly in Psalm 33:6, which teaches that “by the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth,” and where the word “breath” can be translated as *spirit*. Belgic Confession article 9 says, “It is true that He [God] doth not say how many persons there are, but that which appears somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is made very plain in the new” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 30). This is evident from John 1:1–2: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God”; the baptism formula in Matthew 28:19: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost”; and 1 John 5:7: “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” On the basis of these passages and many others in the sacred scriptures, we have the confession of the Athanasian Creed, which teaches that the object of our faith and worship is one God “in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity.”

The biblical doctrine of the Trinity is unique in the sense that it can be taught in such a way that our covenant children can understand it, and yet the doctrine transcends our understanding as finite creatures of the dust. That the Reformed fathers understood this is clear from Belgic Confession article 9:

Although this doctrine far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless we now believe it by means of the Word of God, but expect hereafter to enjoy the perfect knowledge and benefit thereof in heaven. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 30)

This saying must also determine how we understand the economy of the Trinity, that is, the relationship of the three persons in the Godhead to each other. We are bound in our understanding to the word of God. That is why we may not go around in the creation looking for proof that God is triune any more than we may look around in the creation for proof that God created all things in the beginning. Some attempt to do this, and they call their interpretations a social doctrine of the Trinity. They try to explain the relationship of the three persons of the Godhead to one another by various earthly examples. They compare the relationship of the Father and the Son to the relationship between the husband, who is the head of his wife, and the wife, who submits to the headship of her husband. But God’s unity is not like any earthly unity. God’s fellowship is not like any earthly fellowship. The comparison is erroneous on the face of it because it teaches that there is subordination in God, not to mention the fact that the vital relationship of the Holy Spirit within the Godhead often is overlooked in such comparisons. The reality is that there can be no subordination in God. This much is clear from the confession of the Athanasian Creed when it teaches in articles 25 and 26, “In this Trinity none is before or after; none is greater or less. But the whole three persons are coequal and coeternal” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 14).

However, this is not to suggest that God reveals nothing about himself in his creation. That would be untrue. The whole creation declares the glory of God; the firmament shows forth his handiwork. “Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge” (Ps. 19:2). And we also know that God makes known in the creation his eternal power and Godhead, so that all men

are left without an excuse before the judgment of God (Rom. 1:20). What may be known of God from the creation is that God is a God of fellowship.

When God created the animals, he created them after their kinds, both male and female. When God created man, God created male and female. And God said to the man, that is, to the male and the female (married), “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). The structure of relationships that exist in the world, even as that world is fallen in Adam and lying under the curse, testifies concerning the reality that the God who created all things in the beginning is a God of fellowship. All the societies, communities, and institutions, which are intrinsic to the creation, are revelatory that God is a God of fellowship.

God did not need to create anything to be the God of fellowship, but God is the God of fellowship within his own being—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we speak of God’s fellowship, we speak of God’s covenant. God is a covenant God, not first because he establishes his covenant with his elect but because God is a covenant God in himself. God’s life is a life of blessed covenant fellowship. It is a life that God lives in himself, out of himself, and unto himself. That life in God is as eternal as God is eternal, as infinite as God is infinite, and as majestic as God is majestic. It is a life that cannot be possessed by a God of one person. Just as there can be no fellowship in the world in solitude, there can be no fellowship in a God who subsists in only one person. The scriptures know nothing of a god of one person but instead teach that God is one in being and three in persons.

If there is no subordination among the three persons of the Godhead, how then are we to understand their distinction from each other? The Athanasian Creed emphasizes that the three persons in God are indeed distinct from each other. However, the explanation of this distinction must be one that neither confounds the persons nor divides the essence. In articles 21 through 24, the Athanasian Creed gives an explanation that strikes the perfect balance of beauty and simplicity:

21. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.
22. The Son is of the Father alone, not made nor created, but begotten.
23. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son, neither made, nor created, but proceeding.
24. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. (*Confessions and Church Order*, 14)

The explanation is that the distinction is not one of essence, for God is one in essence. Rather, it is a distinction

of personal properties, or characteristics. These personal properties refer to the distinct characteristics that differentiate the three persons of the Godhead. According to Herman Hoeksema,

when we assert, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, that there are three persons in the Godhead, we mean that in the one spiritual nature of God there are three subjects, three who say “I,” distinct from one another in personal properties, but subsisting in the same divine essence and eternally remaining the same in their distinct subsistence.²

First, there is the personal property of the Father. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten but is *begetting*. God the Father eternally begets, or generates, the Son. Unlike human generation the Father’s generation of the Son is simple, so that it is eternally without division or separation of essence. This divine generation implies that the Father eternally begets the Son out of the being of the Father. The Father eternally reproduces himself in the Son. We must say of the Father, therefore, that he takes perfect delight in generating the Son. For God the Father to reproduce himself in the Son is for the Father to make manifest that which is truly expressive of his nature, essence, and all his virtues that he possesses as coequal and coeternal God with the Son and the Holy Ghost. God the Father therefore eternally beholds the Son as the object of his delight and eternally enters into fellowship with his Son in the Holy Spirit.

Second, there is the personal property of the Son. The Son is of the Father alone, not created nor made but *begotten*. The Athanasian Creed rejects the false doctrine of the Arians, who taught that there was a time when the Son was not. The Son is not a creature of time and called out of nothing, but the Son is eternally begotten of the Father alone. If there were such a time when the Son was not, then the Son would not be coequal and coeternal God with the Father and the Holy Ghost, the Father would be deprived of the eternity of his Fatherhood, and thus the Father would be subject to change, seeing that the basis of calling him Father would not be eternally present in his nature but would have taken place in time. Instead, the creed establishes the truth that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. This means that the Son is the eternal expression of the divine fullness. That is what John 1:1–3 means when it calls the second person of the Trinity “the Word.” Within the being of God as holy family, it means that the Son eternally enters into fellowship with the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Third, there is the personal property of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and the Son,

² Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:207.

neither made nor created but *proceeding*. At this point the Athanasian Creed shows itself as a creed of the Western Church and distances itself from the Eastern Orthodox Church, which taught that the Son and the Spirit both can be traced to the Father as one single cause. It was and is still to this day the position of the Eastern Orthodox Church that the Son is begotten of the Father and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone. The fruit of that position is the mysticism that has predominated the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church for centuries. Augustine led the Western Church in viewing the three persons as relations in the one single Godhead, and therefore the Holy Spirit is related not only to the Father but also to the Son.³

The personal property of the Holy Spirit is indicated already from his name Spirit or Breath. The Spirit is not called holy because he is without sin but because the Spirit is living consecration in God. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and consecrates Father to Son and Son to Father. The Spirit as consecration in God is also called Breath. The Spirit, who consecrates Father to Son and Son to Father, is the intimate union and fellowship of the other two persons of the Godhead. It is not merely that the Spirit creates that union, but the Spirit himself *is* the union. That is why Augustine referred to the Spirit simply as “love.” Love. That is who the Spirit is in God.

The Lord Jesus Christ is Perfect God and Perfect Man

The Athanasian Creed teaches us the necessity of believing not only the truth concerning the triune God but also the real incarnation of Jesus Christ. More specifically, the Athanasian Creed teaches us that Jesus Christ is really God and really man united in one person. I will keep this section brief because I am running short in my allotted space; however, it is important to note some of the key points in the last half of the creed. There in article 31 is the altogether lovely phrase concerning the second person, that he is “God, of the essence of the Father.” “Essence” refers to the divine being of God. Jesus Christ as to his person is divine, “begotten [of the Father] before all worlds; and man, of the substance of

His mother, born in the world” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 14).

It is important to understand that the human and the divine are two substances that can never be mingled. It is an utter impossibility. Yet in order for man to be delivered from his sin and misery, it is necessary that there be one able to satisfy for us who is himself both fully God and fully man. That is what article 32 is getting at when it teaches that Jesus Christ is “perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and flesh subsisting,” where the word “perfect” can be understood as *complete*. Jesus Christ is completely God and completely man. Jesus Christ possesses all the qualities and powers that make God God, and Jesus Christ possesses all the qualities and powers that make man man. This is needed for our salvation.

However, the question becomes, how is this possible? If the two natures in Christ are distinct from one another, what explains the unity? The unity is “not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God” (Art. 35, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 14). The word translated as “taking” comes from the Latin word from which we derive the English word *assumption*. Positively, this means that when God the Son became a man, he added, or assumed, to himself a human nature. Negatively, this means that God the Son did not have to forfeit any of his divine attributes or qualities by becoming a man.

Article 36 gets to the heart of the union when it says that the two natures are “one altogether, not by confusion of essence, but by unity of person” (*Confessions and Church Order*, 15). The two natures of Jesus Christ are united in one person. This was important to emphasize over against the heresy of the Nestorians, who taught that Jesus Christ was not one person but two. The necessity of the union being in the one divine person of the Son of God is because “only in this way could he stand outside of the imputation of the original guilt of sin.”⁴

More on the unity of the divine person in Christ is expounded by the Creed of Chalcedon (AD 451), a creed that is not mentioned specifically in any of the three forms of unity, but the doctrine of which is clearly taught in article 19 of the Belgic Confession. I will consider that in the next article, the Lord willing.

—Garrett Varner

3 This is what became known as the *filioque*, which is a Latin term translated as “and the Son” and is a reference to the addition of the Western Council of Toledo (AD 589) to the Nicene Creed. This double procession of the Spirit is taught in John 15:26; 16:17; and 20:21–22 and in Belgic Confession article 11.

4 Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:501.



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FINALLY, BRETHREN, FAREWELL

*From henceforth let no man trouble me:
for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. — Galatians 6:17*

Christ bears his marks. Thomas in unbelief asked to see those marks. The Lord in love for Thomas showed him the print of the nails in his hands and the spear hole in his side. Those are the splendid marks of the crucifixion that Christ bears eternally as the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world. He will bear those marks for all ages as the Lamb exalted upon his throne. Those marks were given to him by men as they vented their hatred on him. He turned those marks into the signs of his glory as the crucified Christ. It is his glory that he in love for God, in love for his plan of salvation, and in love for his people submitted himself to the bitter and shameful death of the cross. Now the believer glories in nothing save the cross of his Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified to the believer and he to the world.

The servant is not greater than his master. Paul speaks of marks left on his body. They were given to him by men who hated him and the gospel that he preached because they hated the Christ of that gospel. Their glory was not in the cross of Christ, but they gloried in that which is shameful. They gloried in circumcision. They gloried in their works. They gloried in their faithfulness. But in the cross of Christ, they did not glory. The wisdom of God displayed in the cross, they could not understand. The truth and power of that cross, they could not grasp. Those enemies of the cross also would not bear the shame and reproach that those who confess Christ must bear in a world that hates him. They crafted their theology and their confessions to avoid all suffering in order to be accepted by the world and the false church. The very lack of those marks of reproach in their bodies indicated that they were not of Christ.

And in their rejection of Christ, they heaped reproach on the apostle Paul as the world today still heaps reproach on the church. They accused him of having evil intentions and wicked motives. They maliciously mischaracterized his theology to make it appear foolish and wicked. They hounded him from city to city.

What did the apostle say? “In stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned...in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city...in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:23–28).

The marks were given, indeed, by men, but they were the marks of the Lord Jesus Christ. Caesar branded his soldiers. Christ brands his. Thus those marks were the traces left in the apostle’s body by the hardships, imprisonments, scourgings, and beatings endured by him for the cause of Christ. Those scars and bruises on his body marked him as Christ’s faithful and approved soldier and refuted all the wicked calumny of the enemies of Christ raised against his servant.

So it must come to all who glory in nothing save the cross of Jesus Christ. Because you are Christ’s, the world hates you. Because you speak Christ, the false brethren slander, ridicule, and despise you. And bearing those things, you may say with the apostle, “Henceforth let no man trouble me. Show me your marks of Jesus Christ, and I will believe that you are his.”

—NJL