

THE
Church's
WITNESS TO
THE
World

P. Y. DE JONG

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Preface

Many years ago our blessed Lord said to the religiously-minded leaders and people of his day, "If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:31,32) Too many of them were satisfied with the form of faith without its substance.

That situation has not changed in the centuries since.

More than two decades ago Dorothy Sayers, writing about the spiritual condition of Great Britain, wrote in her *Creed or Chaos*,

"It is fatal to imagine that everybody knows quite well what Christianity is and needs only a little encouragement to practise it. The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ. If you think I am exaggerating, ask the Army chaplains . . ."

And what she wrote then about her own land may, without fear of substantial contraction, be said of our own countries on this side of the ocean. Even in our Reformed churches the understand-

ing and practice of the full Gospel of grace leaves much to be desired. We still claim to cherish our creeds. Well may it be asked, Do we and our children still endorse, propagate and defend their testimony in a world of religious confusion and contraction?

The *Belgic Confession* is no substitute for Holy Scripture. Its only aim is to set forth simply and straightforwardly what the Reformed churches believe to be the sound doctrine of the Bible unto godliness. As such it is an official declaration of those churches whose goal was to declare in their preaching and teaching neither more nor less than what God himself has revealed in his holy word. And each one who loves the truth in Jesus Christ which alone can set us free from sin and all its fatal consequences is under obligation to make this truth his own personal and precious treasure, witnessing to it in word and deed whenever opportunity is provided.

With pleasure, although not without a measure of hesitation, we once again present this material on the *Belgic Confession*. It was first published in two volumes at the time of the four hundredth anniversary of that creed in 1961. Among many it met with a warm response. Since then requests have come in for copies which were no longer available. We trust this new edition, with its minor changes and corrections, will also be able to serve many in coming to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Gospel.

The writer has attempted to make this instrument of the church's witness speak for today. Attention is therefore given to some voices which seem to be undermining the historic Christian faith. Those who read these pages will also notice that many of its truths we hold as a common heritage with believers in every age and in many lands. References are made repeatedly to several early fathers, to Augustine and especially to Calvin from whom the Reformed churches have learned much. Because the *Confession* aimed at summarizing the teachings of God's word, Biblical texts appear on almost every page. These are quoted to

assist the reader in recognizing the indestructible basis upon which sound doctrine rests. Questions appear at the end of every chapter to assist in group discussion. Only a few footnotes have been included, and these at the close of the book.

For generations the Reformed churches have used the *Belgic Confession* in testifying to the world their faith in the sovereignty and grace of the eternal God unto salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time it has served as an arsenal from which they drew the sharpened weapons of truth in a never-ending conflict with error. May this book in some small way enable devout believers to give a good account of the hope that is in them to their children, their friends and neighbors and those who are yet without God and without hope in the world.

Peter. Y. De Jong

September, 1980

TO MY PARENTS

*whose love for the doctrine which
is according to godliness has under
God kindled mine.*

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Introduction to the Confession

MEN LIKE to think of their times in superlatives. When asked to characterize the world in which they live, they often speak of it as either the best or worst which man has ever known. Such judgments are usually of little value. Each generation may demonstrate a marked difference from the preceding but the bond of a common humanity binds them indissolubly together.

Much greater and more glorious is the oneness of the church of Christ. Throughout her long history she has experienced the impact of changing situations. With great show of right we may speak of times of development and decline, of expansion and retrogression, of burning spirituality and of blighting worldliness. But amid the shifting tides of her life, the church has been joined together by God in a sevenfold unity. "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all." (Eph. 4:4-6) Essentially the church remains the same in every age, for she is the body of Christ, the company of believers called to be saints, witnesses of the grace of God in Christ Jesus to all peoples.

Because the church is provided with the gospel and preserved in this truth by the indwelling Spirit, her message in every generation remains basically the same. Individuals may differ radically in their understanding and appropriation of this truth. Large sections of the organized church may deviate and defect from the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Even at best the church in this world knows only in part and prophesies in part. (I Cor. 13:9) But the truth of God in Christ, always fuller and larger and richer than any representation thereof, remains

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unchanged. This is the inalienable legacy given to the church by divine grace.

These things ought to be remembered, when speaking of the life of the church in our times. Christ's cause seems to have fallen upon evil days, so that we confess appropriately with Samuel J. Stone,

*"Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed,"*

and again,

*"Mid toil and tribulation
And tumult of her war . . ."*

Yet all this by no means exhausts the story of the church or gives adequate expression to the secret of her life. By God's electing love she has received new life in Christ which is communicated to her by the Holy Spirit. To this new life she bears testimony throughout all ages. She knows no other message. In this faith according to godliness she prays that she may daily increase. The bond which binds her members together in holy company is the gospel of her salvation in Christ.

In order that she may rightly understand, faithfully witness to and adequately defend this precious heritage, the church preserves the bond which unites her with the saints and faithful of previous generations. In such times, too, the church was disturbed by heresy and rent by schism. Both from without and within foes relentlessly beset her life. When persecution failed to tempt her to a betrayal of the truth, she was threatened by perversions of the gospel. But keeping careful and constant watch over those whom he had redeemed by his blood and called to be witnesses was the faithful Head and Savior who preserved them in the way of truth and grace. (John 17:14-18) All the pages of church history testify of his presence and his power.

We would therefore be guilty of gross superficiality and ingratitude, were we to neglect the voice of history. What God's

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people believed and preached in previous generations is of signal value for us today. Their insights have been preserved to enrich our lives. Their defense of sound doctrine is an arsenal from which we obtain weapons which may serve us well. Their faithfulness to the Savior in the face of great affliction and apostasy not only cheers our hearts but also encourages us to be loyal to him who loved us and gave himself for our salvation.

One of the precious treasures inherited from the turbulent years of the Reformation is the *Confession of Faith* penned by Guido de Bres. Here the voice of the confessing church is raised above the clamor of conflicting opinion and the cries of the confused who had lost the way which leads to eternal life.

This statement of the church's faith in the sixteenth century is a child of its own time. Its language seems somewhat archaic and abstract. The issues with which it deals at first appear irrelevant to the problems which perplex us in our modern world. Many of its answers can hardly be considered exhaustive. But reading and reflecting upon the message of the *Confession* will be eminently rewarding. It not only illumines the story of the church in the past; it challenges the thought and heart of the church today. For only in the measure in which we are faithful to its message, will we as individuals and churches be true to our heavenly calling in the world. Christ has appointed us to be his witnesses "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." (Acts 20:21) This is the heart of the Christian message in every age.

The Rise of the Reformation in the Lowlands

To understand and appreciate this creed, often called the *Belgic Confession*, we must orientate ourselves somewhat into the historical situation in which it arose.

In few lands is the course of the Reformation more fascinating than in those countries by the sea known as the Netherlands. During the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries this name was given to the territories which are now included in the Nether-

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lands (Holland), Belgium and northern France. Most of these lands had been ruled in the form of a loose federation by the Burgundian princes whose line had become extinct in 1477. Each state cherished a strong spirit of independence and aimed at managing its own affairs. By a series of marriages among the rulers of Europe these lands passed into the hands of the emperor who ruled Austria and Spain as well as the Netherlands.

In 1515 Charles of Spain, the son of Ferdinand and Isabella, began his rule, and six years later he was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. His aim was to consolidate all political authority in the states over which he ruled. To this end he found it expedient to embark on a program of military expansion. During the early years of his reign he annexed Tournai, Friesland, Utrecht with its subject territory of Overijssel, Groningen and Drente, and finally the large duchy of Guelders. He introduced a series of central councils by which he hoped to destroy the provincialism which was rampant in that part of the world. His consuming ambition was to exploit the commercial and industrial resources as well as the strategic position of the Netherlands for the expansion of Spanish power. As a faithful son of the Roman Catholic Church he attempted to extirpate all heresy and thus unify the people in one church and one state.

Outside of Italy no part of the European continent had made such rapid and remarkable advances in economic and social life as the Netherlands. Here was an amazingly developed environment which enjoyed a high level of culture for those years. Many of the people, even those in moderate circumstances, could read. There was much contact with other lands, especially Italy where for some generations humanism had flourished under the influence of the Renaissance. The church was deeply rooted in the lives of the people, although criticisms of her doctrines and practices were not uncommon. When the Reformation broke out at Wittenberg in 1517, the Lowlands were ripe for harvesting.

At an early date many Sacramentarians arose here, who clamored for reform in the church. One of their major emphases

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was the denial of the real presence of Christ in the sacraments. Although the works of Luther were widely read, there is little evidence that he won a large number of adherents. Especially his emphasis, more strongly developed after the debacle of the Peasants' War of 1525, that the legitimate princes must be obeyed in all secular and religious matters no matter how tyrannical their rule, did not appeal to the Netherlanders who experienced that under the government of Charles V they were being daily robbed of rights and privileges of long standing. Much more attractive were the teachings of the Anabaptists which in the early years of this movement stirred many to defiance and rebellion. Printing presses were producing a flood of religious writings, both orthodox and heretical, which were avidly read in this age of intellectual, political and religious ferment.

Charles V believed himself to be king by divine right. This included for him the prerogative of compelling all his subjects to submit to the authority of the bishop of Rome. He therefore resolved at an early date to introduce the inquisition as it had been developed in Spain. Against this his Netherlands councillors, who knew the temper of the people much better than he, protested vigorously but in vain. Already in 1522 he appointed a member of the council of Brabant to investigate all suspected of heresy and inflict proper punishment. By 1524 the inquisition was in full swing with papal approval but without the support of the local magistrates who insisted that they could cope with heretics.

Increasingly it became apparent that the situation was getting out of hand. Greater rigor was needed to achieve the ideals of the Spanish king. In 1529 an ordinance was imposed which ruled that all laymen who discussed questions about the faith or failed to report heretics or made insulting remarks about images of God, the virgin or the saints were to be put to death. Even these stringent measures failed to stem the rising tide of heretical opinions. In all parts of the Netherlands especially the Anabaptists were winning adherents. The printing presses of Antwerp were groaning under the load of forbidden books. Never was the quantity sufficient to satisfy the insatiable appe-

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tites of the Dutchmen. Literature poured in from foreign lands, especially Germany, and was secretly sold. By 1540 all heretics were to be deprived of their property, and those who sheltered the suspects or spoke a good word on their behalf were liable to punishment by death.

After ruling for some forty years Charles V died in 1555. He was succeeded by his son, Philip II, who was even more absolutistic in his conception of royal authority and fanatic in his devotion to Rome. Taxes were raised. The constitutional privileges of many cities were withdrawn. Heresy was more severely repressed by royal edict than before. Philip recognized that if he lost control of the Netherlands with their wealth and enterprise, the Spanish empire would be hopelessly crippled. Here alone was to be found the industrial and commercial advance which could provide him with the power necessary to maintain his authority throughout his vast domain.

Since he was frequently absent, Philip appointed as regent to represent him his sister, Margaret of Parma. In this she was assisted by a council of three, chief of whom was Cardinal Granvelle the bishop of Arras. This council flagrantly ignored the rights and privileges of the nobility who always enjoyed great influence in political life and had the confidence of the people. From this time dates the opposition of Prince William of Orange, chief of all the nobles, to the Spanish tyranny. He became the leader of the resistance movement which in time wrested independence for the northern provinces from their Spanish overlord.

During the reign of Charles V heresy had multiplied so rapidly despite the many edicts issued against it, that some new solution had to be proposed to keep the Netherlands in line. By the papal bull of 1559 the country was divided into fifteen bishoprics and three archbishoprics, appointments to which were made only by the pope.

By now the ferment of Calvin's teaching had entered the Netherlands and won the allegiance of thousands. Here was a clear and simple statement of the Christian faith rooted solely in

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the word of God. It exposed the serious doctrinal defections as well as ethical abuses rampant in the Romish church. More than that, its appeal to divine law promised to provide some order, both religious and political, in a situation which grew more confusing and chaotic with every passing year. These teachings also outlined a church organization according to the Scriptures which could flourish in the most troublous times, since it was completely independent of all political control. By such means the believers could be unified in a much more effective way than the Anabaptistic individual and local associations of believers could ever hope to achieve. In this way Geneva became the Wittenberg of the Netherlands.

The Author of the Confession

Among the most gifted and influential leaders of the Calvinistic Reformation in the Netherlands was Guido de Bres, the father of the *Belgic Confession*. The memory of this intrepid preacher and teacher of the holy gospel deserves to be permanently enshrined in our hearts.

We know comparatively little of the early life of this man. The date of his birth is obscure, although there is good reason to believe that this was 1522. Shortly before his birth, de Bres' mother heard the vigorous preaching of Hendrik van Zutfen, an Augustinian monk who had escaped out of the hands of the persecutors. Now on his way to Wittenberg he traveled through Mons, the town in which de Bres was born. Upon hearing the message the mother prayed to God that her son, if she would give birth to a son, might also be a preacher. Little could she have realized what God had in store for her and her family, for at this time she was a faithful member of the Roman Catholic Church. Mons was the chief town of Hainault, a province in what today is Belgium. His father was Jean de Bres, an artisan whose ability to paint on glass earned for the family a comfortable living in those days when churches vied with each other in possessing windows adorned with Biblical scenes.

As a child Guido de Bres was instructed in the Roman Catholic faith. Of this fact he spoke by describing his forefathers

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in one of his writings as unbelievers and image worshippers. He also regarded himself as being at first unbelieving and blind. Quite early in life he embraced the Reformed faith, possibly hearing one of the many wandering preachers who announced to the people the rediscovery of the simple Christian faith. There also seems to be strong evidence that he read some of the evangelical literature which at that time was widely disseminated in spite of the royal edicts. Coming under the conviction of his sins, he found salvation and peace in Jesus Christ.

Because of the uncompromising allegiance of the magistrates to the Roman church, persecution was the order of the day. Everywhere throughout the land those suspected of heresy were hunted and, if found, tortured and put to death. By 1547 Guido de Bres was compelled to flee. He went to England, where under Edward VI a warm welcome was extended to all those who professed the Reformed religion. During his stay, which lasted almost five years, he was providentially prepared for the great work which he was to do. Living in close fellowship with several outstanding Reformed leaders who like himself had fled persecution he learned much. John a Lasco, the homeless Polish nobleman, had been appointed pastor of the refugee church in London and organized this in accordance with the teachings of God's word. Petrus Dathenus, later to become famous as an outstanding preacher of the gospel and the father of the liturgy of the Dutch churches, was also spending time there. Others with whom de Bres had contact were Martin Micronius, a popular preacher whose catechism for small children was long used in the churches, and John Utenhove, a pious nobleman who was instrumental in translating the Bible and several significant reformatory works into the language of the people.

By 1552 we find de Bres back in his homeland. Here he traveled widely, going from city to city to preach the Reformed faith and gather the small groups of believers into congregations. At this time he wrote his first book, *Le Baston de la Foy Chrestienne*, "The Rod (cudgel, stick, or staff) of the Christian Faith." It militated against the errors of a Romish book, popular

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among many, which first appeared in Paris in 1547. By quoting voluminously from Scripture and appealing at times to the church fathers, de Bres demonstrated that what he and others were teaching was the pure and wholesome word of God. The various topics discussed in this book are worthy of attention, since many of these reappear in our *Confession*. In simple and straightforward language the author instructed his readers in the Scriptural doctrine concerning

God and his attributes
Christ and his attributes
The Holy Spirit and his attributes
The law of God
Free will
The grounds of our justification
Merit
The only Mediator
The church and her authority
Baptism
Confession to God and reconciliation with one's
 neighbors
The Lord's Supper
The Holy Scriptures
The gathering of believers
Marriage
Vows
On fasting and foods
The veneration of the saints
Images
Purgatory
That none may be compelled to faith
On magistrates who persecute believers
On the civil authority and its power

During this period he labored with exemplary devotion as pastor of the church at Lille.

When the authorities discovered his growing influence among the people, he was forced again to flee. This time he

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found refuge in Frankfurt on the Main, a German city where those who professed the evangelical faith were safe from molestation. Possibly he may have met Calvin at this time, who visited the city for a short season. Not long afterward de Bres left for Switzerland to study in Lausanne and Geneva.

In 1559 he was able to return to the southern Netherlands. At that time he married Catherine Ramon, with whom he had several children. With increasing vigor and effectiveness he devoted himself to preaching the pure gospel. The Spaniards, incited by the intransigence of Philip II, opened the floodgates of persecution. All who broke with the Roman Catholic church were accused of undermining good order in the land. This charge was born largely out of malice and misunderstanding, since the Romanists insisted on imputing to all who embraced the Protestant faith the excesses of the small number of Anabaptists involved in the tragedy of Munster.

Both for the purpose of replying to these unfounded charges and of instructing the believers Guido de Bres prepared his *Confession of Faith*. At this time he was laboring in Tournai, a city which Charles V had wrested from the French king in 1521 but whose inhabitants maintained close contact with the French. The local magistrates were greatly displeased when as a result of edicts of Charles V two evangelical preachers had been burned to death there in 1545 and 1546. Now, however, Philip II was on the throne. Under his prodding the court of Brussels kept a watchful eye on Tournai because of its sympathies both for the French and for the reformers. In the summer of 1561 an event took place in that city which proved dangerous for the spread of the Reformed faith. Spontaneously quite a few of the inhabitants engaged in a series of "chanteries," public singing of the psalms which had been strictly prohibited by the authorities. This seemed to give credence to the Romish charge that all who embraced the "new doctrines" were disturbers of the peace and order of the city. De Bres himself had not hesitated to warn against these "chanteries," knowing full well that the ire of the authorities would be aroused. And when Margaret of Parma heard in Brussels that the city of Tournai

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had engaged in such open violation of the edicts, she sent a commission of certain nobles to investigate the situation and arrest all suspected of heresy. Thus the situation in Tournai became critical for de Bres and his congregation. Numerous arrests were made, and finally the minister himself was forced to flee once more.

Knowing that the authorities were searching for him everywhere, de Bres made preparations for his escape. During the night of November 1, 1561, he took a copy of the small volume which contained his *Confession of Faith* together with a letter addressed to the local magistracy and tossed this over the castle wall. Here the commissioners of Margaret of Parma were lodging. The reformer became the object of an intense and relentless search, during which the small garden house in which he lodged and kept his library was burned to the ground. He was declared an exile with a price upon his head and burned in effigy.

From December 1561 to July 1566 this man of God was compelled to remain on foreign soil. He labored in the ministry of the word in Dieppe, Amiens, Montdidier and Sedan, all cities of France wherein the Reformed religion had won many adherents. At this time he also wrote his book against the Anabaptists, entitled *La racine, source et fondamente des Anabaptistes*, "The root, origin and basis of the Anabaptists." At Sedan, where he served the congregation for several years, he was pastor of the duke of Bouillon, one of the chief noblemen of France. From time to time he made short journeys to Antwerp and Brussels, conferring in all secrecy with the Reformed congregations and their pastors. He was also in contact with Prince William of Orange, who desired closer affiliations between the Calvinists and the Lutherans in order to secure the assistance of the German princes in the Dutch struggle for independence from Spain.

Although de Bres did much to further the cause of the Reformed faith in France, the people of the southern Netherlands greatly desired his return. Under such affectionate pressures he settled for a season in Valenciennes. Here with Peregrin de la Grange he assumed the spiritual care of a large congrega-

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tion, since a majority of the town's inhabitants had professed the Calvinistic doctrines. Not long after his return the iconoclastic disturbances broke out. Roman Catholic sanctuaries were violently entered and profaned, while all images and relics were ruthlessly destroyed. Also the townspeople of Valenciennes took part in this movement. To the Romanists this was an act of gross sacrilege and blasphemy. The indignation of the authorities, most of whom were adherents of that church, knew no bounds. By royal edict the city was declared guilty of open rebellion. The soldiers of the emperor besieged the city, which capitulated after three months. Both of the preachers managed to escape in the confusion which reigned. But after a few days they were captured and imprisoned. During this time Guido de Bres wrote letters of great faith and consolation to his wife and children as well as to his mother. Finally on the night of May 30, 1567, having steadfastly refused to repudiate the Reformed religion, de Bres was hanged. His body was burned, and its ashes scattered on the waters of the Schelde river which ran alongside of the city. Thus ended the earthly career of one of the heroic champions of the faith. But through his writings and especially the *Confession of Faith* he, being dead, still speaks to us today.

The Antecedents of the Confession

Often the creeds are superficially judged to be the work of one or a few men. Nothing is farther from the truth. The *Belgic Confession* expressly manifests the earmarks of the faith which was commonly received by the people of the Netherlands in those days. To demonstrate this somewhat it will be necessary to review the historical antecedents of this document.

As the survey of the life and labors of de Bres evidenced, he was an ardent and able disciple of John Calvin, the lion-hearted reformer of Geneva and teacher of countless thousands in Europe of his day. In the library of de Bres, secluded in the garden house at Tournai and burned by the minions of the emperor, were several of Calvin's works. Undoubtedly the work which made the profoundest impression upon this Netherlands

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preacher was the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Many phrases and much of the argument of the *Confession of Faith* demonstrate a large measure of dependence on this illustrious book.

The first edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1536 when Calvin was only twenty six years old. Originally the reformer had intended his little work, which comprised only five chapters, to serve as a means of instructing the people in pure religion. But having heard of the bitter persecution which raged in the dominions of the French king against those who embraced Protestantism, Calvin added not only the fifth and last chapter wherein were exposed many of the most heinous errors of Rome but also a preface to Francis I, king of France. This was an apology or defence of the Reformed religion, admired to this day as one of the noblest pieces of French literature of its kind. The opening sentences explained Calvin's purpose admirably.

“When I began this work, Sire, nothing was further from my thoughts than writing a book which would afterwards be presented to your Majesty. My intention was only to lay down some elementary principles, by which inquirers on the subject of religion might be instructed in the nature of true piety. And this labour I undertook chiefly for my countrymen, the French, of whom I apprehended multitudes to be hungering and thirsting after Christ, but saw very few possessing any real knowledge of him. That this was my design, the book itself proves by its simple method and unadorned composition. But when I perceived that the fury of certain wicked men in your kingdom had grown to such a height, as to leave no room in the land for sound doctrine, I thought I should be usefully employed, if in the same work I delivered my instructions to them, and exhibited my confession to you, that you may know the nature of that doctrine, which is the object of such unbounded rage to those madmen who are now disturbing the country with fire and sword. . .”

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It is significant to note that de Bres' *Confession of Faith* served the same dual purpose. The author had learned his lessons well in the school of Calvin, assuming his place in the church both as an apologist for sound doctrine and as a patient teacher of the little ones who belonged to Christ's flock. Unabashedly his writings bear the stamp of the great reformer. Yet he did not follow Calvin slavishly. He knew how to present the doctrine which is according to godliness in words which struck a responsive chord in the heart of the Netherlands churches. Thus the *Confession* is more than a mere reproduction of the *Institutes*. It takes the teachings so beautifully and comprehensively set forth on its pages and summarizes them in language which is de Bres' own.

That the *Institutes* had a direct influence on the formulation of our *Confession of Faith* is further evidenced by what took place in French-speaking lands during the years immediately preceding its appearance.

Calvin had directed his little book (for this it indeed was in its initial editions) not only to the French king but more especially to the French people. These both read and were profoundly influenced by its pages. In spite of frequent shifts in political and religious policy on the part of the authorities, the Reformed faith was embraced by a large segment of the population. Multitudes broke more or less publicly with Romish doctrine and worship. In nearly every city, town and village groups of Reformed believers gathered together. These all looked to Geneva for leadership, recognizing in John Calvin, one of their own number, a spiritual father and teacher in Christ. Continually they sought his advice on the numerous problems which perplexed them in defending and propagating the principles of the Reformation. Out of this situation the *Gallican* (or French) *Confession* was born.

In the congregation of Poitiers dissension appeared. Not all the members agreed on how the doctrine of divine predestination ought to be formulated and believed. That this teaching was clearly affirmed in Holy Scripture and constituted an integral element in Calvin's exposition of the Christian faith they

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all recognized. To resolve their difficulty, the congregation sought the advice and help of neighboring churches. In the judgment of this assembly all Reformed congregations in France would be admirably served by a common confession, "so that no strange opinions might creep in." The desire was expressed for a general synod of all the French churches. While persecution was raging through city and countryside and believers stood in jeopardy of their lives, the delegates met in Paris during 1559.

Plans for such a synod had already been submitted to Calvin. Strange as this may seem to us today, the reformer urged those who conferred with him not to pursue their plan to draft a general confession for the French churches. He feared that this might in time prove to be a hindrance to the unity of all true Protestant believers. But when the representatives of the churches could not be dissuaded, Calvin prepared for them a tentative confession of faith. This was in due time presented at the synod of Paris by the delegates who had been to Geneva.

This tentative confession was a summary of the *Institutes*. So pleased were the delegates with this draft, that it was overwhelmingly adopted without any significant changes. It deserves to be noted that the *Gallican Confession* was drawn up to preserve the peace and unity of the Reformed congregations in the true faith. Yet it soon came to be used as an apology and testimony to the French king.

The assembly itself had decided not to present the document to the king except under extreme necessity. Little did the delegates realize how soon such necessity would arise. Francis I, to whom Calvin had dedicated the *Institutes* was now long since dead. In 1547 Henry II had ascended the throne of France. Less than a month after the synod had gathered in Paris, this king died unexpectedly after receiving a fatal wound at a tournament held in honor of the marriage of his daughter. He was followed by his son, Francis II. From the new king the Protestants fervently hoped to receive the necessary royal permission to worship God according to his word without molestation. They were convinced that if only the youthful ruler

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were acquainted with what they in good conscience believed, he would order a cessation of persecution. Thus the first edition of this creed was publicly presented to the king during the following year (1560) by a delegation of eight representatives of the French Reformed churches. Shortly thereafter Francis II also passed away to be succeeded by Charles IX. Now in 1561 this *Gallican Confession* was presented publicly to him for his perusal. Thus also this creed served almost from its inception the double purpose of instructing the church and acquainting the world with the true doctrine of God's word.

The Belgic Confession is plainly the child of the creed adopted by the French churches.

The first edition, penned in French which must be regarded as the original, did not appear in print until 1561. However, de Bres had begun his labor of love nearly two years earlier. To this he was prompted largely by the tragic religious divisions of his land as well as the thirst of the believers for some systematic but withal simple statement of their faith. One of the chief incentives to this work was undoubtedly the charge which the Romanists repeatedly hurled against those who embraced the Reformed teachings, ranging them along with the Anabaptists as disturbers of the peace and order of the country. An old account informs us that the author showed these articles to Saravia who at the time was on the point of journeying to Geneva. Saravia, who approved of their form and content, showed them to Calvin and the other Genevan theologians. These men urged their visitor to plead with de Bres not to prepare another creedal statement for the Reformed churches but content himself with the confession which the French churches had adopted in Paris in 1559. For nearly two years de Bres apparently followed this advice.

Although Calvin and others had urged him to make use of the French confession which could readily be employed by the French-speaking congregations of southern Netherlands, de Bres published his own confession in 1561. We can only surmise what some of the weighty reasons were which prompted him to follow this course. Vonk suggests that basically it was

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the same circumspection and care which inspired Calvin to advise against this, namely, the spiritual care of the churches. This urged him to seek that which was best for their safety and growth. We should remember that the court at Brussels had little reason to regard anything that came from France with favor. Especially the French Calvinists were suspect, since many of the forbidden books which entered the Lowlands were printed in the cities of France. In addition, the city of Tournai, in which de Bres lived at the time, was carefully watched by the royal authorities lest its ties with France be strengthened. The political as well as the religious situation would seem to indicate sufficient warrant for formulating a *Confession of Faith* which would uniquely represent the Reformed congregations which had sprung up in the Netherlands.

In some measure de Bres drew upon the work done by the synod of Paris. To a large degree he deals in his *Confession* with the same major themes of the Christian faith. Often the language is almost identical. Yet his work was not merely a translation or even a slight emendation of the *Gallican Confession*. Where the one speaks at great length, the other discusses some doctrines with brevity. This will become apparent to anyone who takes pains to compare these two creedal formularies.

Nor was the work of de Bres the expression of personal and private opinion. There are too many indications that he was in long and fruitful contact with other Reformed pastors in the Netherlands. It seems likely that the author in writing and publishing this defense of the Reformed faith consulted with Fabricius, the well-known martyr of Antwerp. The title page indicates that several, possibly many, were acquainted with what de Bres was doing and encouraged him. In the original edition we read as title: "Confession of Faith. Made with common consent (agreement) by the believers who are scattered throughout all the Netherlands, who desire to live according to the purity of the holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." There is every reason to believe that the *Confession* itself was discussed with the congregation of Antwerp, the

mother-church of the Reformed in that area, and most certainly with its pastors. Before the end of 1561 it was widely known as "the Confession of Antwerp." Nor does it seem that de Bres concealed his work from his own congregation. In the letter appended to the book containing the *Confession* which was thrown over the wall of the castle of Tournai on that memorable night of November 1, 1561, he stated that this document was presented to the authorities in the name of the citizenry of Tournai, the majority of whom professed the doctrine which it contained. In addition, de Bres mentioned that throughout the land no less than one hundred thousand were adherents of the Reformed religion as set forth in his *Confession*.

All this sheds important and interesting light on these articles of faith which we also embrace. The *Belgic Confession* is in full accord with the doctrine of the historic Christian church as first systematized by Augustine and thereafter revived by Luther and Calvin. This creed is less polemical than that of the French churches, especially in its opposition to Romish teachings which are refuted rather by a positive appeal to God's word than by open attack. More attention is devoted to the departures of the Anabaptists from the sound doctrine of the Scriptures. This is undoubtedly because these sectaries were far more numerous and influential in the Lowlands than in the French kingdom. On such points of doctrine as the Trinity, the incarnation, the church, the sacraments and the final judgment it is also more elaborate. On these issues particularly the Reformed were engaged in continual debate with the Anabaptists. Yet the emphasis throughout is positive rather than negative, setting forth the teaching of the Bible for the instruction and consolation of the believers rather than attacking the opposition. Schaff judges that "it is, upon the whole, the best symbolical statement of the Calvinistic system of doctrine, with the exception of the *Westminster Confession* which was written some eighty years later."

The First Edition of the Confession

In the packet tossed over the wall of Tournai's castle were a letter and a little book. Because exact copies are not found

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outside of the Netherlands, our curiosity concerning this first edition of de Bres' work is aroused.

The letter was a respectful address to the lords commissioners sent to Tournai by the regent, Margaret of Parma. They had been ordered to preserve peace in the city while uncovering and exterminating adherents of the Reformed faith. These commissioners wrote their superior shortly after the packet came into their hands. They stated that the letter was too long to be copied, and therefore they sent only a summary of its contents. In it de Bres pleaded with the authorities to cease their persecution of an innocent and simple people who had not rebelled against either the crown or its representatives. Only this summary has been preserved and can be found in the royal archives in Brussels.

For many years there was no known copy of either the first French or the first Dutch edition (published in 1562) of the *Confession*. So well had the inquisitors of those fearful years done their work in searching the houses of suspected believers and destroying illicit literature, that all copies of these first editions were deemed lost. But in 1855 and then again in 1862 a copy of each was found. These were reproduced and thereupon the originals were deposited in the Royal Library at the Hague, Netherlands.

For all who are interested in this early Reformed creed the contents of the little book are worthy of some special consideration.

On the first or title page we find what we would expect. This is a *Confession of Faith*, so the title reads, "Made with common consent (agreement) by the believers who are scattered throughout all the Netherlands . . ." In the center is an engraving surrounding which are the words of Psalm 102:27, freely translated into Latin: "They all shall perish, but the Lord shall abide." Below, the text from I Peter 3 is quoted, "Be ready always to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you." At the bottom of the page the date is given in bold type - 1561.

The second page contains a poem addressed to the judges of the land and the king, urging that just decisions be made concerning those who appeared before them for the sake of their allegiance to the gospel of Christ.

Thereupon follows a lengthy address to king Philip II, at the time ruler of Spain, much of Germany and the Netherlands. In compelling and charming style de Bres pleads for the lives of the sheep of the good and faithful Shepherd. The accusation that they are revolutionaries who would wrest the royal scepter out of Philip's hand is denounced as false. The king should know from the testimonies of the accused that in their gatherings prayers were regularly offered for all those in authority over them and especially for their king. Not one had ever refused to pay tax or toll. With great frequency the author quotes from the Holy Scriptures to demonstrate that these people desired to live in all obedience to the sacred writings. Nor should they be considered schismatics and heretics who readily gave ear to new theories, since their aim was to restore the preaching of the gospel to its purity according to the Bible. The letter closes with a prayer offered for the king. Here we see how well de Bres had been taught in the school of Calvin.

To introduce his readers more specifically to the *Confession* itself, he directed their attention to the duty of witnessing to the Savior before men. This he did by quoting five pertinent passages from Scripture, "according to which all believers are exhorted to make confession of their faith before men." Witnessing belongs to the essence of the Christian life. This de Bres substantiates by his use of these texts. "Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32, 33) "For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of man also shall be ashamed of him, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26) The quotation on the title page is repeated. (I Peter 3:15) Two more texts are cited. "With the heart man believeth

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unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Rom. 10:10) "If we shall deny him, he also will deny us." (II Tim. 2:12)

Now follows the *Confession* itself under the title, "True Christian Confession, containing the eternal salvation of souls." Each article is indicated by number, but no captions are provided. In the margins appear a large number of texts on which the doctrine is based. Rarely are no Scripture passages cited, as for example in connection with articles 4, 5, and 6. The seventh article, however, is accompanied by an unusually large number of references. The book ended with an appeal to the lower magistrates, with whom most of the believers had to deal when apprehended on suspicion of heresy or revolutionary activity. De Bres reminds these authorities that they are servants of God appointed to punish evildoers and protect the good. On this basis he appeals for better treatment of the innocent who were being brutally imprisoned, tortured and impoverished. Instead of condemning them unheard on the basis of the false reports circulated either by those who fanatically pursued their religious errors or by those to whom the godly lives of the believers were an unbearable reproach, the magistrates are urged to judge according to truth and righteousness, lest God visit upon them his wrath.

It is this little book, which so accurately reproduced the faith which lived in the hearts and lives of multitudes in the Netherlands during those trying times, which has become the treasure of Reformed churches throughout the world.

The Confession on Romanism and Anabaptism

Here we will not concern ourselves with the specific contents of the thirty seven articles of the Christian faith which this little book contained. This will be dealt with later. Our interest now is chiefly in the approach which de Bres took, when he attempted to express the faith which lived in the hearts and was confessed with the lips of the Reformed believers in his age.

Although the major themes of the Christian religion are expounded in a rather systematic order, this is not a manual in Christian dogmatics. Not everything that the church believed is presented in these pages. If one is interested in full definitions of theological terms, he usually looks in vain in the *Confession*. Yet the whole round of Christian truth is simply, soberly and strikingly stated. In this sense it could serve as an admirable introduction to the faith once for all delivered to the people of God. In logical order the author treats the doctrine of God and how he is known to us, then more specifically the life of the Trinity together with the works of God in creation and providence. Thereupon he discusses the fall of man and its consequences, which serve to introduce us to the divine plan of salvation. The saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ together with its blessed fruits in the lives of believers are considered at length. This leads to a consideration of the church and sacraments. The *Confession* concludes with an article on the magistracy and its relation to the Christian faith and an article on the final judgment.

In contrast with the *Gallican Confession* nothing is said explicitly of the Romish doctrine and worship, while from time to time the opinions of the Anabaptists are rejected as serious errors. As we noted before, this approach seems to have been deliberately chosen by de Bres because of the situation which prevailed in the Netherlands.

That the Roman Catholic religion is not openly condemned should not be interpreted solely as occasioned by fear for reprisals on the part of de Bres and the churches which so eagerly received and adopted his *Confession of Faith*. In those early years many pamphlets and books appeared, which exposed the teachings and practices of that church which were in flagrant conflict with the Scriptures. These were widely disseminated among the evangelicals. To some of these pertinent, although indirect, references are made in several of the articles. The Reformed faith was a strong and sustained protest against those doctrines which undergirded the religious piety and practice which that church championed in the name of Christ. To the

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reformers, including de Bres, these were no less than a repudiation of the authority of the Scripture and a rejection of salvation by grace alone.

At that time the Reformation was in a period of transition especially in the Netherlands. While the upper echelons of the hierarchy were recognized as enemies of Christ because of their rejection of evangelical truth and suppression of the people in spiritual ignorance, the early reformers were aware that within that church there were still thousands hungering and thirsting for the word of the gospel. Certain towns and villages throughout the land had embraced the doctrine of God's word wholeheartedly. Others had wilfully rejected the pure preaching. Many more, however, had enjoyed little if any opportunity to become acquainted with the teachings of Luther, Calvin and others who called men back to the Bible. To win these for the true faith was the aim of both preachers and people who had found comfort and hope in the proclamation of the rich grace of Christ. To them a positive and clear exposition of God's word would make a stronger appeal than any frontal attack on the perversions of the Roman Catholic Church.

Quite different is the approach taken with regard to the Anabaptists. While the *Confession* breathes a mild and conciliatory spirit, evidence of the fact that de Bres was by no means averse to conferences with the followers of Luther in the hope of an eventual union of all evangelical believers, it singles out the Anabaptists no less than three times by name and without mentioning them attacks several of their errors in other articles.

All this seems strange to us, who are accustomed to thinking of the spiritual descendants of the Anabaptist movement as a godly and law-abiding people. Their sober and frequently secluded life seems to offer strong testimony to their hope in Jesus Christ. Voices have been raised questioning and at times even denying the correctness of the *Confession's* opposition to this reformatory movement which has so largely influenced English and American church history.

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The term Anabaptism (meaning—re-baptism, because of the insistence on baptizing again those who had received the sacrament in infancy) denotes a religious movement which began in Switzerland under the leadership of Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz. Soon it spread widely throughout northern and western Europe especially among the poor and uneducated. In various forms it continued until after the death of Menno Simons (1496-1561), when the term Anabaptist was replaced by the name Mennonite.

The origins of this movement have been the subject of much intensive study, and scholars are usually agreed that these are exceedingly difficult to trace adequately and accurately. Some Baptist apologists, who claim the Anabaptists as their legitimate spiritual forebears, take the position that many of the dissenting groups found within and outside of the medieval church were their antecedents. That several of the teachings of these groups were taken over and vigorously propagated by the Anabaptists cannot be denied. But it is most difficult to define precisely what their chief tenets were. They followed no single leader and adopted no common confession of faith. What some taught was openly denied or ignored by others. In the local congregations, the only unity which they knew, guidance was in the hands of simple folk who had little if any education. Yet in every land where they flourished for a season, one or two colorful figures arose to compel attention and often to create confusion not only for the civil magistrates but also for the churches, both Roman Catholic and evangelical. There was indeed a religious group, and they stated their convictions in the theological language of that day. But it must not be overlooked that many of their ideals and programs stemmed from the social, economic and political situations which colored their lives.

From its inception under the guidance of Grebel and Manz the movement championed the position of a radical separation of church and state. Any affiliation and cooperation between the two was to them a denial of the teachings of Christ and the New Testament. The church, so they argued, was the company of the visibly regenerate. Baptism as the outward sign of inward

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regeneration and conversion might be administered only to adults who gave credible evidence of a spiritual change in their lives. In these early years they were opposed to all violence, insisting that military service was sinful and payment of taxes to a state engaged in warfare a violation of the Christian faith. They were characterized by an extreme Biblical literalism. Because of their emphasis on inward religion, many looked for special guidance through visions and new revelations. Apart from a special illumination by the Holy Spirit, which alone enabled the believers to comprehend the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures, the Bible remained and was appraised as a dead letter. Zwingli sensed at an early date to what lengths their basic positions would drive the Anabaptists and did not hesitate to warn against them in strong language. To him they were a serious threat to all order and decency in both church and state.

The first open conflict between the Lutherans and the Anabaptists occurred when the Zwickau prophets came to Wittenberg. In those days Luther was being held in the castle at Wartburg. These men accused the Lutherans of a half-hearted reformation and prophesied that within five to seven years the present world would end. Then all the unrighteous would be slain and only those who professed the true faith and had been rebaptized would be saved.

To these men Thomas Munzer gave heed. Soon he became the outstanding Anabaptist leader in German lands. He believed that a special inner voice was required to understand God's word. Whatever was so taught had more value than all the teachings of the church and her theologians. His special assignment, so he claimed, was to usher in the kingdom of God after the example of apostolic times. Thus he argued vehemently for equality of social status and community of goods. If the new realm could not be brought in peacefully, then the believers would be compelled to use force. One of God's elect could strangle a thousand foes; two could slay ten thousand! During the Peasants' War (1525) he was killed in battle as he led his disorderly followers.

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Many of these difficulties arose in Zurich, where Zwingli opposed the outstanding positions of the Anabaptists. They wanted complete separation of church and state, a church composed only of the regenerate, and a recognition that infant baptism was a device by which the devil deceived the church. Many openly denied predestination and championed Pelagian notions concerning the free will of man. The officials at Zurich became alarmed, when Zwingli was unable to persuade the Anabaptists of their errors. Soon they made drowning the penalty for all who held Anabaptistic notions. Here begins the story of their martyrdom, one of the most tragic chapters in the history of the Reformation to which Lutherans and Calvinists as well as Roman Catholics must plead guilty.

To reduce the Anabaptist controversy merely to doctrinal differences, however, is to betray gross ignorance of the situation which obtained in those days. Had this been the case, these folk would not have been harried out of the land with such vehemence and vengeance. Some like Hubmaier and Hans Denck indeed rejected the revolutionary ideas of Manz. But for several years their influence was completely overshadowed by that of the revolutionary wing. It was this party which possibly more than anything else brought the Reformation into disrepute.

One of the first to proclaim openly that God's kingdom must be established by the use of brute force was Hans Hut. Jacob Wiedemann taught that community of goods was a basic Biblical doctrine and must therefore serve as a rule for Christian believers everywhere. Melchior Hoffmann foretold the imminent return of Christ in such lurid terms, that many of his followers forsook their daily occupations and lived in a state of religious ecstasy looking for the coming of the new and heavenly order which would end all their sufferings.

Against this background we can better understand the dark story of Munster, the most horrible and hideous chapter in Anabaptist history. For this John Matthyszoon of Haarlem and John Beukelszoon of Leiden, both Netherlanders, were responsible. Inspired especially by the teachings of Hoffman, they encouraged their followers to come with them to the city

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of Munster in Westphalia. Here Zion was to appear in full glory upon earth. The two leaders deliberately undermined the legal authority and power of the town council, in order that they might seize the government on behalf of the saints of God. Soon the town was besieged by the forces of surrounding cities and provinces. Matthyszoon lost his life when in prophetic frenzy he ran out of the town to attack the enemy. Now all restraint within the city was thrown to the winds. John of Leiden assumed power. Often he is depicted as courageous, eloquent and handsome. True as this may possibly be, he was a rascal nonetheless, being guilty of polygamy even before he came to Munster. Upon his insistence the whole city of Munster, whether agreeing to the positions of the Anabaptists or not, was to conform to the pattern of the Old Testament. Here we notice again how some of these people, possibly because of their lack of formal education and surely because of their refusal to recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit within the church of all ages, could play fast and loose with the word of God. Twelve elders were appointed by John to rule under him. All previous marriages were annulled. Polygamy was publicly introduced. John eventually allowed himself the privilege of sixteen wives in addition to the radiant Divara, previously a nun who had been married to John Matthyszoon. The king of this new Jerusalem was John of Leiden himself. A few months later he sent out twenty-eight of his most ardent and ambitious disciples as apostles who were to convert the nations, these men compelled by circumstances to leave behind their one hundred and twenty four wives and numerous progeny.

Before and during these happenings at Munster, the preaching of these Anabaptists who championed revolutionary means to gain their ends stirred up especially the poorer and uneducated in the Netherlands. In several of the towns men and women ran naked through the streets proclaiming woe to the world on account of its sins. Others urged the slaying of all monks and priests as servants of the great whore foretold in the book of Revelation. Some even dared to advocate the abolition of all civil authorities and governments.

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Amid this confusion many Anabaptists refused to be wooed from the ways of gentleness and peace. But so great were the disturbances that the magistrates were constrained to regard all those who had Anabaptist leanings as a pestilential crowd. Even after the debacle of Munster, which finally ended in 1536, such men as John van Batenburg and David Joris made outrageous claims in the name of the Christian religion. The former insisted that he was the prophet Elijah and the latter that he was the promised Messiah. Both defended polygamy and argued that marriage vows were not binding on the regenerate. Grace, after all, put an end to all the claims of nature and natural law on man's life.

Although it is to the everlasting credit of the saner Anabaptists that they disclaimed these revolutionaries as belonging properly to their company, many of the excesses of the radical wing were simply the legitimate conclusions of the teachings of this group. Their insistence on the superiority of inner guidance and new revelations paved the way for the extravagant claims of the rebels who not only in theory but also in practice used the written word of God according to their personal insights and for their private profit. The radical distinction between nature and grace was the first step on the road to the dissolution of the marriage tie and the introduction of polygamy of which many made themselves guilty. Visions concerning the imminent return of Christ challenged men of less spiritual and sensitive natures to justify the use of violence to bring in Christ's kingdom. The whole matter of church-state relations was a peculiarly vexing problem for Protestants. They were heirs of a tradition of more than a thousand years in which these relations had been conceived of in a manner which could not pass the test of Holy Scripture. With much of this tradition many found it impossible to break, so that their own conceptions were fluid and ill-defined. But with one accord they denounced the solution proposed by the Anabaptists, sensing that it contained the seeds of revolution which was contrary to God's word. In the tragedy of Munster they felt certain that they possessed irrefutable evidence that false principles produced a practice which is fatal to

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all order and decency. Much as we deplore the awful persecution to which these misguided souls were subjected and deeply as we sorrow that our forefathers also added to the sufferings of so many of the gentler Anabaptists, we can understand and justify the warnings which Guido de Bres sounds in his writings and *Confession* against their errors. Almost without exception the leaders of the Lutheran and Reformed churches recognized in the Anabaptist heresy a most dangerous and subtle perversion of the word of God.

The Official Adoption of the Confession by the Churches

The French edition of 1561 was speedily followed by a translation into the Dutch language the next year. This was to be expected, since the Netherlands in those days was bilingual. Both the French and the Dutch churches adopted de Bres' *Confession of Faith* as the official statement of what they believed.

Although persecution compelled the churches to assemble themselves only in secret, they immediately endorsed this document which gave such accurate utterance to what lived in their minds and hearts. It has already been noted that before the end of 1561 these articles were referred to as the "Confession of Antwerp." Two years later a number of Reformed congregations gathered together in preparatory session at Armentieres and ruled that "the confession of faith, which is adopted by us" should be signed by all elders and deacons. The synod held in Antwerp in 1566 spoke in much the same vein of "the confession of faith of the churches in this country." It was there decided that the sessions of every synod should be opened with a reading of the *Confession* both to signify their unity in the true faith and to inquire whether or not its language could be improved. Slight redactions were indeed made, but the substance of what de Bres had penned remained unchanged. Repeatedly these churches testified that they accepted these articles as a true and faithful representation of the teachings of Holy Writ. The churches were fully cognizant of the seriousness of introducing changes into what had once been adopted. They were aware that this

might endanger their unity. Thus when the synod of Antwerp (1566) altered the reading at some points, the brethren sought approval of these emendations from the brethren at Geneva. No congregation or even group of congregations was to undertake a revision lightly or singlehandedly. The confession was their common property and might be changed only by common consent.

The Dutch-speaking churches seem to have been represented for the first time at the convent of Wezel (1568). This synodical gathering ruled that before any minister might be installed in the Reformed churches, he was to express public agreement with the *Confession*. The synod of Emden (1571) made obligatory upon all the delegates the affixing of their signatures to a copy of these articles of faith.

War and persecution took severe toll of the original editions of the *Confession*. Frequently it was reprinted and usually under adverse conditions. In this way many changes in reading were introduced. The provincial synod of Dordt (1574) recognized the need for an official edition in harmony with the revisions endorsed by the Antwerp synod (1566). But since this document belonged to all the churches, it determined to wait until a general synod of all Reformed congregations in the Netherlands could be assembled. It did rule that all ministers, elders and deacons were to subscribe publicly to this *Confession*. In 1583 the Dutch-speaking churches adopted an official version of these articles at the provincial synod of the Hague. This was prepared by Arent Cornelissen, minister of the church at Delft. In this edition captions appeared above every article, which were later removed by the national synod of Dordt (1618-19). Scriptural references were also incorporated, but these were not retained when the *Confession* was officially adopted in final form. The document was publicly presented to the government, since the synod was convinced that the "Christian reformation" was being greatly hindered by various sects as well as by defenders of the Roman Catholic church. In the early days of the Dutch republic both this *Confession* and the *Heidelberg Catechism*

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were committed to memory in Latin and in Greek by the pupils of the Latin schools.

When Arminian (Remonstrant) opinions began to filter into the Reformed churches, the position of the *Confession* was seriously threatened. Those who no longer agreed with the doctrines officially adopted by the churches argued on the basis of variant readings that no one was in a position to judge what really were the convictions to which all were supposed to be pledged. That these different readings posed a problem cannot be denied. Many of the printers who issued editions of the *Confession* were guilty of slovenly work. Often the articles were quoted without regard to the changes approved by the synod of Antwerp (1566). To this uncertainty the great synod of Dordt (1618-19) determined to make an end by ordering authentic texts in the Dutch, French and Latin languages. The first two were completed before the synod adjourned. These were officially adopted. The Latin version, prepared by Festus Hommius, appeared too late for official endorsement. Although some corrections and changes were made, the substance of the *Belgic Confession* remained as it had flowed from the pen of Guido de Bres. This synod also prepared and adopted a Formula of Subscription, the signing of which was made obligatory for all ministers in the Reformed churches. A similar Formula was drawn up for theological professors, teachers in the schools and visitors of the sick, but none for elders and deacons.

After the golden age of the Dutch Reformed churches the *Confession of Faith* fell into disuse and in some quarters into disrepute. Rationalism and Pietism each in its own way undermined the vigorous faith by which the churches had once lived. In many congregations the pure gospel was perverted beyond recognition. During the earliest years of the nineteenth century spiritual life in the Netherlands was at its lowest ebb. The king compelled upon the congregations a new system of church government contrary to the order by which they had lived for generations. Now the church was shackled to the state. In those years voices were heard calling for reform. The disciplinary action enforced by ecclesiastical authorities under the aegis

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of the state led to the organization of free Reformed congregations wherein the pure preaching of the gospel was once more heard. Throughout the land people were called back to serve God according to his word. The first movement for churches free from government interference dates from 1834; a second, which carried along with it thousands of highly educated leaders in the land, from 1886. Strict attention was once more given to sound doctrine according to the confessional standards of the Reformed churches, of which the *Belgic Confession* is the oldest. These movements had repercussions throughout the world wherever Reformed churches with roots in the Netherlands had been established. Today this statement of doctrine is officially recognized as one of the forms of unity by Reformed churches in every continent.

The Value of the Confession

From the survey it becomes apparent that any creedal statement including the *Confession*, if it is to mean anything at all, has a very distinct function in the churches.

Primarily these articles of faith are an instrument by which believers within the church may be more carefully and clearly instructed in the message of God's grace in Christ. This was the original intent of de Bres. For such a purpose there is ample warrant in Scripture, which does not cease to encourage us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (II Pet. 3:18)

It is also an instrument of apology or witness to the world, including the civil authorities. The church takes seriously her calling to recognize the magistrates. They are endowed with authority under God to preserve order and peace within their lands. To this end they should be aware of the religious convictions and persuasions of those whom they rule. By presenting to them the creed the churches may hopefully dispel unwarranted and evil charges levelled against Christian believers. Even more, such a witness informs the world of her message. By

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means of this she in some measure discharges her missionary responsibility among the nations.

Intimately associated with the above is the third aim and function. The *Confession*, together with the other creedal formularies, serves as an instrument by which the true faith is defended against error. No church can exhaustively reproduce the truth of God within the confines of her confessional standards. Nor is this essential to her life. But certain fundamentals, which lie at the center of the Christian faith, must be preserved inviolate. With these the life of the church stands or falls. Without in any way attempting a complete list, mention should be made of the Trinity, the incarnation and atonement wrought by Christ, the gracious work of the Spirit within believers individually and corporately, the sovereign rule of God over all things, and the authority of the Scriptures.

Here a measure of caution becomes all Christians. Even the most competent teachers within the church, including Calvin, warned continually against undermining the unity of Christ's body for the sake of personal theological opinions. None of the creeds are intended to exhaust those teachings commonly received and propagated by the church. These rather serve to set some well defined limits within which alone the church's proclamation as well as personal testimony may legitimately move. This limiting function of the creeds, by which believers may more readily discern truth from error, does not rest upon any inherent authority. All confessional statements of the Reformed churches are examinable, that is, subject to inquiry, investigation and scrutiny. Their authority is derived from the word of God alone and may be invoked only because the church is convinced that they accurately reproduce on specific points what the Bible clearly teaches. They are subject to revision, as soon as objective evidence is adduced that they teach anything contrary to God's word. As long as this cannot be demonstrated, they retain their authority. A careful and prayerful study of them therefore enables believers to escape the snares of false doctrine against which the Bible warns. Thus they function as a preventative as well as an antidote to falsehood.

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Finally, the creeds function as an instrument of preserving and promoting the unity of Christ's church. Often the charge is levelled that they are divisive and thus destroy what our gracious God has joined together in Christ Jesus. This usually rests upon a complete misunderstanding of what the Bible means by being in Christ. Although our union with the Savior includes much more than doctrinal soundness, this is an integral element of our life-communion with him. God's word states explicitly, "Shall two walk together, except they have agreed?" (Amos 3:3) The prophet applies this not so much to common association among men but specifically to our covenant fellowship with God. In full realization of the scope and significance of maintaining the unity of the faith in the bond of peace, Reformed churches have explicitly adopted their confessional writings as forms of unity. By these official statements of their common faith in the God of the Scriptures, they not only give expression to but also seek to preserve and increase their unity with true believers everywhere.

None of these functions may be stressed at the expense of the others. We serve Christ's cause best in these times which clamor for a Christianity without divisions by knowing who we are and what we believe, in order that thereupon in full obedience to the word of God and in the spirit of meekness, humility and love we may consider with all who name the name of our Lord Jesus Christ "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that we (ye) may be filled unto all the fulness of God." (Eph. 3:18, 19) A Reformed church ought always be engaged in reforming herself both in doctrine and duty. To this end she pursues her calling of presenting as fully and faithfully as possible the living word of the Lord to the whole world.

Today the Reformed churches with their dynamic and well-defined *Confession* find themselves in an age of spiritual and theological ferment.

Our situation differs radically from that which obtained a few decades ago, when the dominant mood in the churches of

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Canada and the United States was radically anti-intellectual. For this the orthodox must be ready to share blame with the liberals.

For years the liberal star was in ascendancy. In the classroom common practice was to attack the Scriptures as replete with discrepancies and informed with an imperfect ethic apart from a few teachings of Jesus. The major tenets of the historic Christian faith were dismissed as either unnecessary or contrary to the simple words of our Lord. In this parlor game, played by religious press and pulpit, Paul was tarred as the villain who substituted for the attractive religion of Jesus his intricate and intractable theology. The inconspicuous beginnings of this levelling process of the Christian faith rooted in the nineteenth century, when brilliant young men went abroad to study for a season at the feet of Ritschl, Troeltsch and Harnack. Upon their return they infected seminaries and churches with the virus of rationalism and higher criticism. Like a pestilence this attitude to the Bible and dogma raged through the pulpits and ravaged the pews. One doctrine after another was opened to dispute and denial, until under the influence of Rauschenbusch and his disciples it became fashionable to regard Christianity not as doctrine but solely as a way of life, a personal and social ethic too superficially divorced from the doctrine of Christ and his cross.

Doughty defenders arose to champion the cause of the historic faith. Mention must be made of such intellectual and spiritual giants as the Hodges and Warfield of Princeton fame, whose efforts to defend the Reformed faith were not entirely in vain. To a more recent time belongs J. Gresham Machen. But meanwhile the churches were surrendering themselves increasingly to vague and vapid teaching. For popular consumption a series of tracts was published in 1910 entitled *The Fundamentals*. These dealt with the major themes of the Christian faith and pointed out where the battle lines were being drawn within American Christianity. Since then the term fundamentalist has been in vogue to designate those who resisted the onslaughts of doctrinal indifferentism and heresy. But because to this group belonged also many who had little regard for

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respectable theological scholarship or were captivated by an extreme dispensationalism or esteemed such exotic excrescences as speaking in tongues, healings and foot-washings as tests for Biblical orthodoxy, the term has come into reproach.

As the conflict increased and intensified evangelical Christians often reacted in one of two ways, both of which proved frustrating to the cause of historic Christianity. Frequently the adherents of sound doctrine isolated themselves within their small circle, so that their witness could not be heard by those on the outside. Others became less objective and more vituperative in their attacks on the liberals. Many sought to reduce the Christian faith to a doctrinal minimum restricted to an acknowledgement of the infallibility of the Scriptures, the Trinity, the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, the atonement through his blood, and the second coming. Everywhere Bible-believing Christians seemed to beat a slow but sure retreat. Many were content to live in the past, fighting the battles of bygone centuries and unaware of the continual changes to which the intellectual and spiritual climate of America was being subjected by such pressures as economic recessions, wars, and the rise of existentialism. Like the Levite and priest of old they passed by a wounded and bleeding church with little heart-warming concern.

Happily the tide has shifted.

Many causes for the renewed concern of the orthodox with a positive and continual Christian witness to all men might be mentioned. In certain instances the barriers of cultural isolation were broken down. Recent wars revealed that the American nations were rapidly replacing Europe in influence. During the past two decades liberals began to feel less sure of themselves and their positions, realizing that they had no message for a world torn by tension. Many learned to listen, if not in faith at least with a measure of respect, to the dialectical theology which took seriously the depth dimension of the Christian gospel. Once again the church was called back to the word of God. Even the liberals, possibly with tongue in cheek, joined the chorus.

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In his analysis of Christian responsibility in our day Carl F. H. Henry lists the following duties for orthodox Christianity. (1) It must align itself earnestly with the current plea for a return to biblical theology. (2) It must rededicate itself "to positive and triumphant preaching" as "the evangelical pulpit's great need." (3) It "needs a fresh and pervading conception of the Christian life." (4) It must manifest "a new concern for the individual in the entirety of his Christian experience." (5) Finally it "needs also the sustained study of the New Testament doctrine of the Church and a greater concern for the unity of regenerate believers."

This call comes also to us who cherish the rich heritage of the Protestant Reformation, more particularly as set forth so vibrantly and relevantly by Calvin and his immediate successors. Too long have we as Reformed churches lived on the fringes of American ecclesiastical life, content to be by ourselves and concerned almost exclusively with the task of delivering to the next generation our legacy untainted and unsullied. May it possibly be that the problems which have persistently risen up within our churches during the past decades to plague our corporate life are the Lord's judgment for being so preoccupied with ourselves and our institutions, that we paid little more than lip-service to the Biblical injunction, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations?"

We would not deny that at long last, especially after the second World War, we are finally disentangling ourselves from the comfortable cocoon of cultural and spiritual isolation to challenge with the Reformed faith all who will hear. The Back-to-God hour with its large sustained listening audience over more than four decades has paved an entrance for us into many homes and communities. More wholeheartedly than ever before we are expanding not only foreign but also domestic missions. The movement for parentally owned and operated Christian schools, so indigenous to the Reformed community, has fired a spark in several parts of the continent where our churches were not represented. Institutions for the mentally afflicted, supported as part of our commitment to the work of Christian

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mercy, have become widely and favorably known. The voice of the Christian Labor Association, seeking to apply concretely the social implications of the gospel to the tangled web of industrial relations, is not going unheeded.

But, and this needs underscoring, we have come with so little and we seem to have come so late.

Even more frustrating is the fact that not all who profess the Reformed faith seem committed to a thorough program of action. Often we fail to see the forest in our preoccupation with a single tree. We still bicker among ourselves about methodological details, with the result that the impact of our witness is blunted. But more ominous for the future is the discovery that many seem to know so little about the principles which undergird and alone can give vibrancy and strength to our Christian testimony. Well may we ask whether our church attendance springs more from ingrained habit than from a thirst for Biblical preaching; whether we send our children to Christian schools for the sake of convenience and to insure a measure of respectability in the Reformed community or out of conviction of heart; whether we support the causes of our Lord to salve our consciences or as the response of loving hearts which rejoice in his message of salvation by grace. As Reformed believers we have by no means escaped the effects of the winds of doctrinal indifferentism. Too often when some point of doctrine is discussed in our religious press, the cries of well-intentioned but ill-informed people tell us we should rather preach Christ. Little do they understand that we cannot preach Christ with blazing conviction, unless we arrive at increasing clarity of God's great plan of redemption which embraces the totality of our life.

Doctrine has never been expendable in the history of the Christian church, least of all in our days which seem to have lost all sense of spiritual direction. And before we listen to those voices which proclaim from the housetops, "Lo, here" or "Lo, there," we do well to reflect upon what our forefathers bequeathed at the cost of their blood and sweat and tears.

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The truths expressed in the *Belgic Confession* are, indeed, not the last word which must be spoken. That honor belongs alone to the word of God upon which this creed rests. Although often misinterpreted and misapplied, we may appropriate the words of John Robinson, spoken to the Pilgrim fathers as they embarked for the American wilderness. One of his disciples has preserved this record for us:

“He charged us . . . to follow him no further than he followed Christ; and if God should reveal anything to us by any other instrument of his, to be as ready to receive it as ever we were to receive any truth by his ministry; for he was very confident the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.”

But long before the church may rightly expect new light to break from the sacred page, she owes it to God, herself and the world in which she lives to walk in that light which has already shined upon her.

Here the *Confession* will take us by the hand and lead us back to the Scriptures. Its study will nourish the tender plant of faith in these chill days. It will strengthen holy convictions by which error and heresy can be resisted. It will nerve us for the fight against all who would rob us of our rightful heritage and impoverish our strength and hope. As the church today in the light of the guidance which the Holy Spirit imparted to God's people of a bygone age reflects upon the message of salvation revealed in the holy word of God, she will rise up and boldly testify to the God of all glory and all grace. With childlike confidence she will say with the apostle, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the evil one. And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.” (I John 5:19, 20)

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1. Wherein must the unity of Christ's church be found? 2. What is the specific nature of the church? 3. Who may properly belong to the church? 4. If God's truth is always richer and fuller than human formulation thereof, of what value is the study of theology? 5. Are all creeds relative? 6. Should the church write and adopt a new creed for the twentieth century? 7. What rights and privileges did the Netherlands towns possess before the rule of Charles V? 8. Can the Reformation be explained in the light of social, economic and political crisis? 9. How is the church affected by the world in which she lives? 10. Why did Calvin's teachings appeal more to the Dutch than Luther's? 11. Who was a Lasco, and what were his contributions to the Reformed churches? 12. What was the iconoclastic movement of 1566 and following years? 13. What was Calvin's relation to and evaluation of the Lutheran Reformation? 14. Sketch the history of the religious wars in France. 15. Why do you suppose de Bres wrote a distinct creed for the Dutch churches? 16. Why did de Bres and Calvin appeal to the rulers for a cessation of persecution? Does the Reformed view of political authority differ from that of the Anabaptists? 17. Why does the Confession attack Romish doctrines and practices indirectly rather than directly? 18. Which Romish doctrines are refuted in this creed? 19. On what grounds did many early Reformed believers regard the Roman church and especially the pope as antichrist? Was this judgment valid? 20. Which destructive social and political consequences did the denial of infant baptism have for European countries in Reformation times? 21. Which churches today stand in the Anabaptist tradition? 22. Which specifically Anabaptist ideas do they still maintain? 23. Can community of goods and pacifism be harmonized with the Bible? 24. Was there justification for the Anabaptist accusation that Luther's reformation was half-hearted? 25. What does Scripture mean by confessing Christ? 26. Is revolution against political authority ever justified? What is the Reformed position on this? 27. Should the official creeds openly attack and condemn heretics and heresy? 28. Which glaring defects in the Roman Catholic Church made the Reformation necessary? 29. On what grounds do the Reformed churches strongly condemn rebaptism? 30. Show how limiting ecclesiastical authority to the local congregation destroys the true unity of believers. 31. Explain why Lutherans and Reformed insisted on both Scripture and the Holy Spirit in contrast with the Anabaptist emphasis on the Spirit. 32. Which arguments are used today against binding confessional statements? 33. Of what value is the official signing of the creeds by church officers? 34. What is Pietism and how did it affect the Reformed churches? 35. Which churches throughout the world still adhere to the **Belgic Confession**? 36. In which specific ways does the creed strengthen personal faith? 37. Should the creeds be used for purposes of instruction on the mission fields? 38. Since new heresies arise in each generation, of what value can the study of ancient heresies be? 39. Are the Reformed churches fundamentalistic? Explain. 40. Evaluate the duties of orthodox Christianity as outlined by Carl Henry

Chapter 1

The Overflowing Fountain Of All Good

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 overflowing fountain of all good.

ARTICLE I



THE SIMPLEST but profoundest statement which man can make is the confession: I believe in God.

In this affirmation he reflects his highest dignity and deepest dependence. Here the watershed between rational and brute creation is fixed. Only man can affirm that he believes. He has an awareness and enjoyment of his Creator and Lord. This belongs to his deepest nature, for "the spirit of man is the lamp of Jehovah, searching all his innermost parts." (Prov. 20:27) For him it is both duty and delight to acknowledge God among the sons of men.

The Problem of Unbelief

Yet today's world, like generations long since gone, has its unbelievers. The church must face the fact that many deny God's existence. Some do this with elaborate argumentation. Others merely ignore his impact on their lives and to all practical purposes reject his reality. That which should be the most joyful and spontaneous expression of our life is frequently a beleaguered citadel of faith in a faithless world.

The scriptures declare that the denial of God is irrational. It is abnormal. It makes man less than he should be. "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." (Ps. 53:1)

Paul deals with this tragic fact in *Romans*. The absence of faith in God never springs from mere ignorance but results from a deliberate suppression of God's witness to himself. As the confessing church seeks to live by her faith in God, she becomes acutely aware of the barrier raised by the fact that "all have not faith." (II Thess. 3:2) Thus her witness falls often upon deaf ears and dead hearts.

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This unbelief should not be interpreted as a purely theoretical judgment. Those who reject divine truth are people who "hinder the truth in unrighteousness." (Rom. 1:18b) Never may God be blamed for this, since "the invisible things of him . . . are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse." (Rom. 1:20) Men themselves are fully responsible "because that knowing God, they glorified him not as God neither gave thanks; but became vain in their reasonings and their senseless heart was darkened." (Rom. 1:21) Unbelief is apostasy from God, the breaking of the covenant bond which was established in the beginning. Its concomitant is unrighteousness. Rejecting the witness to God man becomes an idolater who enslaves himself to the creature instead of serving the Creator. For this sin the judgment of the Lord comes upon him, and he is given up to the lusts of his heart to work all manner of unrighteousness and uncleanness. True religion alone is the safeguard of wholesome morality. The folly of unbelief brings the human race step by step to dishonor, despair and doom.

The record of man's religious history illumines the truth which Paul declares. Man refuses to serve the true God to whom he is bound with every fiber of his being. Yet sooner or later he senses that he can no more live without God than without air. Even those races whose practices seem most degraded have not escaped the idea of God. Atheists are not born; they make themselves what they are by the abnormal rebellion of their hearts. What C. S. Lewis says about the damned in *The Great Divorce* may in large measure be applied to unbelievers. "Good beats upon the damned incessantly as sound waves beat upon the ears of the deaf, but they cannot receive it. Their fists are clenched, their eyes fast shut. First they will not, in the end they cannot, open their hands for gifts, or their mouths for food, or their eyes to see."¹

In such a world which relentlessly attacks his confession of God, the believer must live and work and witness. Daily he is confronted with the difficulty of his task. He must speak to those who have "no fear of God before their eyes." (Rom. 3:18)

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Somehow he strives to understand the workings of these minds alienated from God. But this is impossible, for sin is abnormal, irrational, unpredictable. Karl Barth has evaluated man's religious apostasy in arresting language, "And if we glance at the history of human desire, human assertion about this Being, the first and strongest impression we receive is that of human skill in invention, active on all sides and taking the most various routes; but also of human waywardness and human violence with this concept, this idea of God. Hence the picture of an infinite variety of possibilities, the picture of a great uncertainty, of great contradictions."²

The Church Speaks to the World

How, then, can we approach the world with the confession of our hearts and mouths about God?

Many have tried to find help in the rational arguments for God's existence. On the surface this seems plausible and possible. All men are endowed with reason, so the argument runs, and therefore they should be capable of considering and weighing and accepting the evidences. To support this approach Scripture itself has been invoked, since believers must be "ready always to give answer to every man that asketh . . . a reason concerning the hope that is in them." (I Pet. 3:15)

Because these arguments played such a large role in philosophy and theology, we will consider them briefly. The first is known as the *ontological* argument and argues from the nature of being or existence. The claim is made that because man can conceive of an absolutely perfect being, and because existence is an attribute of perfection, therefore such an absolutely perfect being called God necessarily exists. Stated in its most compelling form by Anselm, it has since been employed by Descartes, Samuel Clarke, Hegel, Hocking, and others.

Closely related is the *causal* or *cosmological* argument. Everything we know has some sufficient cause. The universe cannot be explained rationally in terms of itself. Because it is

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so comprehensive and vast, it requires an infinitely great cause, whom we call God.

The third or *teleological* argument for God's existence appeals to the evidences of order and purpose in the world. These seem to require belief in an intelligent, purposeful and sovereign God.

The *moral* argument, like many of the others, has taken several forms. Some argue that because all men live under some form of moral obligation, this can be explained only by the existence of a divine lawgiver and judge. Others claim that the disparity between moral conduct and the earthly prosperity or adversity experienced by men demands a holy and divine judge who one day will set all accounts straight.

Finally, the fact that all peoples have some sense of the divine and engage in some form of worship is presented as proof for God's existence. Commonly this is called the *historical* or *ethnological* argument.

Upon these foundations certain Christian thinkers have tried to build a logical and compelling faith-structure. Yet their success has been severely restricted. Each of these rational proofs has been challenged with great vigor. Experience indicates that no man seems to have come to faith in the God of the Scriptures on these grounds. More compelling is the fact that these methods of arguing for God directly contradict the approach which the Bible takes. Simply but strikingly it affirms God's existence without attempting any logical proof and condemns all denials of God as folly. Barth, to quote him once more, evaluates these so-called proofs for us, when he writes, "I don't know whether you can at once see the humour and fragility of these proofs. These proofs may avail for the alleged gods; if it were my task to make you acquainted with these allegedly supreme beings, I would occupy myself with the five famous proofs of God. In the Bible there is no such argumentation; the Bible speaks of God simply as the One who needs no proof. It speaks of a God who proves himself on every hand: Here am I, and since I am and live and act it is superfluous that I

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should be proved. On the basis of this divine self-proof the prophets and apostles speak. In the Christian Church there can be no speaking about God in any other way. God has not the slightest need for our proofs."⁸

By this we do not mean that these arguments are devoid of all value, especially for believers. They demonstrate that faith in God is basically reasonable. At times they may silence unbelievers who ridicule Christianity as irrational and credulous. But to rear the structure of our faith on these grounds leads to frustration. We accept the existence of God by faith. This is an act of the heart. Without such a commitment we can never speak truly about the living God.

Therefore the *Confession* begins with the affirmation of God. It is the first and fundamental doctrine, shaping all that we believe about ourselves and the world.

We cannot, we dare not begin with anything less. All theologians and philosophers who have begun with man, his nature and strivings, his experiences and ideals, have failed to win the approval of the believing church. What we confess about God dictates the pattern of our lives and determines our witness in this world.

The Nature of True Confession

The first article begins with the arresting words: *We believe with the heart and confess with the mouth . . .* Here we are confronted with the essence of true religion.

True religion is the bond which binds man to God in saving fellowship. It springs from the heart which hears his voice. Yet religion, which by its very nature involves God in his relationship to us, includes much more than the response of the heart. This is made abundantly clear in the Scriptures, which distinguish sharply between the objective and subjective aspects of true faith.

There is first of all that aspect of religion which lies outside of ourselves, which exists independently of all persons and situa-

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tions on earth. It is the norm or standard which regulates our life. This we call revelation, the authoritative and inescapable testimony of God to himself in his words and works. For the Christian believer that voice is heard supremely in the Scriptures, which is his good news of salvation for a lost and erring world. Therefore the church has set its face as flint against the notion that religion is man's discovery.

To this revelation of God man cannot be indifferent. Because it comes continually and compellingly he must respond. Two possibilities are open. Man either accepts or rejects God's witness to himself. Yet this response is not a matter of indifference to God. He commands men everywhere to believe in him. This is the act of faith. It alone produces joy and peace, confidence in and communion with the Lord of life.

Faith involves the whole soul of man. This needs emphasis in view of the many conflicting opinions on the nature of the believing response. Often Christian faith has been explained in terms of knowledge or intellectual assent. As such it has been both criticized and misunderstood. Although the Bible warns against a faith which involves the mind alone, it does not hesitate to place a high premium on knowledge. The truths revealed in Scripture must be accepted. Without these propositions our faith rests upon purely human notions and experiences. To the Jews who believed on him our Lord said, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32) Even more clearly he indicated the significance of divinely-revealed knowledge in his high-priestly prayer, "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." (John 17:3) But this knowledge is always of a very specific kind. It is experiential—a knowledge which roots in the heart, requires an emotional response and results in action. We refuse, therefore, to find the seat of religion in the mind or in the emotions or in the will. Christianity is unique also in this that it lays claim to all of man's life. True religion roots in the heart, "for out of it are the issues of life." (Prov. 4:23) In its profound and hidden depths God confronts man with his revelation. From it spring

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our motivations and motions. This is the conviction of the Old Testament writer, "For as he thinketh within himself, so is he." (Prov. 23:7) It is further corroborated by Christ who said, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." (Luke 6:45)

Confession as the Church's Task

The heart which believes and the mouth which confesses the one only true God are not rehearsing purely personal convictions. In this world we speak as members of the Christian church. To her have been committed the oracles of God. In fellowship with each other as members of the body of Christ we have heard the gospel and learn to witness to its truths. Here we stand on common ground with all who know the Lord and love his word.

Our confession is therefore a communal rather than an individual, an official rather than a personal declaration of things most surely believed. This does not obscure our individual commitment but rather corrects and amplifies and strengthens it. This common testimony to God's truth has been embodied in the creeds.

Several weighty reasons can be advanced for the value of the historic Christian creeds.

The church has received the truth from God with the command to preserve and propagate it purely. Thus she is called "The pillar and ground of the truth." (I Tim. 4:15) By officially formulating Christian doctrine the church has produced and preserved precious benefits for individual believers. By means of the creeds they come to a clearer and fuller understanding of Biblical truth. Carefully the church fathers reflected on the teachings of Scripture, exposed and condemned heretical opinions and reproduced God's truth for their times under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In that activity we see a fulfilment

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of Christ's promise, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth." (John 16:13)

Divine truth also preserves and promotes the unity of the true church. Divisions are not occasioned by truth; they are the result of the unwillingness of some to abide by what the Bible teaches. In these days when many clamor for organizational unity, often at the expense of spiritual agreement concerning the truth, we do well to remind ourselves of what God's word teaches. Our Savior prayed for unity in the light of his petition, "Sanctify them in the truth: thy word is truth." (John 17:17) Paul condemns all who would minimize doctrinal truth, "If any man teacheth a different doctrine, and consenteth not to sound words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is puffed up, knowing nothing, but doting about questionings and disputes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, wranglings of men corrupted in mind and bereft of the truth." (I Tim. 6:3-5)

Today we must face honestly the tragedy of the church's brokenness. This deeply wounds the hearts of believers. Much of the church's weakness in witnessing may be attributed to her lack of unity. No longer is she able to speak with one mind and heart either to herself or them that are without. Yet the fault lies not so much with having too much doctrine as too little. She speaks so haltingly and confusedly, because she is convinced of so little. Many in the church seem ignorant of God's plan of salvation in Christ. To them the Scriptures remain largely a sealed book. What is even more tragic, they care less that they know so little. Not until the church returns to the word will she be able to tell her story convincingly to the nations. A church without doctrinal convictions degenerates into a silent church. And a silent church cannot witness to a world walking in darkness.

The Knowability of God

We believe not only that God is; we confess that we both can and do know God.

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The problem of God's knowability has occupied man's attention for centuries. Many who refuse to be classified with the atheists insist that God cannot be known. Such agnostic positions have become more prominent in recent years in the interest of being unprejudiced or scientific. Others deny the possibility of knowing God to justify their opinion that life is meaningless. Much of modern prose and poetry, reflecting the temper of these times, embroiders this theme. Nearly a century ago Matthew Arnold wrote,

*"The Sea of faith
Was once, too, full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."*

For him there remained nothing else than to "be true to one another," since the world he knows "hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain." Today the situation is more critical and chaotic. Literature is still religious, because no man is irreligious. But the myths and mysticism in which men now seek strength and peace are a far cry from the historic Christian faith. Ours is a lost world, because it does not know God. It refuses to believe that God can be known.

Here we find small comfort in Karl Barth, who devotes much attention to God's knowability. This theologian of heroic proportions affirms that God exists. But having said this clearly, he maintains that God not only is unprovable; he is also inconceivable. Although confronting man as the One who exists in the highest and condescends to the lowest depths, God always remains the wholly Other. Man can never know him in the sense of being able to say anything adequately and conclusively about him. He knows God only in the concrete and specific act of his

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divine invasion into our lives. Any knowledge other than that of direct, immediate and ephemeral experience is impossible. This conception of God's self-revelation, appealing as it is in its strenuous effort to maintain the sovereign character of God's grace, nevertheless does injustice to what the Bible teaches.

The believing church has always recognized that man cannot by searching find out God. (Job 11:7) Neither is it permissible to liken God to anyone or anything known to the natural mind. (Isa. 40:18) His transcendence must be upheld, shall we remain true to the Scriptures. Yet we may not fall into the pit from which some early church fathers narrowly escaped, when they spoke of God as nameless and incomprehensible being in terms reminiscent of Greek philosophy. Although "no man hath seen God at any time" (John 1:18a), yet because God has declared himself to us in Christ he can be known. Such knowledge is not the product of human thought or experience. It roots solely in the divine act of revelation. But man created in God's image can be confronted meaningfully with this divine self-manifestation. Even sinful man, apart from grace in Christ Jesus, does not wholly escape the impact of God's witness to himself. In the believer the grace of God has repaired the damages of sin and restored the image of God, by which man now can appropriate God's revelation. Thus he experiences the joy of David, "For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light." (Ps.36:9)

God can be known only in so far as he has been pleased to show himself to men. Such knowledge in the very nature of the case is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Calvin says rightly, "His essence is incomprehensible; so that his divinity wholly escapes our senses."⁴ Because of this we are unable to formulate a logically defensible definition of the God whom we know and serve. God does not belong to a class of beings with whom he may be classified. He is *sui generis*, in a class all by himself. In their insistence upon God's uniqueness Reformed believers have always resisted the attempts of the Roman Catholic theologians to define God in terms of pure being. Likewise, every effort to construct a *natural theology* on what can be perceived of God

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in the created order is contraband. The labors of both eighteenth century rationalists and later liberals in this direction have ended in dismal failure. We can speak knowingly and correctly about God, only because he has first spoken to us in language which is meaningful for all ages.

Both the uniqueness of God and the limitations of man, imposed by our creatureliness and sinfulness, demand that we bow humbly and reverently to the teachings of the Bible. Here we find no definition of God. Instead, we are called upon to hear his words and behold his works. In this life our knowledge is and will remain limited. But for the purpose which God has intended, it is accurate and adequate. It alone enables us to live in covenant communion with him.

The Essential Nature of God

Before the *Confession* deals with the nature of God's self-revelation, it speaks eloquently about him whose we are and whom we serve. It *confesses*, that is, it says the same thing about God that he has first said about himself.

Here the believing church speaks officially. Her members join the chorus of voices tutored by the Holy Spirit who binds the hearts and minds of God's people to the Bible. In this creed the believers speak not only to themselves and the world. They speak above all in the presence of and to God. Every true confession is a doxology, a hymn of adoration to the revealing and redeeming God. To speak of the creeds as cold, abstract and lifeless formulations is to betray gross ignorance of the church's life—of her convictions and commitments, of her struggles and songs, of her seasons of danger and her days of delight in his service.

The believing church does not begin with a definition of God. Blaise Pascal understood this well, when after the darkness of his soul was dispelled by the Scriptures he exclaimed, "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars." Here we learn to know God not as he dwells in

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the eternity of his ineffable and transcendent glory. Such knowledge would be too wonderful for us. All curious prying into what God is in and of himself is forbidden. Humbly and heartily, as little children mimic the words of their elders, we repeat after God what he has so clearly told us of himself especially in his relations to mankind. We confess to all the world our faith *in one, only, simple and spiritual being which we call God.* In these words we say not only that God is but also what he is for us.

We believe that God *is*. This is the presupposition of all true and saving religion, "For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him." (Hebr. 11:6) He alone "hath immortality, dwelling in light unapproachable; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honor and power eternal." (I-Tim. 6:16) How foolish, therefore, the clamor of those who deny God's existence because they have not been able to find him in the test tube or through the telescope. Without faith in God's existence man and the world remain baffling riddles. Apart from him who is the ground of all being, truth and goodness, every law and moral distinction loses its validity. Man without God consigns himself to despair and death.

Because God is God, he is *one* God. The consistent refrain of the Scriptures is, "Hear, O Israel, Jehovah our God is one Jehovah." (Deut. 6:5) All dualism, which accepts two eternal principles in its efforts to explain the problems which arise when we consider time and eternity, matter and spirit, good and evil, is radically cut off. God is the *only* God. The deities of the heathen are but figments of man's imagination. Sharply the psalmist contrasts the Biblical and pagan world-views, "But our God is in the heavens; he hath done whatsoever he pleased. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not . . . They that make them shall be like unto them; yea, everyone that trusteth in them." (Ps. 115:3-8)

We also confess God as *simple* being, without division or

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parts. Herein he differs radically from all the works of his hands, including man who is composed of body and soul. All his attributes root in and are identical with his being. "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." (I John 1:5) This has profound implications for all that the church says about God. Never may the persons of the Trinity be in any way divorced from the divine essence. Nor can there be the slightest contradiction or conflict between any of the divine attributes. His perfections are joined to his being. The Bible therefore does not hesitate to conclude from God's self-revelation in his works to his attitude.

The true God is *spiritual*. He is substantial being; immaterial and invisible and without composition and extension, always distinct from all the works of his hands. To be sure, we read of God's hands and feet and eyes. These are figurative expressions which God has employed for our sake, in order that we might more readily understand who he is and how he works. But these statements do not obscure the Biblical insistence on his spirituality which also determines the worship we must offer. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

Although the Bible makes use of many names in speaking of God, only one is mentioned here, the general designation *God*. By means of it is indicated his absolute power, uniqueness and simplicity. "O Jehovah, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth, who has set thy glory upon the heavens." (Ps. 8:1) Although his name is one because he is one, yet God has revealed himself in many names. These are no human inventions but designations which God has given, in order to declare himself. While he remains the incomprehensible one, we are commanded to use his names, draw comfort from them and spread their knowledge through the earth. "As is thy name, O God, so is thy praise." (Ps. 48:10) Because his name, from which all other names derive and upon which they depend, is so great and glorious, we may take it upon our lips only with reverence. Its knowledge is a mark of special favor which he

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has shown to us. Because we know the name of our God we may sing with assurance,

“O world invisible, we see thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.”⁶

The Perfections of Our God

From all the above we learn humbly to acknowledge that man can never fathom God's essential being. Yet we are not lost and lonely souls, groping in the dark. God has spoken, and his speech comes in language which is meaningful.

This heavenly speech in the limitations of earthly language announces to us the *attributes* of our God. The term is a rather unhappy one, in so far as it leaves the impression that we “attribute” or ascribe certain qualities to God's essence. Yet this we neither can nor may do. All God's attributes or perfections are identical with his being. We know them, only because he has so plainly revealed them to us in his word. They are the virtues or perfections of God reflected in his dealings with mankind.

The *Confession*, and to this language we are committed by faith, refuses to single out one attribute as determinative for our conception of God. The temptation to misrepresent God in this way is far from imaginary. Since the days of Ritschl many have followed in his footsteps to make his love the central and all controlling quality of his being. Before the days of Barth little was said in many Christian circles about his glory and majesty, his sovereignty, righteousness and truth. Such an unbalanced view of God emasculated the Christian message and undermined the spiritual life and hopes of the church.

In simple obedience to the Scriptures we make mention of all those qualities of his being which God has revealed. Only a few are specified in the first article, the study of which together with their Biblical evidence should stimulate us to reflecting upon what God has said about himself.

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God is *eternal*, without beginning or end of days. He transcends all limitations of time and space, while at the same time filling all with his presence and power. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou are God." (Ps. 90:2) This knowledge affords the believer unspeakable consolation, for "the eternal God is thy dwelling-place, and underneath are the everlasting arms." (Deut. 33:27)

God is *incomprehensible*. Our knowledge of God, although real and reliable because it roots in God's act of self-revelation, leaves us with many mysteries. As we trace his footsteps in this world, we see only the fringes of his ways and touch but the hem of his garment. With Paul we adore him and his ways, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past tracing out." (Rom 11:33)

Being pure spirit of infinite perfections, God is *invisible*. He possesses no body, neither is there any human thought which adequately represents him. To ascribe any quality to him without Biblical warrant is idolatry. To know him rightly we must bind ourselves to his revelation in Christ Jesus. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." (John 1:18)

God also is *immutable*, free from all change not only in his essential being but also in his perfections, purposes and promises. His attitudes and actions are not conditioned by the response of his creatures. "For I, Jehovah, change not: therefore ye, o sons of Jacob, are not consumed." (Mal. 3:6) James mentions this quality as a source of inestimable consolation for the believers, since "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning." (Jas. 1:17)

He is *infinite*, without any defect or limitation, the source of all potentiality and power. We name him as "the one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all." (Eph. 4:6) As he manifests himself in the exercise of his power,

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God is *almighty*. Of himself he asks the wavering Sarah, "Is anything too hard for Jehovah?" (Gen. 18:14) Our Lord affirmed, "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible." (Matt. 19:26)

Three attributes are listed, which we generally call *communicable*, since some reflection of them is found in man created after the likeness of God. He is *perfectly wise*, a term which includes the perfection of his knowledge, truth and wisdom. In all the works of his hand this wisdom, by which he always applies his knowledge to the attainment of his purposes in the best possible way, is displayed. "O Jehovah, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom thou hast made them all." (Ps. 104:24) He is perfectly *just* or righteous both in his being and in his government of all things. This is his holiness in action, by which he maintains himself and his will by rewarding good and punishing evil. "Righteous art thou, who art and who wast, thou Holy One, because thou didst so judge . . ." (Rev. 16:5) God is also good, perfect in all his works and ways. Jesus said, "None is good save one, even God." (Mk. 10:18) This perfection prompts him to deal bountifully with all his creatures. "Jehovah is good to all; and his tender mercies are over all his works." (Ps. 145:9)

As the believer learns to know and serve God according to his word, he adores him as *the overflowing fountain of all good*. All things we enjoy in this life and expect in the life to come proceed from him who is our light and salvation. Without him we cannot live. With Thomas Heywood in his *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels* we lift our souls to our great and good God with the prayer,

"O, make us apt to seek and quick to find,
Thou, God, most kind!
Give us love, hope, and faith, in thee to trust,
Thou, God, most just!
Remit all our offences, we entreat,
Most good most just!
Grant that our willing, though unworthy quest
May, through thy grace, admit us 'mongst the blest."

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1. How does faith in God demonstrate both man's dignity and dependence?
2. Can unbelief ever be reasonably explained?
3. Why does unbelief produce uncertainty and contradiction in man?
4. On which grounds has the ontological argument been assailed?
5. Evaluate Barth's criticism of the so-called proofs for God.
6. What place does Christianity assign to the heart in religion?
7. Can you find parallels between this and modern psychology?
8. What is the relation between personal and church confession?
9. Are creeds responsible for the disunity in Christendom?
10. What is the difference between atheism and agnosticism?
11. In which sense does Barth deny the knowability of God?
12. What is meant by God's transcendence and his immanence?
13. Why is it impossible to define God?
14. Can we know God as he exists in himself?
15. Which names of God are mentioned in Scripture, and what is their meaning?
16. Of what value are God's names for believers?
17. What is meant by communicable and incommunicable attributes? Is the distinction valid?
18. What relation do God's attributes sustain to his essence?
19. Which attributes are mentioned in Scripture in addition to those listed here?
20. What is meant by God as the overflowing fountain of all good?
21. How can God's immutability be harmonized with those passages which speak of change in his attitude and acts?
22. Why do we distinguish between one God and only God?
23. Evaluate the slogan of many fundamentalists, "No Creed but Christ."
24. Do those who deny basic Scripture doctrine retain the right to the name Christian?



Chapter 2

The Self-Manifestation of God to Man

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to "see clearly the invisible things of God," even "his everlasting power and divinity," as the apostle Paul says (Rom. 1:20), All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

ARTICLE II



TODAY MAN is plagued with the problem of Job upon whom God's hand rested so heavily. Something seems to have gone awry with the government of the universe. Amid wars arising from deep-seated social, political and religious differences man finds himself at the end of his tether. Circumstances against which he feels so helpless have driven him into a corner.

Stronger souls seek to fight back in the uneven struggle. Unable to overcome the evils which have overwhelmed the human race, they look for a reasonable explanation to console their wounded hearts. Some take refuge in Christian Science or esoteric Oriental philosophies which deny reality to sin and evil. Others, too profoundly influenced by Christian thought, cannot dismiss so lightly from their thoughts the personal God. Yet they reduce him to our limitations. From David Hume and John Stuart Mill to William James and Edgar S. Brightman of our day they plead that there must be "evil which is structural in individual human nature, structural in human society, structural in the very nature of created existence."¹ Against this God must struggle. By such dualism they seek to absolve God from all involvement with sin. This they achieve only by limiting his sovereignty.

Against all such efforts Job, who experienced the evils of life as he sat on the dung heap, would protest radically. He, indeed, had opened his mouth to speak against God. At times he argued that the Almighty seemed unjust. "The tabernacles of robbers prosper, and they that provoke God are secure; into whose hand God bringeth abundantly." (Job 12:6) Then again life to him was vain. "For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, . . . but man dieth, and is laid low: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he?" (Job 14:

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7, 10) He may be tempted to question God, but he will neither limit nor let God go.

Job found the solution to his perplexities by humbly confessing his limitations and turning to listen to the Lord. "Hear, I beseech thee, and I will speak; I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me." (Job 42:5)

The Reality of God's Revelation

The Christian church rests in the assurance that God makes himself known. This self-manifestation of God is called *revelation*. Without it all religion becomes impossible.

The Biblical idea of revelation is too comprehensive to be explored in a few words. Yet something must be said about it. It roots in three basic convictions: (1) that there is a personal God who actively communicates knowledge; (2) that there are facts and truths, events and their evaluation which man can never know by himself; and (3) that man has been so created that he is able to appropriate the speaking of God which comes to him.² This divine activity is expressed in such terms as *reveal*, *disclose*, *speak* and *make known*. That which God announces is said by the Old Testament *to be naked*. In the New Testament God is frequently said *to uncover*, *to make manifest* that which he would have men know.

In most religions the knowledge of things divine has been regarded as dependent upon revelation. Among primitive peoples this knowledge is embodied in traditions, usually handed down orally from one generation to the next. Inspired men, able to read the signs given by the gods in the entrails of animals, the flight of birds or the constellations of the heavens, were respected as the recipients and repositories of this special information. Among the Greeks this view was exchanged under such teachers as Socrates and Plato for the idea that man could know things divine by means of reason and reflection. Here the emphasis was shifted from God's to man's activity. This has plagued the church almost from its beginnings. Yet officially the church has always repudiated every attempt to obscure or deny the reality

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of God's self-revelation as the source and foundation of her witness to the world. This the creeds almost without exception confirm.

Until the seventeenth century the church taught that man's knowledge of God rests upon a twofold revelation of God, in nature and Scripture. The only point at issue concerned the relation between these two. Since then God's revelation in nature and experience has often been stressed at the expense of his revelation in Scripture. To a remarkable degree this shift resulted from the new learning of the Renaissance. Deeper acquaintance with and appreciation of Greek thought, long lost to western Europe, prepared the climate of the churches for the later inroads of deism, rationalism and modernism.

In recent years there has been a renewed emphasis on the written word. All theology grounded in experience, history or reason has been under ceaseless attack. The older liberalism has largely capitulated, been outlawed and refashioned. This new emphasis is largely the fruit of the labors of Barth, Brunner and theologians who have learned from them. But on the subject of revelation Barth and Brunner also part company. While the latter still recognizes a speaking of God in nature, history and human consciousness, Barth denies the reality of such revelation. Consistently he attacks the Roman Catholic distinction between *natural* and *supernatural* revelation. He refuses to tolerate any notion of *natural theology*, arguing that man apart from God's grace in Christ knows nothing about God. By nature he is completely blinded to God and spiritual reality. In no sense does he possess the image of God. Nor is there any point of contact between believer and unbeliever. These convictions have led him publicly to challenge and repudiate article 2 of our *Confession* in his discussions with the Dutch theologians. He argues that our acknowledgement of God's self-revelation in the creation, preservation and government of the universe as an elegant book is a foreign and fatal remnant of Romish leaven in the Reformed creed.

In our witness to the world we confess that God is knowable. To this acknowledgement we add our conviction that all know-

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ledge of God is dependent upon his self-revelation. Apart from this divine activity man knows nothing about God. We do not demur at Barth's insistence that the natural man, if left to himself, can not know God. In language fully as strong as his the Reformed churches have for generations proclaimed this truth. "Man was originally formed after the image of God . . . But revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and by his own free will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and in place thereof became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment: became wicked, rebellious and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections."³ But we declare at the same time—and this in sharp contrast with Barth—that because God is the infinite, immutable and inescapable God who will not let man alone, there is a witness which comes to the natural man which is so real, that even in his awful apostasy man never wholly escapes an awareness of God's presence and power.

This Reformed view of general revelation is a far cry from the Roman Catholic conception. Following the lead of Thomas Aquinas that church sharply distinguishes between natural and supernatural revelation. It recognizes two legitimate methods of obtaining true knowledge of God. Aquinas was influenced in formulating his positions by the scholastic disputes on the relation between revelation and reason. We must face this problem whenever we ask whether an unbeliever (whether heathen or apostate Christian) has any knowledge of God, the world or himself. Is there any area in which believers and unbelievers have a common fund of facts and their interpretation?

The position of Aquinas, officially recommended by the pope as Roman Catholic doctrine on this point, maintains that the truths of philosophy (human learning in its broadest sense) and the truths of religion must be kept in their respective places. To attain the former man must walk the road of reason. To enjoy the latter he must live by faith in the church's doctrine which acquaints him with the mysteries of Christianity. This has produced an unwholesome dualism. Rigidly the sacred and

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the secular are to be kept separate in a manner not countenanced by Scripture. Hardly can a consistent Roman Catholic join in singing

*"This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ear,
All nature sings and around me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world,
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas—
His hand the wonders wrought."*

Natural theology, so ardently championed by Rome, yields at best only the knowledge of God as first cause of all things, the ground of all being, and the ruler of the world. It cannot assure us of his fatherhood. To attain this man must move intellectually and spiritually on another plane. Here, according to Rome, he must reverently listen to the church as she proclaims the mysteries.⁴

Although the reformers retained the distinction between two kinds of revelation, they repudiated the views of Aquinas and Rome. These were based on a false construction of the image of God in man and its radical loss through sin's entrance into the world. Man cannot know God as Creator and Sovereign of the world by means of a strictly scientific investigation of nature, history and human experience. This, however, does not imply that God fails to address himself to man's mind and heart by these means. Rather, God's general revelation has been obscured by sin. It no longer speaks so eloquently to man in sin as before the fall. The circumstances and seasons of life are out of joint. "For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." (Rom. 8:20-22) Even more, man's mind has become so darkened, that he is unable to read and interpret correctly

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this handwriting of God. Therefore special revelation, embodied in Holy Scripture, not merely supplements general revelation, as the Roman church maintains. It republishes, corrects and interprets the truths of God revealed in nature. Only by the illumination which Christ's Spirit bestows can man again know God, the world and himself as he should.

When therefore we declare that *we know Him by two means*, we are not discussing primarily the knowledge of mankind in general, as Barth seems to infer. To be sure, our confession also has something to say on this point. But it is concerned above all with the means by which believers come to know the God of all glory and grace. Only the Christian, because he has the key of Holy Scripture, can unlock and understand the revelation of God in nature and history.

The Scope of God's General Revelation

Wherein the general revelation of God consists is now outlined. Here we confess our faith in God who is always active in the created order. He is the all-sufficient and self-existent ground for its existence. With all our heart we repudiate deism which admits a sovereign God but regards him as far removed from and quite indifferent to the work of his hands. Likewise, there is no room within true faith for pantheism which identifies the Creator with his creation. God is infinitely exalted above all his works in the highest heavens, and yet he remains personally concerned with and involved in the existence of all his creatures. Thus Paul distantiates himself from both deism and pantheism when he proclaims God as "Lord of heaven and earth. . . seeing he himself giveth to all life, and breath and all things" but also states that "in him we live, and move, and have our being." (Acts 17:24-28)

God always manifests himself *in the creation, preservation, and government of the universe*. This does not mean that man, apart from grace, can arrive at a proper view of creation and providence. We are concerned here with the area or sphere in which God is pleased to reveal himself, irrespective of whether man is able and willing to receive that revelation. The emphasis

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falls on God's activity rather than on man's appropriation. Calvin has so clearly outlined this in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "As the perfection of a happy life consists in the knowledge of God, that no man might be precluded from attaining felicity, God hath not only sown in the minds of men the seed of religion, already mentioned but hath manifested himself in the formation of every part of the world, and daily presents himself to public view, in such a manner, that they cannot open their eyes without being constrained to behold him. His essence indeed is incomprehensible, so that his Majesty is not to be perceived by the human senses; but on all his works he hath inscribed his glory in characters so clear, unequivocal, and striking, that the most illiterate and stupid cannot exculpate themselves by the plea of ignorance."⁵ To him it is evident "that the Lord abundantly manifests his wisdom to every individual on earth."⁶

Although the several forms in which God's general revelation comes to man are not listed, they are implicit in the phrases which are used. The whole created order is regarded as *a most elegant book*. In everything above, upon and under the earth God makes himself known. None can deny his everlasting power, his matchless wisdom and his great goodness, except by rejecting the witness daily set before their eyes. Although emphasizing God's revelation in Christ as the Savior of the world, the Bible never ignores or minimizes the attestations to God's being and goodness found in general revelation. The God of salvation is the one "who coverest thyself with light as with a garment; who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain; who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters; who maketh the clouds his chariot; who walketh upon the wings of the wind." (Ps. 104: 2, 3)

He also speaks to the mind and heart of mankind. This Calvin has called the "seed of religion, which is something quite different from saying that man possesses certain innate ideas about God or that religion arises automatically out of some religious faculty within man. Man indeed is a religious being. But he is religious precisely because God has so constituted him in the

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totality of his being and never wearies of testifying to him. This the heathen admit when they agree with one of their poets who said, "For we are his offspring." (Acts 17:28) They seek after God, if haply they might feel after him and find him. (Acts 17:27) The invisible things of God are clearly seen, because "God manifested it unto them." (Rom. 1:19) The Gentiles are even spoken of as "knowing God." (Rom. 1:21) By their lives they acknowledge the reality of God's general revelation in that they have "the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith." (Rom. 2:15)

Nor would we forget that God witnesses to himself in history. By his *government* of the universe he directs all things, so they that serve his sovereign counsel. God alone gives meaning to history by controlling the destinies of all men and nations. "He made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitations." (Acts 17:26) His purpose, according to Paul, is "that they should seek God." (Acts 17:27a)

Because of this inescapable testimony to God in creation, history and themselves, all men are left without excuse for their unbelief and sin. By means of general revelation God maintains his sovereign claims on all whom he has created.

The Value of General Revelation

On the reality of general revelation there can really be no disagreement among Christian believers. God declares himself consistently and continuously to mankind, addressing him in every age and country and condition. The question of its specific value has, however, raised several problems.

One of these arises whenever the church confronts the heathen with the Christian gospel. She must seek an answer to whether or not the Gentiles can know God apart from his saving revelation in Christ Jesus.

The Bible, we have noted earlier, does not countenance the idea that among mankind a natural religion can arise apart from revelation. All religion, also the false religions, are bound

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up with the reality of a self-revealing God. General revelation alone adequately and properly explains the rise of faiths other than the Christian religion. Yet these religions are never presented in the Bible as partially true, differing from Christianity merely in clarity and degree. Rather, God always pronounces severe judgment on them. The heathen gods are but idols. They have no actual existence but are lies and vanity. The ceremonies of the heathen are an abomination to the true God. Those who worship in this way are lost in darkness, walk according to their foolish imaginations and work unrighteousness. For these things the wrath of God rests upon them. At times these religions are spoken of in Scripture as evidencing the work of demons. (Deut. 32:17; I Cor. 10:20; Rev. 9:20)

But are the heathen religions entirely without remnants of the truth? Several writings of those who know not Christ seem to evidence a depth of spirituality and sincerity which puts to shame many who confess the Savior of mankind. In his analysis of this baffling problem J. H. Bavinck quotes words of deep devotion penned by adherents of non-Christian faiths. The seventeenth century poet of India, Tukaram, sings of the grace of God:

*"No deeds I've done nor thoughts I've thought;
Save as Thy servant I am nought.
Guard me, O God, and O, control
The tumult of my restless soul.
And do not, do not cast me in the guilt of my iniquity.
My countless sins, I Tuka say, upon Thy loving heart
I lay."*

Out of the Islamic world of the eighth century comes this remarkable confession of adoration, written by Rabi'a of Basra, "O, my lord, the stars are shining and the eyes of men are closed, and kings have shut their doors, and every lover is alone with his beloved, and here am I alone with Thee. O, my Lord, If I worship Thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of paradise, exclude me thence; but if

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I worship Thee for Thine own sake, then withhold not from me Thine eternal beauty."

To condemn these and many similar confessions as mere hypocrisy and cant is unjust. Those who make them may not be dismissed as liars and imposters. But neither may we be so captivated by the enchanting and haunting beauty of their words, that we ignore certain basic questions which must be asked. Who is the God whom they worship? Whence springs this confession which so profoundly moves us? Bavinck suggests as a possible approach to this problem by the witnessing church, "I do not believe that there is any other way to test the intrinsic value of the religious songs of the Gentiles than by revealing to them the name of our Saviour and King. If upon hearing the story of His incarnation and His work of salvation they spontaneously and immediately seem to recognize Him, and begin to believe in Him, it may be taken for granted that it was really God whom their hearts were seeking . . . It is not the sound of the words that is decisive: it is the heart behind the words that is judged by God."⁷ Thus he would leave open the highway of God to the human heart of means of general revelation. To him this is "the riddle of human religion." Man suppresses the truth. He replaces it with the imaginings of his own mind and heart. But "God is speaking to him day by day: God never grows tired of occupying Himself with man."⁸

How greatly removed is this appraisal from the liberal conception that all religions are as so many roads leading to the same God. The natural man apart from grace resists and rejects God's testimonies. Only the Spirit of God regenerates the heart, opens the eyes and renews the life of sinful men. Isolated instances of relative truth and goodness and beauty within heathen religions may never be made determinative for our evaluation of them and their adherents. In human thought and experience there is no vital point of contact between Christian and non-Christian. This is in God alone, who has not left even the most depraved soul without some testimony to himself.

Thus general revelation is of inestimable value for the church in bringing the gospel of God's grace. Never does it

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serve as a bridge by which we can cross over from one side to the other. The Christian does not witness by standing for a season on the intellectual and spiritual ground of the heathen and then invite him to return the courtesy by standing with us upon Scriptural basis. Such compromise is frustrating and fatal for Christian preaching. In their religions the heathen do not possess certain elements of truth which upon conversion can then be ingrafted in the Christian faith.

Berkouwer sums up the Reformed evaluation of heathen religions in the light of general revelation in these words, "This kind of quantitative analysis neglects the nature of the distortion carried on by false religion. Pseudo-religion witnesses to the truth of God in its apostasy. When the living God is forgotten, false gods of one's own are created . . . Heathenism is not an auto-generated creation of religious people, poets or philosophers. Heathendom is dependent on the revelation of God even in its distortions of the creaturely reality which reveal his power . . . Far from providing a common principle on which to build a natural theology, the parallel witnesses to a basic conflict; and in this it witnesses indirectly to the true revelation of God."⁹

The apostle John calls Christ "the light which lighteth every man, coming into the world." (John 1:9) But on this basis no sound doctrine of God and the world can ever be constructed by man. "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, and the world knew him not." (John 1:10) Only in the full light of this Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us can we know God truly. General revelation remains inadequate to lead man to the knowledge and enjoyment of God. For this the written word of God is essential.

The relation between general and special revelation is succinctly summarized by Calvin. "For as persons who are old, or whose eyes are by any means become dim, if you show them a most beautiful book, though they perceive something written, but can scarcely read two words together, yet, by the assistance of spectacles, will begin to read distinctly,—so the Scripture, collecting in our minds the otherwise confused notions of Deity, dispels the darkness, and gives us a clear view of the true God."¹⁰

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Therein lies the value of general revelation for those who believe the Scriptures. It may never be lightly dismissed by us as unnecessary or negligible. We may never regard science and art, history and culture as of little consequence. Because this is the world of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we would think his thoughts after him. We rejoice in all the works which his hands have made. Here lie the roots for an adequate Christian philosophy. It determines for us the kind of education which we seek for ourselves and our children. In every inquiry into created reality we rely on the testimony of the written word. In its light we begin to understand all things. We trace the hand of God in nature; we behold his footsteps in history. For us nature and grace, creation and redemption, this present world and the kingdom of God are most intimately related.

God Speaks to us in Scripture

Although God has revealed himself in the creation, preservation and government of all things, he has *more clearly and fully* revealed himself to us in his Word. This indicates the superiority of the Scriptures to general revelation. Thus God gives a token of his condescending mercy in providing us with his book. From its pages we may learn more adequately and accurately who he is.

No mention is made in this article of the *Confession* of the special means which God used in giving this revelation to men. The Bible, however, makes explicit mention of them. At times God appeared to men in theophanies. He also made use of dreams, voice and vision to reveal his will. Upon several occasions he declared his will by means of the lot and the use of Urim and Thummim. In the miracles his power and grace are visibly displayed. This revelation has been preserved and made available for the church of all ages. God has enshrined it in his book.

Against this view of a permanent, available revelation of God Barth hurls his thunderbolts. He repudiates the liberal estimate of the Bible as the word of God only in so far as and because it is the record of man's religious ideas and experiences.

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Barth does not hesitate to confess the Bible as God's word. But it is this only in a secondary and derived sense. The true word of God is the Christ, in whom and through whom alone God wills to reveal himself to men whenever and wherever he pleases. The Scriptures are only the human witness to the reality of God's revelation in Christ.

As Christian believers we also distinguish between the eternal Word and the written word of God. Yet we repudiate his devaluation of the Bible as the permanent, objective and reliable revelation of God to mankind for all ages and in all circumstances. It remains the means which God uses to bring us to salvation. Here we find not merely a human witness to God's revelation but his very words to us which cannot be broken. Therefore we do not hesitate to say that it is *holy and divine*. The Bible reflects the very attributes of its primary author.

The written word, however, does not comprise the totality of our knowledge of God. To say this would be a denial of the reality of general revelation. God has provided his written word with a singular purpose in mind. Herein he reveals himself to us *as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation*. Its message is redemptive. It announces deliverance from sin and its consequences. That salvation is bound up with scripture we learn from several passages. Paul says, "In whom ye also, having heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation,—in whom, having also believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise." (Eph. 1:13) Our Lord admonished his hearers, "Search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me." (John 5:39) The Bereans are praised for their use of God's word, "Now these were more noble than those of Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, examining the scriptures daily, whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed . . ." (Acts 17: 11, 12a)

By this written word God confronts man with his message of grace. He makes its content effective in man's thought and

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life. It is not merely a narrative of what happened centuries ago but God's perennial speech to man. To say anything less does these holy writings injustice and disregards the claim which God himself makes for them.

The Perfection of God's Word

Because of these claims Scripture presses us to consider its perfections.

These were formulated in the days of the Reformation to set off the true doctrine from Rome's errors. That church placed apostolic tradition on a level with the Bible. Consequently the written word could be properly interpreted only by the church. In this the reformers recognized a woeful source of errors.

The first of these perfections is the authority of Scripture. It follows necessarily from its *divine* character. The Bible must be believed not because of ecclesiastical authority or experience, but because it comes from God himself. Although the Holy Spirit witnesses to this authority in the believer's consciousness, the reformers insisted that the Bible is inherently authoritative. This authority extends to its history as well as to its doctrine. Where specific regulations are given only under special circumstances and for a limited time, the exact form in which they are announced is no longer binding. Yet the underlying principles are never abrogated. This needs emphasis because of those who undermine the authority of the Old Testament. Jesus affirmed, "The scripture cannot be broken." (John 10:36)

We further confess the necessity of Scripture. Conceivably God might have employed other means to make known his will to men. As long as the witnesses to his redemptive self-revelation were alive, the spoken word sufficed. But because of its historical character, manifested in acts which permit of no repetition, these testimonies were inscripturated. Now men of all ages and races may hear the mighty works of God. We ardently defend the necessity of the Holy Scriptures against both Romanists, who elevated the church at the expense of the word, and Anabaptists and their spiritual descendants, who

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exalted the inner light and often spoke of the Bible as a dead letter.

A third perfection is its perspicuity. Here the way of salvation is *more clearly and fully known to us*. Rome makes Scripture dependent upon the authoritative teaching of the church. This the reformers consistently refused to do. All who seek salvation under the Spirit's guidance can attain to the true knowledge of God from its pages. Some passages indeed are difficult to understand. Peter indicates this when saying of Paul's epistles, "Wherein are some things hard to be understood, which the ignorant and unstedfast wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (II Pet. 3:16) Protestants therefore esteem the teaching ministry, instituted in the churches by Christ himself, very highly. But the Bible speaks clearly of its perspicuity. Paul says of his readers, many of whom were simple and uneducated folk, "I speak as to wise men; judge ye what I say." (I Cor. 10:15) John reminds those whom he addresses, "Ye have an anointing from the Holy One, and ye know all things." (John 2:20)

We further acknowledge the sufficiency of Scripture, for therein is declared all that *is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation*. Not everything spoken by prophets, apostles and the Savior himself has been included. On this point the Bible itself speaks clearly. (I Kgs. 4:33; John 21:25; I Cor. 5:9; Col. 4:16; II Thess. 2:5) Nor are its doctrines presented to us in systematic form. But all man needs to know for salvation has been incorporated. Every human opinion, tradition and rule must be judged in the light of these divine Scriptures. "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." (I John 4:1) This warning is especially relevant today, when winds of false doctrine blow from every quarter and estrange the ignorant and unsuspecting from God's word. Well may we heed the apostolic admonition, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house." (II John 10)

Because the Bible on every page and in all its parts is

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uniquely the word of God, the believer is constrained to say with the psalmist, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. I have sworn, and have confirmed it, that I will observe thy righteous ordinances." (Ps. 119:105, 106)

1. Why is all true knowledge of God grounded in revelation?
2. What is the relation between revelation and reason? 3. Is revelation unreasonable? 4. How did Greek thought both help and hinder the Christian church in formulating Scriptural truth? 5. Who are Barth and Brunner? What contributions have they made to the churches in recent years? 6. Does Reformed thought allow for natural theology? 7. What is meant by innate ideas of God? 8. How has Aquinas' view of natural and supernatural revelation produced a dualism in Roman Catholic piety? 9. What did Calvin mean by the seed of religion? 10. How does general revelation come to mankind? 11. Evaluate J. H. Bavinck's interpretation of the piety of certain pagan saints. 12. How does the Reformed construction of the relation between general and special revelation provide an adequate basis for a true philosophy of education, history and culture? 13. What is Barth's view of the written word? Show its similarities to and differences from the older liberal position. 14. May Christians properly be people of only one book? 15. Wherein do Reformed and Roman Catholics differ on the authority of Scripture? 16. How do the dispensationalists do injustice to the authority of Scripture? 17. If the Bible is perspicuous, why are preachers, theologians and synods necessary? 18. Does II John 10 forbid listening to unreformed broadcasts and having contact with the openly heretical?

Chapter 3

The Inspiration of the Scriptures

We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that "men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit," as the apostle Peter says; and that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed word to writing; and He himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.

ARTICLE III



DR. G. C. BERKOUWER began his timely Calvin Foundation lectures with the comment, "As we all recognize, the contemporary world confronts the Reformed faith with a challenging task. And in the discharge of this task, the Reformed faith will have among its first duties that of reflecting on the authority of the Bible."¹

This is pivotal for any study of Christian doctrine.

Throughout the ages many hammers have attempted to break the anvil of the Word. Since Celsus these antagonists have sought to deal a death-blow to Christianity by attacking its foundations. For if the Bible as the authoritative and abiding word of God to man is removed, the life of the church is imperilled. Having no word from above to sustain her, she cannot speak with conviction in the marketplaces of life.

In the days of the Reformation this situation was not so critical as now. Those who repudiated the Scriptures as God's word were largely content to remain outside of the church. Now the foe is within the gates. The lines of battle have long since shifted. Instead of engaging in front-line attack, those who reject the divine character of the Scriptures use the tactics of damning with faint praise. Often they will say the nicest things about the Bible, while at the same time undermining its reliability.

The several articles of the *Confession* which deal with God's word are of great help to us in this struggle. They pave the way for facing the issues at stake, while at the same time setting forth the Biblical teaching on this point.

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The Inspiration of Scripture

We call these sacred writings the Bible, a word derived from the Greek term meaning "book." It includes many writings of various kinds, penned over a long period of time. Some fifteen hundred years separated Moses, acknowledged as the author of the first five books, from John, who wrote Revelation on the lonely isle of Patmos. Yet these writings constitute a remarkable unity. In origin, message and purpose they with one voice announce themselves to be God's *holy and divine Word*.

When speaking of special revelation the *Confession* clearly distinguishes between the spoken and written word. Yet the notion is nowhere countenanced that divine inspiration is to be limited to the speakers.

The Bible is not of man. Yet it is written by men for their fellows. It speaks eloquently of man's struggles and attainments, of his knowledge and enjoyment of God in this world and his hopes for the world to come. Instead of seeking to obscure this human aspect the Scriptures themselves put it in bold relief. But all who spoke and wrote were in these capacities the mouth-pieces of the Lord. Thus this most truly human of all writings is confessed by the church to be truly divine. The primary author is God himself. "For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit." (II Pet. 1:21) All true and saving knowledge of God comes from God alone. This is clearly affirmed by Paul, "But unto us God revealed them through the Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God. But we received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is from God; that we might know the things which were freely given to us of God, which things also we speak . . ." (I Cor. 2:10-13a)

These and similar passages clearly specify an intimate relationship between revelation and inspiration. Our attention is also directed to the special illumination of the Holy Spirit

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which is necessary to understand the message and to proclaim it to the world. In revelation God communicates knowledge to men chosen by him to receive it. Both to receive and communicate it reliably such individuals were inspired by God.

This has been the firm conviction and teaching of the church for centuries. Even liberal scholars who reject the idea of an infallible Scripture acknowledge the unanimity of the church's confession on this score. Here Christian believers join hands with the Jews of old who held to a strict view of inspiration. Our Lord has put his approval upon it, when he said, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets; I came not to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished." (Matt. 5:17, 18) The fathers of the early church exalted the Bible as the very word of God, at times to the point of almost obscuring the human factors. In order to clothe a lower view of Scripture with ecclesiastical respectability, some scholars have argued that Luther, Calvin and other early reformers were not committed to an infallible Bible. The view that inspiration excludes the possibility of error in the original manuscripts they attribute to theologians of seventeenth century Protestant scholasticism. So frequently have the errors of this opinion been refuted, that fair-minded people must wonder how any scholar would dare to repeat it.

The Bible is abundantly clear on the inspiration of those who spoke God's word to the people. To Moses and Aaron God said, "See, I have made thee as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet. Thou shalt speak all that I command thee; and Aaron thy brother shall speak unto Pharaoh." (Ex. 7:1, 2) Concerning the prophetic calling among Israel God gave this description, "And I will raise them up a prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." (Deut. 18:18) The prophets were aware of their divine calling and the divine source of their messages. Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, to mention no others, tell us re-

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peatedly that the Lord's word came to them. Often they distinguish between times when God addressed them and when he did not, demonstrating that they were not always inspired. They spoke by a compulsion from above, realizing that the Lord would require the blood of the people at their hand if they failed to bring his word. Some of the prophets, like Daniel and Zechariah, plainly indicate that they did not always understand the words which they were commissioned to bring.

This supernatural calling and qualification is not so prominently affirmed in the case of the apostles. Yet the indications that it was present are sufficient and convincing. Christ solemnly assured them of the coming of the Holy Spirit. He would lead them into all truth. (John 16:13) Repeatedly the book of Acts emphasizes that the apostles spoke as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:4; 4:8; 6:10) Especially Peter and Paul went from place to place, calling men unto repentance and faith in Jesus and establishing the congregations by the teaching authority which they had received. The life of the churches, according to the Bible, was conditioned by the presence and power of God's word. "So mightily grew the word of the Lord and prevailed." (Acts 19:20)

The Word Committed to Writing

In communicating his word to mankind God did not limit his special guidance to its spoken form. Fully as much were the writers directly inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus we acknowledge *that afterwards God, from a special care which He has for us and our salvation, commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles to commit His revealed word to writing.*

It should seem neither strange nor surprising that God extended inspiration to the work of inscripturation. For if divine guidance was necessary in speaking, much more essential should it be considered in the work of writing down these testimonies for the church of all ages. Only in this form do we possess God's redemptive revelation today.

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For this position the Scriptures offer abundant proof. Both the Old and New Testament affirm that God commanded men to write down his revelation. "And Jehovah said unto Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book . . ." (Ex. 17:14) Among the men under orders to write the word of the Lord we may mention Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and Habakkuk. Several prophecies were intended for writing rather than for speaking, in order that the people might give to them more careful consideration. (Jer. 29; 36:4; Ezek. 26; 27; 28; etc.) To John the glorified Savior said, "What thou seest, write in a book and send it to the seven churches." (Rev. 1:11) Especially in the Old Testament the human factor is overshadowed by the divine. Isaiah at least once clearly identifies written prophecy as "the book of Jehovah." (Isa. 34:16) The New Testament repeatedly speaks of the written word as the actual speaking of God to his people. When quoting the ancient writings our Lord and his apostles at times merely indicate the passage as belonging to the Scriptures. At other times mention is made of the human author. But frequently they specify God as the speaker. We confess therefore that the Bible, although written by men, owes its origin, authority and reliability entirely to God.

The passages which assert the divine authority of the Scriptures are too numerous to mention. Yet a few deserve special attention. The New Testament writers were profoundly aware of the Spirit's guidance. Therefore they regarded their writings as authoritative. (I Cor. 7:10; II Cor. 13:2, 3; Col. 4:16) Paul does not hesitate to state in the face of opposition, "If any man thinketh himself to be a prophet, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandments of the Lord." (I Cor. 14:37) Peter places the writings of Paul on a level with Old Testament Scripture, "Even as our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given to him, wrote unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; wherein are some things hard to be understood, which the ignorant and unstedfast wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction." (II Pet. 3:15, 16) Peter rejects any tendency to equate the sacred scrip-

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tures with other books. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of men; but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit." (II Pet. 1:20, 21) In his last letter Paul without equivocation adopts the same position, "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness." (II Tim. 3:16)

From these and similar passages we ascertain the character of the sacred writings. They have come to us from God. He inspired men to speak in his name the things revealed to them. That which God judged necessary to be preserved for his church of all ages he had his servants commit to writing. In this work, also, they were completely controlled by the Holy Spirit. Although the activity and unique approach of the several writers is everywhere apparent through the Scriptures, the human authors were servants of the Lord who felt and followed his promptings in these activities.

The Nature and Extent of Inspiration

Christians are commonly agreed that the Bible is inspired by God. Yet this simple acknowledgement does not seem to insure the authority and reliability of God's word. Contradictory views have been championed concerning the nature and scope of divine inspiration. The truth or falsity of these positions can be assessed only in the light of the Bible itself. It is the sole judge of its own character and therefore the final court of appeal for conflicting opinions.

Those who believe in Scriptural inerrancy are frequently accused of holding a *mechanical* theory of inspiration. In this view the human authors are regarded as mere scribes, whose mental and spiritual activities were dormant while they wrote what God dictated. All who believe in verbal inspiration, it is maintained, are necessarily committed to this theory. As evidence the opponents of verbal or plenary inspiration quote certain statements of the early church fathers and the theologians of Reformed and Lutheran churches in the seventeenth century.

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Yet this method of attack is disreputable and dishonest. Usually an occasional phrase is lifted out of its context without any regard for the general tenor of the argument. Indeed, some of these theologians spoke of God as dictating his word. Yet at the same time they insisted, with but few exceptions, that the men who wrote were personally alert and responsive while inspired by the Spirit of God. Calvin especially called attention to the wide variety of talents, insight and style which characterizes the several books of the Bible. This fact clearly indicates that God did not suppress the human factor. It was written by men with a message which profoundly affected their own lives and often arose out of their own experiences. Recognizing this indisputable fact, few if any evangelical Christians champion a mechanical view of inspiration.

The theory most widely held in liberal circles is usually called *dynamic* or *dynamical* inspiration, for want of a better term. Here the supernatural, miraculous work of the Holy Spirit is rejected. Inspiration comes to mean no more than a kind of spiritual illumination of the writers, differing in degree but not in essence from the divine guidance and enlightenment bestowed on all believers. This leaves the church with a purely human Bible, noble and ennobling in its teachings but without any credentials as to its trustworthiness.

On such a basis errors in Scripture are not merely possible but plausible and proper. In this vein Karl Barth, whose contributions in calling men back to the Bible ought not to be forgotten, speaks of Biblical inspiration. He seems to say many wonderful things about God's word. At the same time he undercuts the authority and accuracy of the written word. "Obviously even in Holy Scripture we are dealing with Scripture not in a primary but in a secondary sense: for it itself is the deposit of proclamation made in the past by the mouth of man."² Again he insists, "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it."³ Even more clearly he distantiates himself from the historic Christian faith on this point, when he writes, "The Bible is, therefore, not itself and in itself God's past revelation, just as Church proclamation also

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is not itself and in itself the expected future revelation. But the Bible speaking to us and heard by us as God's Word attests the past revelation."⁴ Now we can understand why Barth does not hesitate to pour out the vials of criticism on verbal inspiration and inerrancy as a mechanical theory which does violence to the essential character of God's speaking. To him the Bible becomes God's word only in the dynamic and concrete event of God's momentary confrontation of our lives.

The Reformed churches have consistently held to and developed what may be called *organic* inspiration. Although not specifically formulated in the creeds, this position is implicit in all their affirmations about God's word. It alone does justice to all that the Bible says about itself. The human authors were completely controlled and guided by the Holy Spirit even in their choice of words. Yet God used them "as they were, with their character and temperament, their gifts and talents, their education and culture, their vocabulary, diction and style."⁵ Some of the writers searched out beforehand the things concerning which they wrote. (Luke 1:1-4) Several of them refer to the sources from which they gleaned their information. (II Sam. 1:18; I Kgs. 15:23; II Kgs. 12:19; I Chron. 27:24; 29:29) The psalmists repeatedly make mention of their personal experiences. In God's word we find the rather commonplace prose of the chroniclers next to the ecstatic utterances of the prophets. All who read with any degree of discrimination must recognize how different is the style of John than that of James, of Paul than that of Peter. All this attests that these writings bear the unmistakable stamp of their human authors. But what they wrote for all generations was God's word. Precisely how God could and did use each of his servants with their unique insights and gifts, so that they both expressed themselves without experiencing any violence to their individuality and yet acknowledged that God announced to them his very words, remains a mystery. The church has evidently felt herself incompetent to inquire more deeply into this matter.

Closely related to the nature of inspiration is the question concerning its extent or scope. Also here the church today offers

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no united testimony to the world. Under deistic and rationalistic influences many have championed the notion that the Bible is partially inspired. Especially its historical portions have been under constant attack. Many argue that these are plagued with minor inaccuracies and major errors, even while still insisting that the Bible in some sense is God's word. This has led them to distinguish between the historical and doctrinal material of Scripture, the former regarded as not essential to its message. Others have sought a way out of the impasse by speaking of different levels of divine inspiration. Those who applied the evolutionary theory to Israel's religious life have denied permanent value and validity to much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament. Personal opinion and bias have sat in judgment on the sacred writings. A more recent notion has been that of thought inspiration. God is recognized as having supplied the writers' thoughts, while permitting them to clothe this in their own words. How accurate and authoritative thoughts, for these indeed they should be if they came from God, can be divorced from words has never been satisfactorily explained. If any idea is to be conveyed to men, thought necessarily takes shape in words.

This debate is cut short for all who take the Bible seriously and honestly. On the subject of the extent of its inspiration it speaks clearly. This is apparent to all who would do justice to the texts mentioned previously. Further support for verbal inspiration is afforded by the testimony of the authors themselves. Moses and Joshua usually introduced their message with the announcement, "The Lord said" or "The Lord spoke." For the prophets the well-known formula was "Thus saith the Lord." Often they claimed that their words were the very words of God. Our Lord and his apostles quoted the Old Testament as the word of the Lord. In three instances in the New Testament an entire argument is based on the use of a single, specific word in the Old Testament. (John 10:35; Matt. 22:43-45; Gal. 3:16) Here we have clear witness to verbal inspiration.

Many objections have been raised against this position. These ought not to be lightly dismissed or ridiculed. Discrepan-

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cies seem to be present in numbers, when two authors relate the same incident. Problems have arisen in connection with Old Testament quotations in the New. Facts about kings and nations are related in the Bible, for which we find no corroboration in secular records. The Old Testament is charged with tolerating a "low" level of morality as evidenced in the law of retaliation, the prevalence of polygamy and the immorality of some of its outstanding heroes. Certain precepts and practices seem unworthy of a holy, wise and good God.

It is impossible to refute these objections at length. Yet a few points ought to be made. First of all, the church refuses to make her faith in the inspiration, authority and inerrancy of the Scriptures dependent on man's ability to solve what seem to be perplexing problems. Many Biblical doctrines burden our understanding with difficulties. No one can comprehend such teachings as the Trinity, the two natures of our Lord, the Spirit's indwelling in the church and the believing heart and the relation between divine sovereignty and man's responsibility. Yet the limitations of our minds do not invalidate the truth of these doctrines. Much of the opposition to verbal inspiration, and this needs saying in our times, roots in spiritual perversion rather than in intellectual difficulties. Many objections root in a strong aversion to the supernatural. Often the discrepancies, when carefully evaluated in the light of all we know, prove to be no errors at all. The Bible indeed does describe conditions of "low" morality. Yet these are not condoned but rather condemned. Each time the believer reads God's word, he feels strangely drawn to acknowledge with Sir Walter Scott,

*"Within that awful volume lies
The mystery of mysteries!
Happiest they of human race,
To whom God has granted grace
To read, to fear, to hope, to pray,
To lift the latch and force the way;
And better had they ne'er been born,
Who read to doubt, or read to scorn."*

The High Purpose of the Written Word

Much time could be spent discussing the relative merits of the arguments for and against the Biblical testimony concerning its own inspiration. This is not improper, when those who engage therein are motivated by a proper spirit of piety. To be able to do this effectively, however, requires some measure of academic training. Therefore the *Confession*, speaking for the congregation of believers, stresses instead the wonderful favor which God manifested in providing his church with the written word. God has been pleased to give us his self-revelation in permanent and accessible form *from a special care which He has for us and our salvation.*

Here we adore the fatherly concern which he displays on our behalf

The Christian religion roots in God's self-manifestation to men. Unless he speaks first, we shall not be able to say anything about him and his plan of salvation with any assurance and accuracy. Moses made this plain to Israel, when he said, "The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deut. 29:29)

The Bible is not the product of one man; much less the work of a single day. God unfolded his plan and purposes throughout the course of centuries.

Against the backdrop of his creative activities he told the story of man's tragic fall into sin. From this he redeems and reconciles a people for his own possession. To them he restores covenant communion with himself now and in the world to come. This saving coming of God to man in his only-begotten Son constitutes the heart of Biblical revelation. It is the story which the church proclaims to the nations.

Many centuries were used by God to prepare all things, including his people, for Christ's coming into the world. "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son." (Hebr. 1:1, 2)

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The Christian gospel must therefore be recognized as both a word and a deed-revelation. To emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other does violence to the Biblical record. In communicating the grace of life to men God reveals his unchanging and unchangeable truth. "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth. . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:14, 17) Christ's completion of his earthly ministry was followed by the miracle of Pentecost. By the power of the Holy Spirit we confess Jesus as Lord (I Cor. 12:3) and are joined to him as members one of another. (I Cor. 12:26; Rom. 12:5) To experience this fellowship we must know the truth as it is in Jesus the Christ. (I John 5:20) Act and fact are indissolubly united in God's holy word.

For generations this divine truth was orally imparted. God repeatedly raised up prophets to bring his message to his people. Those who experienced the mighty acts of God's salvation were instructed to pass them in tradition from generation to generation. (Ps. 78:4) The apostolic church also received instruction in things divine from those who were eyewitnesses of the Lord. But this glorious testimony could not be entrusted to the memory of mere men and women. Oral tradition suffers from the limitations imposed by mind and memory corrupted by sin. To preserve adequately and authoritatively and accurately the record of his will and work, God enshrined his self-revelation permanently in writing. Without this special care it would sooner or later have been distorted beyond recognition or doomed to oblivion. The argument is summarized by Berkhof, "Therefore God provided for its inscripturation, so that His revelation now comes to us, not in the form of deed and events, but as a description of these. In order to guard against volatilization, corruption and falsification He gave it permanent form in writing. From this it follows that there is a very close connection between special revelation and Scripture."⁶

Herein God shows his lovingkindness to his people. As long as they faithfully study and submit to the word, they enjoy

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saving fellowship with him who is their life. The Bible commands them to do the works which God prescribes. The sanctifying consequences of hearing and living by the written word of God have been demonstrated in history. By its regenerative influences learning was increased, the status of women greatly enhanced, slavery gradually abolished, better morals promoted in community and nation, and tyranny replaced by government under law. Every great revival in Christendom has been induced by a return to the Scriptures. Brilliant examples of virtue and genius, of learned philosophies and sublime poetry may appear for a brief season apart from a knowledge of the Bible, but we witness no forceful and fruitful renewal of man's heart and life. Thus God still demonstrates today that through the written word he is active for our salvation.

In the work of inscripturation God took the first step. *He Himself wrote with His own finger the two tables of the law.* This was done to impress Israel with the divine origin and authority of the message which Moses brought. Those who wrote infallibly during the long centuries from Moses to John the apostle were walking along the road which God by his example marked out. Let those who deny that in the Bible we have the very words of God in human language remember that they reject what God so clearly says about himself. "And Jehovah delivered unto me the two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words, which Jehovah spake with you in the mount of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly." (Deut. 9:10) This is the prototype of all the writing which the Holy Scriptures contain. It assures us that what the inspired writers wrote was written in imitation of God himself, so that these writings are indeed *holy and divine*. "We have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts." (II Pet. 1:19)

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1. Who was Celsus and which arguments did he employ against Christianity? 2. Does the Bible permit us to speak of it as holy and divine? Is this an idolatrous reverence for a book? 3. In which sense is the Bible the most human book ever written? 4. In which sense is it alone a divine book? 5. How did God inspire the prophets and apostles? 6. What is meant by the inspiration of the Bible? 7. Wherein does inspiration differ from illumination? 8. Why are the orthodox usually charged with holding to mechanical inspiration? 9. How does Scripture itself demonstrate that it is God's word uniquely? 10. What is meant by plenary inspiration? 11. Evaluate Barth's position on Scripture in the light of what it says of itself. 12. What is the relation between Scripture and Christian preaching? 13. Is it warranted to speak of certain parts of Scripture as having more value than others? 14. How ought believers approach the problem of so-called discrepancies and errors in Scripture? 15. How intimately is the Bible connected with our salvation? 16. Is it scientifically defensible to assume the infallibility of the Bible? 17. How has the Bible influenced western culture? 18. Show how the Bible throughout speaks of God's revelation in Christ.

Chapter 4

The Canon of the Scriptures

We believe that the Holy Scriptures are contained in two books, namely, the Old and New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged. These are thus named in the Church of God.

The books of the Old Testament are the five books of Moses, to wit: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; the book of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the two books of Samuel, the two of the Kings, two books of the Chronicles, commonly called

Paralipomenon, the first of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther; Job, the Psalms of David, the three books of Solomon, namely, the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs; the four great prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel; and the twelve lesser prophets, namely, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Those of the New Testament are the four evangelists, to wit: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the fourteen epistles of the apostle Paul, namely, one to the Romans, two to the Corinthians, one to the Galatians, one to the Ephesians, one to the Philippians, one to the Colossians, two to the Thessalonians, two to Timothy, one to Titus, one to Philemon, and one to the Hebrews; the seven epistles of the other apostles, namely, one of James, two of Peter, three of John, one of Jude; and the Revelation of the apostle John.

ARTICLE IV

ALL RELIGIONS have certain teachings by which their adherents are to live. Invariably these are ascribed to the gods. Among primitive tribes such teachings are carefully preserved by oral tradition. Handed down through the generations, usually by male members of the tribe or religious leaders recognized as possessing divine powers, these regulate the lives of all who belong.

The higher religions have their holy books. Hinduism and Buddhism, Judaism and Islam join with Christianity in appealing to sacred writings which are revered as holy.

More than any other religion Christianity has always championed a collection of sacred writings. To this list of recognized books none may be added. From it none may be withdrawn. Not merely the general doctrine but every detail is accepted as God's word. Strongly is this stressed by John "I testify to every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto them, God shall add unto him the plagues which are written in this book; and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life, and out of the holy city, which are written in this book." (Rev. 22:18, 19) The speaker is none other than Christ himself, the source and content of the Bible. In the light of this passage the church's acknowledgement of the canonicity of the Scriptures becomes meaningful.

The Definition of the Canon

All Bible-believing Christians will heartily join with the Reformed churches in acknowledging *that the Holy Scriptures*

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are contained in two books, namely, the Old and New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged.

The word "canon" is of Greek origin. In classical Greek it was used to denote "any straight rod or bar, especially to keep a thing straight." In metaphorical language it designated "any-thing that serves to determine other things, a rule, a standard." G. L. Robinson suggests that the church, when it used this term and applied it to Scripture, may have borrowed from a Hebrew word for rod or measuring reed. It expresses the faith of the church that the writings incorporated in the Bible are to be accepted as authoritative for faith and practice. In this light all things concerning God and his relation to mankind are to be judged. Thus Paul employed the term, "And as many as shall walk by this rule (canon), peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God." (Gal. 6:16)

To designate the standard collection of Biblical writings the word seems to have been first used by the church fathers in the fourth century. Early instances are found in the 59th canon of the Council of Laodicea (363 A.D.,) in the festal epistle written by Athanasius (365 A.D.), and in the writing of Amphilochius, archbishop of Iconium (395 A.D.).

Several important questions concerning the canonicity of Scripture ought to be sharply distinguished.

There is first the basic issue of the authority of these writings. What determines whether or not these books are from God? Also the further question of when and how the church historically came to recognize these writings as of God should be considered. Involved in this is the question whether official recognition by the church imparts authority to the Scriptures. To these questions conflicting answers have been given.

Several scholars, among them W. H. Green and J. D. Davis, maintain that no formal declaration of their canonicity was needed to win approval for the Bible books. Green argues that the writers, as it were, canonized their own writings. These were not only read but at once accepted as authoritative and divine

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by pious readers. Davis remarks, "The canon does not derive its authority from the church, whether Jewish or Christian; the office of the church is merely that of a custodian and a witness."

Others, like Dillmann and Briggs, insist that all these books passed through a longer or shorter period of verification by the church before they were accepted as divine. Briggs goes so far as to argue, "We cannot be certain that anything comes from God, unless it brings us personally something evidently Divine." By this argument he shifts the ground for authority and canonicity to the subjective experience of the believer.

The Bible offers no evidence for the historical canonization of its writings. In straightforward and striking language it affirms its divine and authoritative character. The two tables of the law were placed within the ark as God's testimony to Israel for all times. (Ex. 40:20) The laws of Deuteronomy were entrusted to the sons of Levi for safekeeping. (Deut. 31:9; 24-26) When Solomon brought the ark into the finished temple, the law still reposed under the mercy seat. (I Kgs. 8:9) Upon Joash the priest Jehoiada placed not only the crown but also "the testimony." (II Kgs. 11:12) To preserve them as holy writings the wise men of Hezekiah made copies of Solomon's proverbs. (Prov. 25:1) Such preservation of these writings is not identical with full recognition of their canonicity, although this seems to be at least implied.

Stronger evidence for the canonicity of the sacred writings may be adduced. When the book of the law was found in Josiah's time, it was read in the ears of all the people and recognized at once as authoritative. These writings became the foundation for a thoroughgoing reformation of life and worship in Israel. (II Kgs. 22:8f) Much earlier the people recognized the divine authority of what Moses read to them in the wilderness. To the book of the law they responded, "All that Jehovah hath spoken will we do, and be obedient." (Ex. 24:7)

Nehemiah records how Ezra together with other scribes "read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave

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the sense, so that they understood the reading." (Neh. 8:8) This text is of signal importance. It demonstrates that the Jews possessed writings which they recognized as inherently divine and authoritative. All the people were to hear these words. They formed the basis for further teaching and exhortation. Zechariah also affirmed the canonicity of the law of Moses. (Zech. 7:12) Daniel apparently had access to the books wherein God's word to Jeremiah was recorded. These he regarded as authoritative and accurate. (Dan. 9:2) Even the Samaritans accorded high honor to the books of Moses. (Neh. 13:28) When the Old Testament was translated into the Greek by Jewish scholars at Alexandria, every book which we recognize as Old Testament canon was included. The Scriptures employed by Jesus and his disciples were the same as ours. To their content they ascribed without hesitation the fullest divine authority.

On the recognition of the New Testament writings the Bible speaks more sparingly. This need not surprise us, since they were written within the space of some fifty years. Paul claimed canonical authority for his epistles in at least one place. "And when this epistle hath been read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye also read the epistle from Laodicea." (Col. 4:16) Peter ascribed divine authority to the letters of Paul. (II Pet. 3:16)

How the various writings of the New Testament were gathered into one book is an intriguing but little-known story. All we can say definitely is that between the years 100 and 400 A.D. the New Testament in its present form was accorded binding authority. The originals possibly were kept by the churches and individuals to whom they were addressed. From these copies were made and distributed. This explains how the church fathers, who lived between 90 and 150 A.D., could so freely quote from the apostolic writings as authoritative. Towards the close of this period the heresy of Marcion invaded the churches. In support of his peculiar views he rejected Matthew, Mark, John, the Acts of the Apostles, the pastoral and general epistles, and Revelation. Only Luke's gospel and ten Pauline epistles were recognized by him as canonical. Even these he

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had the temerity to revise. This unwarranted use of the sacred writings led the orthodox fathers to define more explicitly the canon of the New Testament.

In this process the authenticity of certain books was discussed at great length. Eusebius faced the question which books the true believer must recognize as holy and divine to be saved. This was a pressing practical problem in view of the persecutions which raged in his day. His list of the sacred writings in general agrees with our New Testament. However, he left open the question whether James, Jude, II Peter and Revelation should be included, since in his day they were not universally acknowledged. More than a century earlier a similar position had been taken by Origen. Athanasius, the great father of the orthodox faith, listed in one of his pastoral letters all twenty seven books of the New Testament, saying of them, "These are the wells of salvation, so that he who thirsts may be satisfied with the sayings of these. Let no one add to these. Let nothing be taken away." It has often been claimed that the Council of Carthage (397 A.D.) canonized the New Testament. What it actually did, however, was confess publicly what the church had long believed.

Although we recognize a human element in this long process, God was manifestly active in guiding his church. No council ever arrogated to itself the power to clothe these writings with authority. The church simply confessed which books she accepted as *holy and divine*. This we believe was a special ministry of the Holy Spirit. He not only inspired the writers but also preserved their writings. He directed their gradual spread throughout the churches. He enabled the church to discern by faith that these constituted God's word. This gracious activity enabled the church to preserve and propagate the holy writings throughout the ages.

The Recognition of a Closed Canon

From the beginning of its history the church has always championed a closed and complete canon. The judgment of

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strengthened in conviction and disciplined in character to walk well-pleasing to the Lord. Because that word evokes the response of faith in our hearts, we feel ourselves continually drawn to it. "For the Word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Hebr. 4:12) In its penetrating light we learn to know ourselves as we never did before. The deepest secrets of our souls are laid bare and judged. Here we are confronted with our sin and need for salvation. It prompts us to flee for refuge to the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. It exhibits the glorious work of redemption and reconciliation in Christ Jesus. It assures us that all who come unto God in him shall not be cast out. It sustains and strengthens us in all circumstances of life. It enables us to grow up in all things in Christ who is our life. In these holy and divine Scriptures we rest our minds and hearts and rejoice until our lives are perfected in heaven.

The Fulness of Faith's Response

The believer acknowledges the trustworthiness of the Bible. For him this confession is of singular benefit, since it assures him of help and hope.

According to the *Confession* faith's acknowledgement of the message of salvation in Christ is intimately bound up with its recognition of the accuracy and dependability of God's word. At this point the believer dare not separate what God has joined together.

Important issues are at stake. If the Bible is not a reliable revelation of God, man and sin, how can we rely upon its assurances of salvation? If we doubt the historical account of God's dealings with Israel, by what right may we assume that the story of the Savior's life and death are dependable? The true response of faith to God's word is *believing without any doubt all things contained in these writings.*

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*"The Church from her dear Master
Received the gift divine,
And still that light she lifteth
O'er all the earth to shine.
It is a golden casket,
Where gems of truth are stored;
It is the heaven-drawn picture
Of Christ, the living word."*

The chief enemy of this Christian confession is doubt, which repeatedly requires our concern as believers. Which believer has not at one time or another experienced its subtle stalking in our minds and hearts, questioning the trustworthiness of God's word? Its presence is betrayed by a lack of complete conviction and confidence. Such unbelief may assume several forms, some more radical and vicious than others. But all spring from a heart which either consciously or unconsciously rebels against the words and works of God. Pride and vanity are its essential characteristics. In every form of doubt there is a subtle refusal to submit unconditionally and unhesitatingly to the sovereign word of God.

In several respects doubt is like disease. It robs the mind of clarity, the will of conviction and the heart of God's comforting presence. Chiefly it is of two kinds. Some doubt calls into question the authority and accuracy of God's word. In another form it undermines our assurance of salvation. Although the former is much more serious and disastrous than the latter, these are often closely associated. Not infrequently doubts concerning our state of grace involve a distrust of the reality and reliability of God's promises. Many secondary causes may operate to undermine our Christian convictions. Yet all doubt springs from the corruption of our hearts which so easily are tempted to love and live by the lie.

The solution to this problem lies not in discussion and debate. Doubt is never a purely intellectual reaction to God's word. It roots in and feeds upon the unspiritual response of a heart not fully surrendered to God. Weighing all the arguments

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for and against the Christian religion will not silence its stubborn voice. When Philip was confronted with Nathaniel's doubt concerning Christ, he did not argue but invited him with the words, "Come, and see." (John 1:47) The doubter must be challenged by the living Savior in the glory of his person and work. This confrontation takes place today when we obey the command to "come and see" him as he is revealed in the Scriptures. Although various arguments may serve to allay some doubts, these do not form the solid foundation of Christian faith. What is needed is a change of mind and heart. This is produced by the Holy Spirit. He brings under the compulsion of the living word all who humbly seek God's truth.

We waste the time of ourselves and others, when we try to convince the doubter of the Bible's reliability by all kinds of evidences, proofs and demonstrations. Even God's mighty judgments upon earth, apart from the Spirit's saving work, fail to convince them that do not believe. This John clearly states, when he says repeatedly, "And they repented not to give him glory." (Rev. 16:9, 11; 9:21) Man either accepts the Biblical testimony to itself or rejects it to pursue the path of unbelief. The issues are clear. Without an authoritative and accurate word of God the Christian religion succumbs to the unstable and unreliable theories of man.

For the believer the first kind of doubt is ruled out without hesitation. We accept the Bible on the basis of what God has said about it. When this commitment is made, the second kind of doubt is in large measure soon resolved. Although it rises up to plague us in this life, we are strengthened and sustained by these holy writings which Athanasius has so aptly called "the wells of salvation." The only antidote to doubt is God's word itself. All debate about whether and in how far the Bible is true is completely cut off. Precisely this is the meaning of the *Confession*.

To the unbeliever this sounds like obscurantism. Often it has been so attacked. Our only reply is that this is the obedience of faith which God commands. The believing response does not

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automatically resolve every problem and exclude every question. "For we know in part, and we prophecy in part." (I Cor. 13:9) The truest friend of faith is sound Christian scholarship. We therefore dare to face the problems which perplex our understanding. But these can only be reliably resolved on the basis of the Scriptures themselves. Ours is the high and holy calling of studying the word. We would understand what God himself has said.

Here an important observation must be made. God has not been pleased to preserve for the church the *autographa*, the original manuscripts of the Biblical writers. It would seem that these have been removed lest we venerate them with an idolatrous devotion like the Israelites did the brazen serpent. The church is therefore dependent upon copies of the originals. Many differences and discrepancies in reading are found in these early copies of Scripture. These form a challenging field for research and study. Our aim is to obtain the most accurate and authoritative copy of the originals. Other questions occur in connection with two Biblical accounts of the same incident which may differ in certain details. Problems also arise when we attempt to interpret and correlate the specific teachings of the Bible. Frankly the church confesses that even after two thousand years of study she does not have the answers to every problem which has perplexed her. But this admission in no way invalidates her conviction and confession that the Bible is absolutely reliable. She accepts it as God's own word. In the words of her Savior she affirms, "Thy word is truth." (John 17:17)

The Ground of Faith in the Scriptures

On what basis do we accept the Bible as authoritative and accurate? Is our faith to be equated with blind acceptance despite every difficulty? Are we by *believing without any doubt all things contained in them* virtually selling out Christianity as a reasonable faith?

This problem, which impinges itself upon every thinking believer, is faced frankly and honestly.

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Two aspects of this question must be mentioned. They are considered as closely related to each other in the fifth article. For the sake of clarity we should distinguish between the objective and the subjective grounds of our assurance that the Bible as God's word is dependable. In this article attention is especially directed to the latter since it was the more pressing problem in Reformation times. However, the former and in a sense the more important ground of our assurance is not neglected.

In their struggle to defend the authority of Scripture our fathers declared that they believed the Scriptures *not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such*. The Romanists insisted that the Bible was dependent upon the church; the reformers claimed that the church was dependent upon the Bible. Here the paths parted radically and, judging by what we know today, seemingly irrevocably. Until Rome revises her conviction on this score, all attempts at closer fellowship will suffer shipwreck.

Rome defends her position on the ground that the church both logically and historically precedes the Bible. Thus she can exist independently of the written word through the indwelling Christ who is communicated by the Spirit. In times past there was a church before the divine word was inscripturated. But without the church the Bible could not be produced or propagated. The results of this position are far reaching. Rome often appeals to Scriptural authority in defense of some article of the Christian faith. Yet her conception of this authority differs widely from that of evangelical Protestantism. Tradition has been accorded a place of equal honor with the Bible. Often it exerts a more formative influence in the definition of doctrine than God's word. The Biblical writings have authority since the church receives them as holy and divine.

Against this position the reformers with one voice protested. They maintained that the Bible is self-authenticating. It possesses an inherent and indestructible authority as the very speaking of God to his people. Whether or not its teachings are believed

they are binding in the sight of God. These sacred writings *are from God*, and therefore *they carry the evidence thereof in themselves*. This "autopistia" or self-authentication of the Scripture has been well summarized by E. J. Young, "Historic Christianity, inasmuch as it is founded upon the Bible, teaches that the Bible is itself the authoritative Word of God. The Bible is authoritative, therefore, whether there is any Divine-human encounter or not. The Bible is authoritative whether or not its message is borne home to me in compelling power. It is authoritative whether I believe it or not; whether I believe in Jesus Christ or not. The Bible, according to the Christian position, is authoritative in itself; its authority resides in the fact that it is the Word of God."²

This does not mean that we refuse to ascribe any significance to the testimony of the church. The universal acknowledgement of the Bible as God's word by believers in all ages substantiates the inherent authority and accuracy of Scripture. Yet this is not the fundamental ground for believing the Bible. It is to be believed for its own sake and upon the ground of its own testimony. The response of the church in no way makes the Bible more authoritative than it is.

But how does the individual attain assurance on this point? The united testimony of the church of all ages may strengthen him in his convictions, but it does not produce faith in the Bible as God's word. What we need is the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. He alone can fully assure us *that they* (these sacred writings) *are from God*. This emphasis on the Spirit's illuminating work harmonizes with what the Bible teaches about the darkness of the natural mind. It cannot discern things which are spiritual apart from the Holy Spirit's activity. (I Cor. 2:14) The faith of the Corinthians is attributed neither to Paul's evangelistic zeal nor to their readiness to believe. "And my speech and my preaching was not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, in order that your faith might not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (I Cor. 2:4, 5) In this same vein the apostle wrote to the Thessalonians, "For our gospel came not unto

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you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and much assurance . . . And ye became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction and with joy of the Holy Spirit." (I Thess. 1:5, 6)

This internal testimony of the Spirit concerning the authority of Scripture has been discussed from time to time. Some would identify it with the illumination of our minds, by which we are made capable of seeing the excellencies of God's word. From Paul's word to the Thessalonians more seems to be implied than dispelling the darkness of our minds. The apostle distinguishes between the actual content of Scripture and the power by which it was applied to the hearts of the hearers. He speaks plainly of the coming of God's word in "much assurance." Yet this power does not produce a new revelation. Rather, the Spirit takes God's word, and having enlightened our darkened understanding to see the truth as it is in Christ, he now seals it effectively to our hearts. This enables us with joy and assurance to receive the word as God's provision for *the regulation, the foundation and the confirmation of our faith.*

After considering the subjective or personal assurance that the Bible is God's word, the *Confession* directs our attention more specifically to the objective ground. Here we confess that the Scriptures are to be believed *also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves.* Only the true believer will confess this. Such restricted recognition, however, by no means invalidates the truth of this testimony. *For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.*

The Bible abundantly demonstrates that it is true.

Here an appeal is made to the prophecies which have been spoken and recorded by holy men of old. Centuries before these things came to pass, men heard from their mouths of the rise and fall of certain kingdoms, of the captivity of Israel, and of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh. Many of these prophecies contained remarkable and specific details. To their truth not only the Bible but also secular history and archæologi-

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cal finds have attested. Other prophecies such as the preservation of the church, the spread of the gospel among all nations and the increasing wickedness of the world *are being fulfilled* before our eyes. The inescapable conclusion is that a book which contains such a remarkable message can only have been produced by God.

The *Confession* does not hesitate to say that *the very blind are able to perceive* that Scriptural prophecy is being fulfilled. To some this may seem to involve us in a denial of the serious consequences of sin. They cannot understand how the natural man (*the very blind*) can recognize any divine truth. However, we are not committed to saying here that man apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit actually confesses that the Scriptures are the very word of God. We merely affirm that they can recognize the indisputable fact that many of the things which the prophets announced have been literally fulfilled. Whatever interpretation they may offer of these facts remains their responsibility. Nothing is said of this here. The response of man, however, in no way affects the reliability, the self-authentication, the "autopistia" of the divine and holy writings of God.

The more we study all things in the light of the Bible, the more we are amazed at the uniqueness of this book. It focusses its bright light upon the hidden recesses of the heart, showing to man what he really is. It urges us to look back over the countless centuries of human history and behold the mighty works of the Lord. It compels us to evaluate our present life in the light of the truth of God. It makes plain the mysterious forces which are at work in our own times. It points the way to distant years, telling us of things which must shortly come to pass. And against the truth of all this testimony *nothing can be alleged*. The conclusion is inescapable. Only God could have produced this book. "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower falleth: but the word of the Lord abideth forever." (I Pet. 1:24, 25)

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

1. Why does the historic church cling so tenaciously to verbal inspiration? 2. What is meant by the regulation of our faith by Scripture? 3. How does the Spirit use Scripture to bring man to faith? 4. Show how revival and reformation have always been connected with the Bible. 5. Prove from Scripture that doubting is always sinful. 6. Why is it impossible to argue people out of doubt? 7. Why is it wrong to consider the reliability of Scripture a legitimate and open question? 8. Which are legitimate fields of investigation for the Bible student? 9. What is the difference between higher and lower criticism? 10. Explain the distinction between objective and subjective grounds of assurance. 11. What is meant by the self-authentication of Scripture? 12. What is the internal testimony of the Spirit to Scripture? 13. In which sense can the very blind see the fulfillment of prophecy? 14. Which several prophecies have been and are being fulfilled?



Chapter 6

The Apocryphal Writings

We distinguish those sacred books from the apocryphal, viz.: the third and fourth books of Esdras, the books of Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Jesus Sirach, Baruch, the Appendix to the book of Esther, the Song of the Three Children in the Furnace, the History of Susannah, of Bell and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and the books of the Maccabees. All of which the Church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books; but they are far from having such power and efficacy that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the other, that is, the sacred books.

ARTICLE VI



WHEN ENGAGED in discussion with Roman Catholics, we soon find ourselves accused of having mutilated the Bible. At first this sounds strangely unfair to us who love God's word, until we remember that Catholics and Protestants differ on what constitutes the sacred scriptures. Their charge is prompted by our refusal as Protestants to accept the apocryphal books as *holy and divine*.

Today this question is given little more than a passing thought. Many Protestants hardly know what the apocrypha is. Yet its place in the canon constituted a fundamental difference between these two churches.

The Meaning of the Term Apocrypha

Certain religious writings which have come down from ancient times are called by the church "apocryphal." The term derives from a Greek word which means "hidden." Three early usages of this term may be distinguished. It designated certain writings whose origin was not known. It was also used for records which were concealed for safe keeping. It was further applied to writings withdrawn from general circulation, because they were deemed inferior. The Jews, because they hesitated to destroy any copies of religious writings, adopted the habit of depositing them in a secret place or burying them. Thus one Jewish account tells us that by order of Hezekiah *The Book of Remedies* was concealed from the people, because it undermined faith and trust in God.

The Christian use of the term attaches itself quite closely to the Jewish. In ecclesiastical usage the term "apocryphal" refers to "that which is excluded from public use in the church." Augustine used the word to describe certain spurious writings

which purported to be part of the canon but whose origin was obscure and whose contents were of dubious value. In the days of the Reformation the word was applied to the writings specifically listed in the sixth article of the *Confession*. These are not forged or spurious documents. Nor is the origin of most of them obscure, since they were produced during the period between Malachi and the Savior's birth. However, their contents are judged to be far inferior to that of the canonical books.

The Apocrypha in the Ancient Church

The church fathers used the term very seldom to designate the writings which are here considered. Instead, these books were early accorded a place of some honor. Frequently they were read in public worship. Not a few of the fathers quote them in their theological writings along with the canonical books.

Although this practice seems strange to us today, it can be easily explained. Greek was the universal language in the days of the early Christian church. The fathers quite naturally used the Greek version of the Old Testament which had been prepared in Alexandria some two hundred years before Christ's birth. In this *Septuagint*, so called because tradition ascribes this translation to seventy men, these writings were included. How and why this happened cannot be satisfactorily explained. The Jews never recognized these books as holy and canonical. Most of the early Christians, however, could not read Hebrew and therefore had no access to the Hebrew Bible. They simply had to take for granted that what was included in the Septuagint was divinely inspired and therefore authoritative for the churches.

The scholars in the ancient church were from earliest times opposed to endorsing these apocryphal writings as part of the Hebrew canon. Eusebius informs us that Melito, the bishop of Sardis, travelled to Palestine in 200 A.D. There he carefully inquired into the question which books properly belonged to the Old Testament. The list which he prepared for the churches omitted the apocrypha. Athanasius in his festal epistle distin-

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guished the Hebrew canonical writings sharply from those books which might be read to edify the people but possessed no divine authority. Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, Amphilochius and Epiphanius are early authorities on the Old Testament canon. They accord no divine authority to what we call the apocrypha. Rufinus in his exposition of the Apostle's Creed made the same distinction. When Roman Catholics insist that the early church always endorsed these writings as canonical, they are guilty of distorting the facts.

In its practice the church refused to follow the teachings of its scholars on this score. The Septuagint had been used so long in the churches, that the common people were accustomed to readings from the apocrypha. Even Jerome, who prepared the Vulgate edition of the Bible, was unable to stem the tide of public opinion. The Council of Hippo apparently recognized the apocryphal as well as the canonical writings as part of the Scriptures.

Throughout the Middle Ages both were read in the churches. The Council of Florence (1438-1455) confessed that both were divinely inspired. Yet throughout this period many scholars ardently defended the position taken by Athanasius and Jerome.

The Conflict Between Rome and the Reformers

When the great Council of Trent (1545-1563) met, the ecclesiastical leaders were not at first unanimous on this question. Seripando carefully reviewed for the assembled bishops the two streams of opinion which had prevailed in the church. Although concluding that these writings might be considered canonical, he was convinced that they should not be used as a foundation for sound doctrine. Their authority should be restricted instead to moral issues. Since the Roman Catholic Church accorded great honor to both Jerome and Augustine, the council refused to choose sharply for the position of either against the other. As a result, its decision, adopted at the fourth session, was vague. None of the theologians seemed ready to erase

all distinctions between these two kinds of writings. They also refused to define precisely wherein they differed. In practice the Roman church gradually came to recognize both sets of writings as of equal validity, dignity and authority. In 1870 the Vatican Council ended all uncertainty by declaring the apocrypha divine and canonical.

The Protestants with one accord returned to the Hebrew canon. The first to declare himself on this question was the theologian Carlstadt in 1520. He was soon followed by Luther, whose translation of the Bible into German appeared in 1524. In this edition the apocryphal writings were inserted after Malachi as books not to be accorded canonical dignity, although they might be read with profit. Calvin was in complete agreement with Luther on this point. He argued that they might rightly be called apocryphal, since they contained only private opinion and were no part of God's special revelation to his people. In this vein the *Consensus of Zurich* (1545) lists as canonical only those books found in the Hebrew Bible.

With this judgment all Protestant creeds agree. Yet the reading of these writings in the church for edification was allowed. This was a concession to the venerable practice in the churches to which the people had been accustomed. The basic principle however was clearly enunciated and defended. Gradually under Biblical preaching, which sharply distinguished between divine and purely human writings, the apocrypha fell into disfavor and disuse.

This issue was debated at the great Synod of Dordt (1618-1619), which arranged for an official translation of Scripture into the Dutch language. Many still favored the age-old custom of permitting the reading of these books in public worship. Especially Gomarus of Groningen and Deodatus of Geneva insisted that they should be eliminated. In support of their position they argued that these writings were purely human, had never been accorded a place in the Hebrew canon, and contained ideas and championed practices in direct conflict with the holy Scriptures. The agitation of the Remonstrants seems

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to have affected the final decision somewhat. These opponents of the Reformed faith argued that if the apocrypha might not be read in the churches since it was a purely human writing, then the *Heidelberg Catechism* also did not deserve this honor. The synod thereupon decided that the apocrypha should be published in the official edition of the Dutch Bible. However, these writings were to appear after the canonical writings, in small print, and with the warning that "because they are not canonical, they are not to be read publicly in the congregation." It seems strange that this same synod, which revised and thereupon officially adopted the *Confession*, did not eliminate from this sixth article the words *all which the church may read and take instruction from*.

Yet without equivocation the *Confession* adopted the position of Jerome and other scholars in the ancient church. These books may be read by and serve to instruct believers but only *so far as they agree with the canonical books*. On the main issue which had been debated with such fervor for centuries the *Confession* takes a clear position. *They are far from having such power and efficacy, as that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith, or of the Christian religion; much less detract from the authority of the other sacred books.*

Grounds for Rejecting the Apocrypha

This distinction between canonical and apocryphal writings was made by the church only after much deliberation and on the basis of sound principle. That Protestants were motivated in this chiefly by their opposition to certain Romish doctrines founded upon these books is groundless. Lutherans and Reformed are agreed on the reasons why these books must not be accorded a place in Holy Scripture.

First of all, nowhere do Jesus and the apostles ever quote from this material. Since this is true of a few canonical writings, this argument would have little weight except for the fact that several apocryphal writings are very long and mention salient events in Jewish history. Had these writings been regarded as divinely inspired by the New Testament writers, there would

have been ample opportunity and occasion to refer to their contents.

The chief objection raised by the reformers is that these writings never constituted part of the Hebrew canon. Even today they are not recognized as sacred by the Jews. This is of utmost significance for the Christian church, since Paul teaches that the Jews were by special providence "intrusted with the oracles of God." (Rom. 3:2) By divine guidance the Jews refused to accept them as inspired and authoritative. Therefore the church finds herself on solid ground in rejecting them.

These writings also contain teachings contrary to the doctrine of salvation taught in the Old Testament. In *Jesus Syrach* alms and prayers are represented as meritorious works. *Tobias* teaches an unbiblical conception of angels and demons. In *Second Maccabees* we read of a certain Judas who paid for prayers for the dead in order to effect their atonement. Nowhere are God's redeeming mercies in the promised Messiah exhibited, which is plainly the unifying message of the canonical books.

These writings further include many fabulous and historically inaccurate accounts. Its miracles are of an altogether different kind than those related in Scripture. *The Prayer of Manasseh* is so patently spurious, that even the Council of Trent refused to declare it canonical. In *Fourth Esdras* we are told that Ezra received within the space of forty days special revelations sufficient to fill more than two hundred volumes, a strange account quite at variance with what we know of God's dealings with him as declared in the canonical writings. In *Tobias* magical practices are mentioned with approval. *Baruch*, although evidencing a high type of piety nurtured by the Old Testament books, is historically not genuine.

Finally, the church calls attention to the fact that several of these writers openly disclaimed divine inspiration. This is stated in the prologue to *Ecclesiasticus* or *Jesus Syrach* and repeatedly mentioned by the writer of *First and Second Maccabees*. In the face of such incontrovertible evidence the position of Rome cannot be justified.

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The Contents of the Apocrypha

Fourteen of these writings are mentioned by name in our *Confession*. Many other pseudo-canonical writings were circulated among the Jews and early Christians. None of these, however, was ever regarded by the church as profitable for instruction in spiritual matters. Some were so puerile and inconsistent, that their spurious character was immediately and universally acknowledged. In our controversy with Rome, therefore, these do not require mention.

Since many Reformed believers are hardly aware of the existence of these fourteen writings, much less acquainted with their contents, it is necessary to review them briefly. Here we follow the order of the *Confession*, which is also that of the Septuagint. We should be reminded, however, that this ancient Greek version of the Old Testament inserts them at random among the canonical writings and not in a separate section.

Third Esdras describes the story of God's covenant people from the days of king Josiah to the return from exile. The influential role played by Ezra in reorganizing Jewish civil and ecclesiastical life is the dominant theme. Several sections are identical with what is found in the canonical writings of *Ezra*. Many of the additions are of very dubious value. Historical inaccuracies mars the account of Zerubbabel's return to Judah. The authorship and date of this writing are unknown.

Fourth Esdras is a religious treatise. In style it is similar to some of the prophetic writings. It purports to relate seven revelations given to Ezra, while he was in Babylon. The purpose of the book is to encourage the Jewish people in their sufferings by calling attention to God's providential care of his people. The doctrine of the resurrection is taught. There also seems to be a reference to Messiah's second coming. The first two chapters apparently are a much later addition. These justify God's rejection of the Jews and his acceptance of the Gentiles. Possibly this material was written by a Christian Jew.

The strange experiences of an exiled Jewish family are told in the book of *Tobias*. After a pious father loses his sight,

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his son is strangely helped by an angel of God on his travels. He escapes death by burning the inner part of a fish, the smoke of which puts a demon to flight. Thereupon the son cures his father's blindness by anointing the sightless eyes with the gall of the same magical fish. Strict observance of the moral code is stressed. This writing does not claim to record actual history. It seems to have been written about 300 B.C. Many in the ancient and medieval church were captivated by this tale. Its miracles seem so much more astounding than those recorded in the canonical writings.

Judith claims to be the story of a Jewish widow who in an unusual way was used by God to rescue her people from Holofernes, the head of a mighty Assyrian army. The story is replete with misstatements, anachronisms and geographical absurdities. Nebuchadnezzar, for example, is mentioned as the king of Nineveh. The book was written about 175 B.C. Possibly the story was suggested to its unknown author by the Biblical account of Jael and Sisera (Judg. 4:17-22), to which there are some striking parallels.

Wisdom, also called *The Wisdom of Solomon*, is an ethical treatise commending righteousness and denouncing iniquity. The folly of image worship is described in language reminiscent of the *Psalms* and *Isaiah*. The author writes in the person of Solomon. He mentions several incidents recorded in the books of Moses. It has been generally recognized that he was a man of religious genius and piety. In those times it was not considered improper for an author to impersonate a renowned teacher or leader in order to lend authority to his ideas. The date usually assigned to this treatise is about 100 B.C.

The book of *Jesus Syrach* is also called *Ecclesiasticus*. It was written in Hebrew and consists of some fifty one chapters. *Wisdom* is stressed in much the same way as in the canonical book of *Proverbs*. The author lived about 300 B.C.

Baruch claims to provide us with additions to Jeremiah's prophecies. The first part of this book was written in Hebrew. This section contains Israel's confession of her sins together with

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a prayer for forgiveness and restoration. The second section exhorts the readers to seek the fountain of all true wisdom. The third section offers promises of deliverance to all those who seek God. The last two sections were written in Greek about 100 B.C.

The *Appendix to Esther* is found in neither the Hebrew nor Chaldee languages. Usually its authorship is attributed to an Alexandrian Jew. It claims to continue the story of queen Esther. The material is skillfully interwoven in the canonical writings. It amplifies the history without adding anything of specific value. At a few points it seems to contradict the Biblical account. Yet the prayers are infused with a spirit of genuine piety and reverence for God.

The Song of the Three Children in the Fire has been inserted into canonical *Daniel* between chapter 3:23 and 3:24. The author and date are not known.

Another addition to the book of *Daniel* is *The History of Susannah*. The prophet is introduced as still a lad. Susannah, the wife of a prominent Jew in exile, is falsely accused of adultery and condemned to death. By his wisdom Daniel is able to save her.

The third addition to *Daniel* is called *Bel and the Dragon*. Here the prophet is said to prove to the king that his idol god, Bel, is not able to eat and drink the offerings set before him. What the king and his people actually worship is a fierce dragon, whom Daniel is able to kill by feeding him indigestible cakes. Thereupon the enraged people throw him into a den of lions. Here, however, he remains unharmed and is fed by the prophet Habakkuk. The author and date of this tale are unknown.

The Prayer of Manasseh claims to supplement the story of *Second Chronicles* 33. It expresses the remorse of a man under profound conviction of sin. The Latin translation in the Vulgate differs radically from the Old Latin version. Since its present form is so palpably spurious, even the Council of Trent dared not place it in the canon but included it as an appendix.

First Maccabees is an historical work of great value. It tells the story of the Jewish wars for independence. The heroes

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are five sons of the priest Mattathias (175-135 B.C.) who led the Jews in battle against the kings of Syria. The author evidently lived during or immediately after these stirring times. Although originally written in Hebrew, the book was soon translated into Greek for the Jews who lived in dispersion. A rigid Judaism is championed. One of the aims of this writing was to demonstrate the fulfillment of many of Daniel's prophecies.

Second Maccabees limits its concern with Jewish history to the period from Seleucus IV (175 B.C.) to the death of Nicanor (161 B.C.). As a historical writing it is far inferior to the first book. The fearful persecution of the people under Antiochus Epiphanes is described. Author and date are both unknown. It appeared some time after 125 B.C.

Once again we call attention to the inconsistency of the Roman Catholic church in its decisions on the apocryphal writings. Only eleven of these fourteen books are recognized as authentic and divinely inspired. Yet anathema is pronounced on anyone who differs from its judgment. This seems more than strange to anyone who knows that both Athanasius and Jerome rejected the apocryphal writings. Does Rome imply that these revered fathers of the early Christian church are accursed? Protestants are in good company and stand on solid and unassailable ground, when they refuse to accord the apocrypha the high honor which belongs to God's word alone.

1. How has the term apocrypha been used by the churches?
2. Sketch the two streams of opinion on the apocrypha in the ancient church.
3. On which grounds did some early fathers justify the use of the apocrypha in worship?
4. Show the inconsistency of both Seripando and the Council of Trent in their judgment of these writings.
5. Were the reformers guilty of introducing novel opinions into the church by their rejection of the apocrypha?
6. Was the Synod of Dordt inconsistent in its rulings on the apocrypha?
7. Which Roman Catholic doctrines seem to be justified by the apocrypha?
8. Wherein do the miracles in Scripture differ from those related in the apocrypha?
9. Of what value are these writings to us today?
10. Who were the Maccabees?
11. What was their contribution to Jewish life?
12. Describe the persecution of the Jews under Antiochus Epiphanes.

Chapter 7

The Sufficiency of the Scriptures

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: "nay, though it were an angel from heaven," as the apostle Paul says. For

since it is forbidden to "add unto or take away anything from the Word of God," it does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.

Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; "for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself." Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, which the apostles have taught us, saying, "Prove the spirits, whether they are of God." Likewise: "If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house."

ARTICLE VII

CERTAIN MINES in Cornwall, so we are told, seem to be inexhaustible. They have been worked for centuries without showing any signs of giving out. The deeper man has penetrated under the earth, the richer is the ore uncovered. Some of the lodes have been followed profitably for a thousand and or even fifteen hundred feet.

In a manner far more marvelous Scripture is inexhaustible for the believing church. Here we discover a mine of never-failing spiritual wealth, to use the words of Edwin Hodder:

*"Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine;
And jewels rich and rare
Are hidden in its mighty depths
For every searcher there."*

This follows from the essential nature of God's word. Reflecting its divine author this revelation is sufficient. All we need for salvation is fully and clearly revealed there. With this acknowledgement of the *Confession* climaxes its consideration of the doctrine of the Scriptures.

Scripture Versus Tradition

The opening statement of this article is plainly directed against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. *We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God.*

Since the days of Trent the fundamental differences between catholic and evangelical Christendom on this score have been accentuated. The former neither can nor will concur in the testimony which is dear to our hearts. On this score the decisions of Trent leave us in no doubt. Tradition is accorded a place of equal authority with God's word. By an overwhelming majority

that assembly declared that "following the example of the orthodox fathers, (the synod) receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence, all the books both of the Old (here the approved apocryphal writings are also included) and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church, by a continuous succession."¹ The doctrinal decrees of the Vatican Council (1870) reaffirm this position, "Further, this supernatural revelation, according to the universal belief of the Church, declared by the sacred Synod of Trent, is contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us . . ."²

We do well to inquire into the motive behind this unqualified endorsement of tradition by Rome. In it is reflected the almost unbounded veneration for the visible church as Christ's body which lies at the heart of Roman piety. Karl Adam, one of its outstanding apologists in modern times, has expressed this eloquently. Emphasizing that only through the living church do men come to Christ, he writes, "Therefore it was not literary records, incontestable documents, which were the primary means of bringing the message of Jesus to men, but the broad stream of the uniform life of faith of the primitive Church, a life based on the preaching of the apostles and animated by the Holy Spirit. How could it have been otherwise? A living thing, in all its depth and in all its extent, cannot be comprised within a few written sentences. Only that which is dead can be adequately delineated in writing."³ Although confessing the New Testament as the unique document of faith, he exposes what he considers to be the limitations of these sacred writings, "For the Gospels present us with only a fragmentary record of Jesus, from which it is impossible to construct an exhaustive picture. And so I learn the complete Christ, not from the Bible, but from the uniform life of faith of the whole Church, a life fertilized by the teaching of the apostles. Without the living, uniform tradition of the Church, essential elements in the picture of Christ would remain either enigmatical or hidden from me."⁴

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In unmistakable language the insufficiency of the Scriptures for our lives as believers is unabashedly stated. No Protestant should be misled by all the fine things which Rome says from time to time about the Bible. To suppose that the differences between catholic and evangelical Christianity on this point are inconsequential betrays a grave ignorance.

Because Rome makes the audacious claim that in honoring tradition equally with Scripture she is faithful to the conviction of the early church, we should review what the church fathers had to say on this point.

The sharp distinction between tradition and Scripture, made in the days of the Reformation, was not clearly made in earliest times. Sometimes in the writings of the same theologian we find what seem to be contrary and contradictory views. Yet the position of "sola Scriptura" was presented and defended just as vigorously as that of Scripture plus tradition.

Ireanaeus in his third book *Against Heresies* taught, "We have learned from none others the plan of salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."⁶ In his polemic against Hermogenes who held that matter was eternal, Tertullian argued, "In the beginning God created the heaven and earth. I reverence the depth of Scripture, in which is revealed to me the Creator and his work . . . Let the school of Hermogenes demonstrate where Scripture mentions this (his erroneous view), and if it does not appear in Scripture, let him fear the curse which comes upon those, who add or detract from it." Origen testified that faith in Christ's deity was grounded in the Scriptures, since all human opinions and views apart from the word of God are untrustworthy. That Scripture alone was the source of tradition is claimed by Cyprian, who made tradition dependent on the judgment of God's word. Jerome in his commentary on *Haggai* argued that in settling matters of faith we must look to the witness of Holy Writ. In unmistakable language Augustine, the greatest of all church fathers, defended the sufficiency of the

Scriptures. Although Christ spoke and wrought much more than has been recorded, he contended that the written word is sufficient for our salvation. The Bible must be recognized as the sole fountain of our faith. No human opinions or books may be accorded equal honor with the canonical writings. The same position was taken by John of Damascus (730) in his summary of orthodox doctrine. All things contained in the law and the prophets, the apostles and evangelists must be revered as coming to us from God. No one ought to seek or preach or confess anything concerning God which is not declared in the holy oracles of the Old and New Testament. These examples from the church fathers can be multiplied many times.

But did not the early fathers speak in much the same vein about tradition? Here we must distinguish carefully. Often when speaking of tradition, they refer to usages and practices derived from apostolic times. Among such customs were kneeling towards the east, blessing the water used in baptism, and anointing with oil. Authority for their doctrinal teachings they find in Scripture alone. In their controversies with heretics both Greek and Latin fathers appealed consistently to the Bible. Many of their doctrinal formulations were called tradition by the church as the years passed. To this tradition Rome repeatedly appeals, when it seeks to formulate its positions.

To many teachings of the church fathers we accord high esteem. We acknowledge that the ancient church experienced the Spirit's guidance in preserving and defending the faith. The numerous quotations from the fathers in Calvin's writings attest to this. The reformers were no iconoclasts who dismissed the lessons which the church had learned through her long and painful history. They felt drawn to the holy company of believers of all ages. But this was not the matter in dispute between Rome and them. The question was, rather, whether any or all the teachings of these fathers should be accorded equal honor with God's word as authoritative sources for Christian doctrines and morals. To this question all Protestants replied with a resounding No!

Not Protestantism but Roman Catholicism has deviated

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from the sound path, which with a large degree of consistency had been followed by the early fathers. Together with the overwhelming majority of them we confess *that the Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God*. By that word alone the church lives. From pious scholars in the past we may receive wise and good counsel. Many of their formulations accurately reflect the doctrine of the Bible and thus mark off the true faith from heresy and error. But all their writings must be subjected to the scrutiny of the Scriptures, which alone are fully qualified to regulate, establish and confirm our faith in God.

The Divine Purpose of Scripture

The Bible is the book of redemption. It tells the story of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. Therein lies its uniqueness, for *whatsoever a man ought to believe unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein*.

Against several errors the *Confession* militates at this point.

We believe that God reveals not only truth in general but also specific truths in his sacred word. The Bible must be confessed as the book of divine truth, but this truth comes to us in the form of propositions, truths to be accepted by all who rejoice in Christ. Its doctrine is according to godliness, so that the experience of our hearts and the pattern of our lives must rest upon and reflect its instruction. Without this specific knowledge of God and spiritual things we cannot be saved.

Such true knowledge of God's will is inextricably interwoven with his mighty deeds for our salvation in history. Therefore an assured faith acknowledges the historical accuracy of the Scriptures. If the Bible is not a true and trustworthy account of God's deeds, on what substantial grounds can we argue that it is a dependable record of his will for our lives? This does not commit us, as both the older liberals and the neo-orthodox would argue, to the position that God's word is a textbook for ancient history, geography and culture. Orthodox Christianity has never looked upon the Bible in this way. But what it does

confess is that the Bible in speaking on these matters is accurate and authoritative.

In declaring God's will for man's salvation, these Scriptures reveal an organic unity. They are not a loose collection of religious writings haphazardly assembled and arranged by men. Faith finds in the Bible a well-articulated and well-arranged body of divine truth, from which nothing may be removed and to which nothing may be added. Even the barrage of critical attacks has served to strengthen the church's conviction of the Bible's unity and integrity. Amid all the differences of authorship, style and contents there is reflected a most unusual unity of message and purpose, which proclaims the Bible to be the work of God.

B. B. Warfield in *Revelation and Inspiration* states the case of the organic unity of Scripture well. "The parts are so linked together that the absence of any one book would introduce confusion and disorder. The same doctrine is taught from beginning to end, running like a golden thread through the whole and stringing book after book upon itself like so many pearls. Each book, indeed, adds something in clearness, definition, and even increment, to what the others proclaim; but the development is orderly and constantly progressive . . . But just see where this lands us. Unless we are prepared to allow to a man some fifteen hundred years of conscious existence and intellectual supervision of the work, we are shut up here to the admission of a superhuman origin for this book. It is difficult to see how this argument can really be escaped."⁶

Herein the Christian Scriptures differ widely from the writings of other religions. Nowhere do we find such great diversity within such a compact and clear unity. This compels us either to accept or reject its uniform testimony. No compromise on this issue is legitimate or possible.

Because the confessing church believes that divine redemption is sufficiently revealed in this book, we turn humbly and reverently to its sacred pages. We accept its mysteries, because God has revealed them. As a whole and in all its parts the Bible

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is truth for God's children. In this commitment our minds and hearts find rest amid the conflicting babel of human opinion. Because God's word cannot be broken, it is a sure anchor for our souls.

Scripture and Our Worship

The Bible tells the story of our salvation through Jesus Christ. Wherein this consists is defined by our Lord, "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." (John 17:3)

Our knowledge of the God of our salvation expresses itself in true worship. This is worship "in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers." (John 4:23) In worshipful response to him we experience and enjoy all the blessings which he promises in his word. Worship is the chief expression of the Christian religion.

Controversies concerning the proper mode of worship have agitated the church for centuries. A crisis was reached in the days of the Reformation. At that time superstitions and perversions abounded in the Roman Catholic church. The reformers argued that these practices flagrantly contradicted the truth of God's word. Calvin inveighed repeatedly not only against the use of images and pictures but also against many of the ceremonies imposed upon the Christian conscience by the church. This opposition rooted in certain basic convictions. Not only must God alone be worshipped; he must be worshipped in accordance with his revealed will. True and acceptable service is grounded in the Bible.

In their efforts to reform Christian worship Luther, Calvin and their disciples appealed to the Scriptures. These were normative for the church and her religious observances. The basic principles for worship they found in the Decalogue, especially in the commandments of the first table. All idolatry and image worship were strictly prohibited. Reverence for his name and the prescribed day of rest were specifically enjoined. (Ex. 20:3-11) Often the reformers appealed to God's judgments upon

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Israel for following its own ill-conceived ideas and imitating the nations around them. That nothing might be added to or detracted from his rules was evident from God's declaration, "What thing soever I command you, that shall ye observe to do: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it." (Deut. 12:32) The test for acceptable worship they found in the words of Isaiah. "To the law and to the testimony! if they speak not according to this word, surely there is no morning for them." (Isa. 8:20)

The Christian church was forbidden to reinstate the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament which had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Simplicity and sobriety were demanded instead. True worship was to be spiritual, accompanied by a minimum of external forms since the realities prefigured by the Old Testament types were heavenly. The perfect sacrifice had been offered on Calvary. The highpriest was now in heaven ever making intercession for his own. Anything which would obscure the ever-present and effective ministry of Christ and draw men's attention from heaven to the things of earth was contraband. Yet this emphasis on the spiritual and heavenly nature of Christian worship did not allow the church to do as it pleased.

The New Testament contains many abiding principles for acceptable Christian worship. Chief among these is the requirement of a sincere and believing heart. Our Lord excoriated the pretense of the Pharisees by saying, "Ye hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men." (Matt. 14:7-9) Repeatedly Paul denounced those who confused spiritual worship with external observances. Christian piety may not be judged by feast-days and food, "which are a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ's." (Col. 2:8) All asceticism, veneration of angels and carnal ordinances concerning purifications and special fasts were also condemned. Of them the apostle said, "which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body, but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh."

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(Col. 2:23) Reintroduction of Old Testament ceremonies, making their observance binding upon the believers, was summarily rejected as incompatible with the spiritual liberty of Christ's church. (Gal. 5:1)

Upon such solid argumentation the reformers rejected the worship of the Roman church as superstitious, idolatrous and detrimental to true religion. The problem of ceremonies was for them no minor matter. That the church was authorized to regulate worship for the believers they recognized as proper to her essential nature as "pillar and ground of the truth." Without this there could be no profitable "assembling together." (Hebr. 10:25) But in arranging for public worship and instructing the believers in their duties towards God, the church was under obligation to remain true to Scripture. Also here God's word sufficiently declares unto man his will. The church may never try to be wiser than God.

This conviction comes to clear expression in the *Confession* which declares: *For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures; nay though it were an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul says.*

Today Protestantism is experiencing a renewed emphasis on liturgy, ceremony and adornment in public worship. Many plead for a return to some of the practices of the ancient church. With some of these emphases the reformers possibly would agree. The orders of divine service which they drew up for the churches were not disorganized and barren. Yet the church should take to heart their teaching that all forms of Christian worship must find their justification in New Testament teaching. The leading principle, enunciated by our Lord, remains binding upon the church of all ages, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

Scripture and the Writings of Men

Another problem which faced the early Protestants was that of the relation of the Bible to the writings of men and

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decisions of the church on questions of faith and morals. The Reformed churches have always held in high esteem what godly men and councils have declared. Not for a moment would they obscure or deny their fellowship in the Spirit with those who were Christ's in the past. But none of their writings or decisions may ever be placed on a level with God's word.

To a remarkable degree Christians are people of the one book.

This does not imply that the reading and writing of other books may be neglected. Christianity has always been the mother of good learning. Repeatedly the church urges her members to "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." (I Thess. 5:21) Living by God's word she produces writings in abundance to strengthen the faith of her children and to witness everywhere to the saving work of God in Christ. In Scripture we also find ample warrant for church councils, assembled under the Spirit's guidance to deliberate and decide upon sound doctrine and good morals. (Acts 15:6f) Through them God guides and governs his people in this life. But never may their decisions be equated with the authority of Scripture. Thus we affirm: *Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all.*

Upon all believers this imposes both responsibility and privilege.

No man or church may ever judge another's conscience. (I Cor. 10:29) This must be judged by himself in the light of God's word. Many appeal to this New Testament teaching to justify their right to hold whatever opinions they please on Christian doctrine and conduct within Christ's church. Such unrestrained liberty is nowhere defended in the Bible. All believers are bound by the Scriptures. The church has received authority to judge their confession and conduct. To this end

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Christ has conferred upon her the keys of the kingdom of heaven. When anyone teaches false doctrine or leads an ungodly or immoral life, the exercise of church discipline becomes imperative. In such actions the church does not judge the heart. This clarifies the spiritual responsibilities of believers to God's truth. By the illumination of the Holy Spirit they should evaluate all human writings and traditions, together with the decrees and decisions of church councils, in the light of God's all-sufficient word.

The cause of evangelical Christianity is seriously weakened, because many today no longer know how to live by the Scriptures. Frequently they accept what some scholar or council has declared without ascertaining its validity in the light of the word. The knowledge of divine truth has fallen to a new low. True and false doctrine seem to dwell amicably together under many a church roof. This is a far cry from the Biblical requirement of a "holy intolerance" of all error on the part of those who love Christ with a love incorruptible. If we believe that *the truth is above all*, we will heed John's exhortation, "Who-soever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works." (II John 9-11)

The Roman Catholic Church professes to provide divine guidance for her members. She demands recognition as the infallible interpreter of the Scriptures. Any official decision on doctrine and morals must be accepted as final. The responsibility of her members is limited to acquiescing in and abiding by her judgment. Here the authority of the church is openly acknowledged as superior to the Scriptures. But evidence that Christ so instituted the teaching ministry of the church is plainly lacking. This arrogation of absolute spiritual authority is contrary to the Bible and detrimental to the welfare of the church.

To be sure, no believer can with impunity despise the

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authority of the church in matters of faith and life. Yet every decision must be subjected by the believing mind and heart to the test of Scripture. Thus the church in her official pronouncements also is bound. She ought never say anything less than the Bible does. Neither is she authorized to say anything more, lest she fall into the grievous error of attempting to be wiser than God whose will is *sufficiently taught* in his holy word.

The Infallibility of Scripture

As long as he lives on earth, the Christian recognizes his need of reliable guidance in the knowledge, worship and service of the only true God. This the Bible amply provides. So complete and comprehensive is its doctrine, that we acknowledge it as sufficient for our spiritual needs. Such a confession includes and implies the recognition of its infallibility. For, if the Bible is not inerrant, it cannot be considered dependable. And if it is not dependable, it must be judged insufficient for our needs. The *Confession* therefore does not hesitate to speak of it as *this infallible rule*.

So plain is this term, that all misunderstanding would seem to be ruled out at once. The word designates that which is without error and fallacy. That the *Confession* applies this to every part of God's word is explicitly affirmed in the words that *against* these holy Scriptures *nothing can be alleged*.

Possibly much misunderstanding has been occasioned by those scholars who have improperly attempted to force modern rules of interpretation and criticism upon the Biblical writers. They require that the language of the prophets and apostles shall conform in every detail to scientific terminology. They would argue for the fallibility of the Scriptures by insisting on a crass literalism which plainly distorts the intent of the authors. On such a basis, of course, the description of the Biblical historian that Solomon "made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones" appears untrue. (I Kgs. 10:27) Nor by such an interpretation can the statement be deemed accurate that Caesar Augustus issued a decree that "all the world should be enrolled." (Luke 2:1)

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The Bible, as a holy book written by men for men, abounds in popular forms of speech. Yet these do not detract in the least from the accuracy, the inerrancy of what is therein revealed to us. By speaking in simple language God demonstrates with what gracious concern he was moved to make known to men the message of salvation in Christ. If we have due regard for this, we find no difficulty in confessing our faith in an infallible word of God. Many of the numbers mentioned in the Old Testament are approximations: When Job describes leviathan, he does not give a scientific description of some form of animal life. Although the accounts of events, persons and doctrines are reliable, they never claim to be exhaustive. We find three records of the healing of the blind by Jesus at Jericho. (Matt. 20:29f.; Mk. 10:46; Luke 18:35f) In certain details these stories differ, but this does not permit us to say that there are contradictions in Scripture. The differences can well be harmonized and explained without in any way attacking the integrity and accuracy of God's word. Such attempts at harmonization are far more honest in dealing with the Scriptures, which clearly affirm their own truth, than the methods employed by the critics.

That problems of understanding and interpretation remain ought to be cheerfully admitted. God does not seek to satisfy our curiosity on many points. He has revealed to us all that is necessary for our salvation. Therefore he inspired the human authors to work selectively with the materials with which he provided them. When we recognize this, we find little difficulty in confessing that not merely some but every part of God's word is without error.

For several years the matter of the authority and infallibility of the Scriptures received serious attention at the Reformed Ecumenical Synods. A comprehensive report was presented to and adopted by such a synod in 1958. Its declarations were endorsed by the Christian Reformed Church in 1959 as the expression of its faith in the word of God. These summarize what has been commonly confessed by the churches and offer a wholesome corrective to the many low opinions of God's writ-

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ten word which are current in our day. Because of their value they are reproduced here.

- a. The doctrine of inspiration (to which the Christian Reformed Church holds) is to the effect that Holy Scripture alone and Holy Scripture in its entirety is the Word of God written, given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and practice, and inspiration of an organic nature which extends not only to the ideas but also to the words of Holy Scripture, and is so unique that Holy Scripture alone is the Word of God.
- b. This doctrine of inspiration, while holding that the human authors of Scripture were moved by the Holy Spirit so as to insure that what they wrote communicated infallibly God's self-revelation, also maintains that the Holy Spirit did not suppress their personalities, but rather that he sovereignly prepared, controlled, and directed them in such a way that he utilized their endowments and experiences, their research and reflection, their language and style. This human aspect of Scripture does not, however, allow for the inference that Scripture may be regarded as a fallible human witness to divine revelation, for such an evaluation constitutes an attack upon the glorious sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in inspiration.
- c. This estimate of Scripture is the demand arising from the witness which Scripture itself bears to its divine origin, character, and authority. More particularly it is demanded by the witness of our Lord and his apostles, and to entertain a different estimate is to reject the testimony of Christ and of the apostles.
- d. This doctrine of Scripture must not be regarded as a dispensable addendum, far less as a merely human accretion, to our Christian faith. Holy Scripture is the only extant form of redemptive revelation. Faith in Scripture as God-breathed revelatory Word is implicit

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in our faith in the divine character of redemption itself.

- e. These considerations that Scripture persuasively witnesses to its own God-breathed origin and character and that as redemptive revelation it is necessarily characterized by the divinity which belongs to redemption are the explanation of the sustained faith of the historic Christian church that Scripture in its whole extent and in all its parts is the infallible and inerrant Word of God.
- f. To this faith as it is clearly expressed in the creeds of the Reformed churches the Christian Reformed Church bears witness and on the basis of this doctrine of Scripture seeks to testify to the whole counsel of God in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace."⁷

1. What is Roman Catholic teaching on tradition? 2. How is this justification of tradition as divine and authoritative related to that church's view of the church? 3. Evaluate Karl Adam's position on the value of the gospels. 4. How did the early fathers speak of tradition? 5. What is the Reformed position on the value of tradition for the church today? 6. How much Scriptural truth must be known for salvation? 7. What is involved in the Reformed view of the organic unity of Scripture? 8. Are some Bible books of less value for us than others? 9. What is the nature of Christian worship? 10. Which fundamental principles govern true worship? 11. Why and wherein does Christian worship differ from that of the Old Testament? 12. How must the principle of spiritual liberty in the New Testament church be applied to worship? 13. On which grounds do we justify the binding authority of church councils? 14. Are believers free to accept or reject the decisions of synods and councils? Explain. 15. Which limits does the Bible impose on such councils? 16. What is meant by conscience? In how far may it guide the believer? 17. Demonstrate the unfairness of various criticisms of Biblical infallibility. 18. How binding are the decisions of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod on Scripture?



Chapter 8

The Doctrine of the Trinity

According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is the one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is the cause, origin, and beginning of all things visible and invisible; the Son is the word, wisdom, and image of the Father; the Holy Spirit is the

eternal power and might, proceeding from the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, God is not by this distinction divided into three, since the Holy Scriptures teach us that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit have each His personality, distinguished by Their properties; but in such wise that these three persons are but one only God.

Hence, then, it is evident that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father, and likewise the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. Nevertheless, these persons thus distinguished are not divided, nor intermixed; for the Father has not assumed the flesh, nor has the Holy Spirit, but the Son only. The Father has never been without His Son, or without His Holy Spirit. For They are all three co-eternal and co-essential. There is neither first nor last; for They are all three one, in truth, in power in goodness, and in mercy.

ARTICLE VIII

THE FOUNDATIONS of the Christian faith have been laid.

We declared our faith in the one, only, true God who is the overflowing fountain of all good. Not resting our case in human reason or experience, we with the believing church of every age bow before the Holy Scriptures. By these means we attain to a saving knowledge of him who is our true life. Its doctrines are for us a source of wonder and delight.

Now the *Confession* attempts to set forth these teachings simply and soberly. In these "things most surely believed" we feel the pulse beat of the Christian faith. Beginning with that which is most basic, we turn to the doctrine of the Trinity. Four articles are devoted to this subject.

The Proper Approach to the Trinity

In an anti-doctrinal and anti-intellectual age these articles of our Christian faith are far from popular. In the past they occasioned wide-spread debate. Today they are usually neglected with a happy exception in the theology of Barth and his disciples, or scorned. Characteristically, this essential doctrine has been ridiculed as a theological subtlety with no significance for life. It is rejected as an abstract and specious speculation which does violence to the simplicity of the Scriptures. Such sectarians as the Jehovah's Witnesses inveigh against the Trinity in language echoing the arguments of heretics long since dead and forgotten, while professing to be loyal to the Bible. The orthodox possibly should bear a large share of blame for the present situation; not so much because they have affirmed this doctrine, but because they have failed to recognize and confess its unique value for faith and life.

In his discussion of the Trinity John Calvin called attention to this at the outset. After commenting on the attributes of

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God, he wrote: "But he (i.e. God) also designates himself by another peculiar character, by which he may be yet more clearly distinguished; for while he declares himself to be but One, he proposes himself to be distinctly considered in Three Persons, without apprehending which, we have only a bare and empty name of God floating in our brains, without any idea of the true God."¹ The spiritual sickness of our age has in no small measure been caused by its vagueness concerning God. People are perishing for want of true and specific knowledge of God. Already earlier Calvin signalized the relation between such knowledge and piety. "By the knowledge of God, I intend not merely a notion that there is such a Being, but also an acquaintance with whatever we ought to know concerning Him, conducing to his glory and our benefit. For we cannot with propriety say, there is any knowledge of God where there is no religion or piety."² In order that believers may have a true understanding of the God whom they worship, he aimed at providing "a short and easy definition which will preserve us from all error."

This attempt led Calvin, as it did so many of the theologians before and since, to a discussion of basic terms. The use of these by the church and her theologians has been frequently ridiculed and rejected. To many such terms merely becloud the issue and befog the minds of believers. As for himself, Calvin affirmed that he would be content if men would affirm their faith in one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; each distinguished from the others by some peculiar personal property. He was not fond of contending for such precise terms, as *essence* and *person*, *substance* and *subsistence*, *ousia* and *hypostasis*, so long as the Christian confession reflected the Spirit's teaching in the Scriptures. Yet he felt constrained to employ them. Heretics have made their use by the church mandatory. They have compelled believers to define more precisely, within the smallest possible compass, the true doctrine of God. Nor will these terms obscure the teaching of the Bible, if certain precautions are taken. These Calvin stated explicitly. "But there is a proper medium to be observed; we should seek in the Scriptures a certain rule, both for thinking and for speaking; by which we may regulate all

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the thoughts of our mind, and all the words of our mouth. But what forbids our expressing, in plainer words, those things which, in the Scriptures, are, to our understanding, intricate and obscure, provided our expressions religiously and faithfully conveyed the true sense of the Scriptures, and are used with modest caution, and not without sufficient occasion?"⁸ To refuse their use, when we lack better terminology, is to reject the work of the Holy Spirit who has led the church of all ages into the truth.

The *Confession*, which owes much to Calvin, uses these terms in the interests of the believing church. No attempt is made to make simple doctrine abstruse, intricate and profound. Rather, by means of their use the profoundest mystery of the Christian faith is safeguarded from error and confusion. By insuring us against the idolatry of making God after our own image, they serve a most admirable and advantageous purpose. The very elusiveness and inadequacy of all these terms, which the church has always admitted, declare that we are dealing with a mystery too profound for man's mind to analyze and comprehend fully.

Our age of specialization requires a specialized vocabulary for almost every vocation and task known to man. How strange that men still seem to resent the use of terms uniquely appropriate to the most basic of all human vocations, that of knowing and serving the living God. Do they suppose that true faith can be or even should be exhaustively expressed by the vocabulary of a six year old child?

As we study this statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, we should rather be surprised at its simplicity and sobriety. Unfamiliar terms are employed, but the formulation of the doctrine is short. The aim, consistently carried out in harmony with Calvin's express wish, is to speak for and in the name of the confessing church, thus communicating the true doctrine effectively to even the humblest soul who seeks to know God. Here the church is witnessing in the world to the God whom she has learned to love and serve.

The Essential Nature of the Trinity

Christianity's most distinctive doctrine is that of the Trinity. It is foundational to the whole realm of revealed truth. When obscured or rejected, the whole structure of Christian faith and life is warped. No one knows God in the fulness of his divine works as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, unless he recognizes God as triune.

Here we stand on the boundary between truth and error. What we believe and what we do is determined, consciously or unconsciously, by what we believe about the true God. Not for the sake of safeguarding some intellectual formulation but for her own salvation the church has always safeguarded the doctrine of the Trinity.

The form in which this article is cast beautifully reproduces the teachings of John Calvin. This is most appropriate, since he is widely recognized by Christian scholars as having expounded this doctrine more adequately and definitively than any other theologian. He attempted to reproduce accurately what the church of all ages had confessed about this mystery. On this score there was no conflict between himself and his followers and what the Roman and Greek churches confessed. Yet he made a unique contribution. In his formulation all traces of subordinationism, which tends to degrade the second and third persons of the Trinity to a level lower than that of the first, are effectively erased. This Calvin succeeded in doing by stressing that all three persons inherently possess the one divine essence. Not the essence but only the personal properties are communicated. Thus both the unity of the Godhead and the trinity of persons are consistently confessed.

The church in her confession of this profound mystery begins with God's unity. Repeatedly this is affirmed. Of this basic aspect of God's being the believer must always be aware, lest he fall into tritheism (belief in three Gods)—an error of which Christianity has been so repeatedly accused by Jews, Moslems and heretics. There is *one only God, who is the one single essence*. His being is not only unique; it is indivisible. Whatever

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personal distinctions may and must be made, these in no wise may obscure the unity of God. The three persons are not offered shares in the divine essence, for this is *one*. The fulness of the divine life and attributes is exhaustively found within each of the three distinct persons. The Father is no more divine and eternal than either the Son or the Spirit.

Within the life of the one true God, there are the three distinct persons, three self-conscious and equally eternal hypostases or subsistences. At this point the church wrestles with the limitations of human language in her attempt to formulate as clearly and consistently as possible her faith in God. When all has been said that may and can be said in the light of Scripture, the church admits that the mystery of God's being remains. There are no three individuals within the Godhead; only three individualities most intimately and indissolubly related to each other. And yet because the Scriptures teach that these three are eternally distinct, they must be so distinguished by us in reflecting upon and speaking about God. Therefore the acknowledgement of mystery gives no warrant or excuse for refusing to talk about the Trinity.

To make this teaching somewhat more intelligible, certain church fathers and especially Augustine have referred to analogies or comparisons to the Trinity found within God's creation. These are of little value in convincing unbelievers. Yet for all who confess that this world was created by the triune God such analogies afford assurance that the doctrine of the Trinity is not contrary to reason. Evidences for God's triune existence, faint and limited as they are, we find reflected everywhere in this world which reveals the excellencies of its creator. Man's soul expresses itself in three activities: the intellectual, the volitional and the emotional life. According to the Bible, God created man in his own image, endowed with true knowledge, righteousness and holiness. Matter exists in three forms: as gasses, liquids and solids. We experience time in three dimensions: the past, the present and the future. The man of the street speaks of three kingdoms or orders in this world: the mineral, the plant and the animal. The rainbow is dominated

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by three primary colors: red, yellow and blue. In all creation, which is an elegant book written by its divine maker, we see reflected something of the infinite and incomparable glory of the triune God. Although faith in the Trinity never rests on human reflection and reason, this doctrine in no sense contradicts our reason.

We need not fear the jibes of unbelievers, who have attempted to ridicule this precious teaching as absurd. They betray their gross ignorance of and blatant indifference to what the church of all ages has said in carefully formulated language. No believer by testifying to faith in the Trinity endorses the mathematical absurdity that three is one and one is three. This charge we repudiate with the words of Peter, "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (II Peter 1:16) Quoting that apostle again the church warns all who regard the doctrine of the Trinity as expendable, "And we have the word of prophecy made more sure, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts." (II Peter 1:19)

The Incommunicable Personal Properties

In order to explain the doctrine of the Trinity somewhat more fully, we must resort again to terms little known and used by the common man.

Because the Scriptures speak of God as existing in three persons, we confess our faith in him as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The distinction made by these names in no way involves the essence of the Godhead. It concerns rather the three personal subsistences within the one indivisible divine nature. Each of the three persons possesses an attribute or quality or property uniquely his own. This property is, therefore, called *incommunicable* by the church, since it is never bestowed upon or shared by the other divine persons. But these properties, as well as the divine essence, are eternal. They may not be construed as an after-thought, a later development within the being of God, since God is unchangeable.

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What is at stake in this Christian confession is essential to man's salvation. We are not indulging in an idle dispute, a vain discussion of words concerning a mystery into which man is forbidden to pry. For if God had been pleased merely with the recognition of his divine being, he would not have so consistently and continually spoken of himself as Father, Son and Spirit in his word. Nor is the frequent use of these personal names a concession to our understanding. Therein God displays the uniqueness of his eternal and immutable being. By his revelation of these personal names we are assured of both the oneness and the many-sidedness of his saving revelation in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. He requires of us in his word that the personal distinctions be carefully noted and clearly confessed. In so doing we engage in humble and hearty adoration of him who is our salvation.

The first person of the Trinity we confess as *the Father* who is *the cause, origin and beginning of all things visible and invisible*. Although often misrepresented by the liberals, the doctrine of God's fatherhood is both Scriptural and comforting to believers. The Bible uses the name in four ways. God is the eternal Father of the Son. This is the original fatherhood, of which earthly parenthood is but a faint and imperfect reflection. We do not apply this name to God by way of concession. Neither is it the result of man's religious ideas and ideals. This eternal fatherhood of God is clearly taught in the Bible. "I will tell of the decree: Jehovah said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee." (Ps. 2:7) In prophesying the birth of our Savior, Micah mentioned the eternal generation of the Son, "whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." (Mic. 5:2)

It is also revealed in the works of God, so that we may rightly speak of him as the father of all creatures. All things find their cause, origin and beginning in him. "Yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him." (I Cor. 8:6a)

The name is further used to describe the special theocratic relationship of God to the people of Israel. They were his chil-

dren. "Do ye thus require Jehovah, o foolish people and unwise?" Moses complained. "Is he not thy father that hath bought thee? He hath made thee and established thee." (Deut. 32:6) In the New Testament God is spoken of as the father of all believers in Christ. Speaking to his followers Jesus said, "Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 5:44, 45a) The apostle John wrote, "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God; and such we are. For this cause the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not." (I John 3:1, 2)

The peculiar personal property of the Father is that he is unbegotten. As the unbegotten he begets or generates the Son and together with the Son spirates the Holy Spirit.

The second person is the Son who also possesses a property peculiar to himself. This is made known to us in the three names by which he is called in the *Confession*. He is the *word* by virtue of his intimate relationship to the Father whom he fully and savingly reveals. He is the *wisdom* or personal and effective manifestation of God in all his works. He is *the image of the Father*, the very likeness of the essence and glory of God. We read of the Son as the eternal and personal word in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In one epistle he is called "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation," (Col. 1:15). In another he is designated as "the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance." (Heb. 1:3) Therefore we confess him as the eternal and only-begotten Son of God. Sharing fully in the same divine essence as the Father, the Son is in no sense subordinate to him as God. "For as the Father hath life in himself, even so gave he to the Son also to have life in himself." (John 5:26)

The Holy Spirit is distinguished but never divorced from the Father and the Son.

Of him we confess that he is *the power and might*, whose special task is to bring to completion all the plans and purposes

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of the triune God. He does this by acting directly upon and within every creature. The Greek churches have refused to acknowledge that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, defending the position that he proceeds from the Father alone. By this rejection they have endangered the unity of God and opened the door to a subordination of the second and third persons of the Trinity to the first.

Although the testimonies of Scripture to the Holy Spirit seem fewer and somewhat less clear than those which speak of the Father and the Son, they are sufficient to enable us to speak adequately about his works. Several are explicitly mentioned. To him is ascribed the inception or beginning of all life. "And the Spirit of God moved upon (was brooding upon) the face of the waters." (Gen. 1:2b) He also inspires and qualifies men for their work. Thus God addresses Moses, "And thou shalt speak unto all that are wisehearted, whom I have filled with the Spirit of wisdom, that they make Aaron's garments to sanctify him, that he may minister to me in the priest's office." (Ex. 28:3) The "Spirit of Jehovah" also came mightily upon Saul, when the men of Jabesh Gilead were outraged by the Ammonites. (I Sam. 11:6f) To the Spirit is ascribed the preparation and qualification of Christ's human nature for the work of redemption. Of this we are reminded by Luke, who wrote that "the Holy Spirit descended in a bodily form, as a dove, upon him." (Luke 3:22) The third person plays a tremendous role in the inspiration of the Bible, since its message came "not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; combining spiritual things with spiritual words." (I Cor. 2:13) Especially significant and far-reaching is his work in and for Christ's church. All true believers receive from him the grace of regeneration or spiritual rebirth. (John 3:3) He is the constitutive principle of the church's life, uniting all believers as "elect . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit." (I Peter 1:2a) The gifts by which the church lives and functions in this world come from him. "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit

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to profit withal." (I Cor. 12:4, 7) Throughout the ages the church is guided into all truth by this Spirit. "But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you." (John 14:26)

These personal distinctions, so clearly and consistently set forth in Scripture, must be duly honored. Without them we are left with only the bare name of God, devoid of any real content. Yet these distinctions may never imperil our confession of the divine unity. The Lord our God is one God. All three persons are equally divine. All possess the fulness of the divine being and attributes. None is dependent upon either of the other persons, although none ever exists apart from the others. Therefore we acknowledge, *There is neither first nor last; for they are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and mercy.*

All this in no wise unravels the mystery of the holy Trinity. Here we bow in adoration and praise God with the church of all ages.

*"To the great One in Three
Eternal praises be
Hence, evermore!
His sovereign majesty
May we in glory see,
And to eternity
Love and adore!"*

Such adoration reflects rather than cancels out our calling. In confessing the only true God, we may never say more than God has revealed to us. Neither may we content ourselves with anything less. Within these limits imposed by divine truth our worship and service of God must be content to move. Bound by the universal testimony of the believing church, we enjoy the assurance that this God whom we so adore communicates himself to us as Father in Christ Jesus through the power and might of the Holy Spirit. That and that alone is our salvation.

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1. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity basic to the Christian faith?
2. Why was the church compelled to use precise terms in defining this doctrine?
3. Which dangers are inherent in the use of scientific theological terms?
4. Can consistent anti-Trinitarians be saved?
5. What is meant by subordinationism? What compelled the church to reject it officially?
6. Is it proper to find analogies to the Trinity in creation? Explain.
7. Why is it mandatory to affirm personal distinctions within the Godhead?
8. Wherein does Christian faith in God the Father differ from faith in God as first cause or unmoved mover?
9. What is meant by the Son as the word of the Father?
10. What practical implications does this have for the believer's life?
11. In what sense is the Spirit the power and might of God?
12. Why is Old Testament teaching on the Spirit less specific than New Testament?
13. Which works does the Spirit perform in and on behalf of the church?
14. What is tritheism? Is the church in danger of succumbing to it?



Chapter 9

Evidences for the Trinity

All this we know as well from the testimonies of Holy Writ as from their operations, and chiefly by those we feel in ourselves. The testimonies of the Holy Scriptures that teach us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament, which are not so necessary to enumerate as to choose them out with discretion and judgment.

In Genesis, chap. 1:26, 27, God says: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," etc. "And God created man in his own image, male and female created he them." And Gen. 3:22, "Behold, the man is become as one of us." 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 says, God created, He signifies the unity. It is true, He does not say how many persons there are, but that which appears to us somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New. For when our Lord was baptized in Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard, saying, "This is my beloved Son"; the Son was seen in the water, and the Holy Spirit appeared in the shape of a dove. This form is also instituted by Christ in the baptism of all believers: "Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In the Gospel of Luke the angel Gabriel thus addressed Mary, the mother of our Lord: "The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; wherefore also the holy thing which is begotten shall be called the Son of God." Likewise; "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all." And (A.V.): "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one."

In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence. And 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.

Moreover, we must observe the particular offices and operations of these three persons towards us. The Father is called our Creator, by His power; the Son is our Savior and Redeemer, by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier, by His dwelling in our hearts.

This doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been affirmed and maintained by the true Church since the time of the apostles to this very day against the Jews, Mohammedans, and some false Christians and heretics, as Marcion, Manes, Praxeas, Sabellius, Samosatenus, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. Therefore, in this point, 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.

ARTICLE IX

THE SPIRITUAL climate of our day differs radically from that of a hundred years ago.

Once all who claimed to believe in God sought to confirm their opinions and convictions by appealing to the Bible. Interpretations might differ widely, but all were agreed that God's word determined what was true or false. This was the unifying principle of Christianity. It gave promise of some measure of agreement in every discussion and debate.

Today such common ground can no longer be taken for granted. Rationalism and mysticism have robbed many of their faith in God's word. Higher criticism has cut the Bible into a thousand shreds. Those who debate the great issues of the Christian faith talk alongside of rather than to each other. Disagreeing on their presuppositions, men find it impossible to communicate effectively and profitably.

We do well to take note of this situation. Its consequences are too incisive and determinative to be minimized. Our judgment of God's word decides our principle and practice. To confirm the church's doctrine of the Trinity by an appeal to Scripture will have meaning and authority only for those who accept the Bible as God's word. They alone pray with Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." (I Sam. 3:10b) Hearing God's voice in the Scriptures they will be assured and comforted that this doctrine is of God.

The Nature of God's Testimonies

Basing our faith upon the Bible is never a purely intellectual and impersonal exercise.

Hegel said upon one occasion, "Were the knowledge of religion historical only, we should have to regard theologians

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as resembling the bank clerk who enters in his ledger large sums of money belonging to other people, yet acquires little of his own." With some justification Bible-believing Christians may be criticized for not completely escaping the bank-clerk mentality. Often God's people are satisfied with quoting a proof-text or two. They fail to inquire into its precise meaning and see its relation to the whole of revealed truth. The enemies of sound doctrine are seldom silenced by the recitation of a text. Nor will such a method ever satisfy our own spiritual needs.

God's truth must illumine our minds and stir our souls to adoration. Unless his word challenges the depths of our life, we will experience no fruition of our knowledge. No sin is more fatal to spiritual growth than that of dealing glibly with Holy Writ. No condition is more perverse than that which rests content with a theoretical knowledge of the truth. Christian truth must be experientially appropriated. We do not disagree with the liberals, because they allot a place to Christian experience. True faith always involves a subjective, personal, experiential element. Our dispute with them concerns the relation of this experience to the revealed Scriptures. While they make truth dependent upon man's changing insights and experiences, we maintain that saving fellowship with God is impossible unless our insights and experiences conform to and are molded by the unchanging word of God.

The intimate relation of Christian experience to the Scriptures is acknowledged here. *All this we know as well from the testimonies of Holy Writ as from their operations, and chiefly by those we feel in ourselves.*

This is peculiarly significant here. We are dealing with the mystery of the holy Trinity. The church never has regarded this doctrine as expendable and irrelevant. It may not be equated with the frivolous speculations of the philosophers, whose views change with the weathercock. Nor do we elevate the teachings of theologians, no matter how learned and pious, as an infallible rule. Although we place a high premium on their instruction, we bow unconditionally and unhesitatingly only to the teachings

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of the Bible. We confess indeed that there are certain works of the triune God which the believer feels within himself. Yet this experience is entirely dependent on our knowledge and appropriation of the Bible.

Such an approach characterized Athanasius in his long and painful conflict with Arius and his disciples. He refused to retreat one step from what he considered to be the true confession concerning the Trinity. Repeatedly he insisted that what was at stake was the salvation of God's people. Calvin in his many debates with the anti-trinitarians of his time argued in a similar vein. He is convinced that this doctrine is of utmost value for the believer. Without it man cannot know the way of salvation. But he as well as Athanasius maintained that not an experience of the work of God but only the Scriptures determine sound doctrine.

Our appeal therefore is first of all to *the testimonies of Holy Writ*. Unless we learn from these sacred pages, we cannot rightly know the true and living God. We also know something about the three persons of the Godhead *from their operations, chiefly by those we feel in ourselves*. But this is no independent and additional source of our knowledge. Man never knows the works of the three persons, even those which he feels in his own heart, apart from the teachings of the Bible. It is the authoritative, infallible and sufficient rule for faith.

But having received this word by faith, we experience that a whole new world discloses itself to our minds and hearts. We begin somewhat to trace the glory of our God in all things around us. In the order and variety of the universe we read the incomparable thoughts of the Father of whom are all things and who through the Son made the world. The laws by which all things are governed reveal him "who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be moved forever." (Ps. 104:5) In the light of Biblical truth we behold evidences of the Father's self-manifestation as *the cause, origin and beginning of all things*, of the Son's work as *the word, wisdom and image of the Father*, and of the Spirit's continual activity as *the eternal power and might of God*. While cultivating a holy sobriety in tracing

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this knowledge of God from all those works which declare him, we confess with Gregory Nazianzen, "I cannot think of the one, but I am immediately surrounded by the glory of the three; nor can I clearly discover the three, but I am suddenly carried back to the one."

This is peculiarly pertinent to observing the works of God within ourselves. These are greatly to be praised, for in this God we live and move and have our being. When set upon by fears and frustrations, the Father assures us of his sovereignty and paternal care of all creatures. When the burden of our sins weighs us down, we remember that the Son loved us and gave himself for our redemption. When our souls cry for light in the dark night of our everyday difficulties, the Spirit as the giver and sustainer of life shelters us in his love and speaks the word of grace. "It is not right," says Calvin therefore, "to be silent on the distinction which we find expressed in the Scriptures." Christian experience daily corroborates the testimony of the Bible.

The Language of Scripture

We therefore turn our souls to God's word for our instruction in this mystery. He makes himself known to us as the one in three.

The *Confession* frankly admits that evidence for the Trinity appears to us somewhat obscure in the *Old Testament*. Yet the doctrine is not absent from its pages.

At the outset the Bible mentions a plurality of persons within the one God. God said in the beginning, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." (Gen. 1:21) Gregory of Nyssa in his argument against those who denied the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity pointed out that this passage speaks of more than one person (*us*), yet only one *image* or *likeness*. In much the same fashion was this text explained by Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine. The synod of Sirmium (357 A.D.) declared, "If anyone understand this statement 'Let us make man' as not spoken by the Father to the Son but as the speech of God to himself, let him be accursed."

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Allusions to the Trinity frequently appear in the Old Testament. "By the word of Jehovah were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth." (Ps. 33:6) Again Isaiah refers to a plurality of persons within God, "The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me." (Isa. 61:1) The same prophet also writes, "In all their affliction he (i.e. God) was afflicted, and the angel of his presence (the Son) saved them . . . But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit." (Isa. 63:9, 10)

Yet the doctrine is not fully declared in the Old Testament. This reveals the wise and patient dealings of God with his people. Living among nations who recognized many gods, they needed to know God's unity as the first principle of true religion. When this was firmly implanted in their minds and hearts, his people were prepared for instruction in the plurality of persons. The Bible never reveals doctrine as abstract truth but relates it specifically to the spiritual needs of God's people. Thus revelation is provided in accordance with their circumstances and spiritual capacities. Stressing the progressive character of God's self-revelation as Trinity Berkhof says, "And this revelation increases in clarity in the measure in which the redemptive work of God is more clearly revealed, as in the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And the more the glorious reality of the Trinity stands out in the facts of history, the clearer the statements of the doctrine become."¹

Numerous indications of the Trinity are found in the New Testament. The *Confession* directs our attention first to the baptism of Jesus by John. All three persons are there plainly indicated. From the beginning the church has regarded the formula used at the time of baptism as evidence of three persons within the Godhead. These must be distinguished but never divorced, since the baptism which is administered is one. Also the story of the annunciation reveals the triune God. The Holy Spirit is unmistakably identified as both personal and divine. He is the power of the Most High. As the fruit of his overshadowing of the virgin, that which is conceived is the divine Son

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of God. The anti-trinitarians have been unable to escape the impact of the apostolic benediction. (II Cor. 13:13) We should not be surprised, therefore, that those who reject the doctrine of the Trinity sooner or later are constrained to repudiate the authority of the Scriptures. These denials go hand in hand.

Quite different is the situation which surrounds the use of the last passage adduced by the *Confession*. This contains the disputed words of I John 5:7, "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." It is included in the King James version, while the Revised version omits it.

Admittedly we face here a difficult question of textual criticism. None of the most ancient manuscripts in our possession contain these words. Nor were they ever quoted by the orthodox fathers in their disputes with the Arians. Many ancient translations, including the Egyptian, Ethiopic, Syrian, Armenian and Arabic, omit this passage. For centuries the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed its authenticity, but this decision was reversed in carefully constructed language in 1927. Jerome, who prepared the official Vulgate version, argued that the text had been wilfully omitted by early copyists. Calvin, although inclined to receive it as authentic, writes that he "dare not assert anything on the subject." Since then Reformed scholars have been divided on the problem. In the face of overwhelming evidence most scholars today incline to the position that these words were inserted by a copyist. Since the arguments for including I John 5:7 are admittedly weak, we would do well not to use it as evidence for the Trinity. This doctrine is abundantly clear from so many other passages, that this text is not essential. This admission in no way reflects upon the scholarship or integrity of de Bres or of those Reformed synods which approved this reading of article 9. The science of textual criticism was in its infancy in those days. Today we have access to many more ancient manuscripts and versions. The Reformed Ecumenical synod at one of its sessions might well resolve the question for the churches whether this passage should be retained or deleted here.

The Offices of the Three Persons

While contending for the unity of God, the *Confession* acknowledges the distinction of the three persons. This is reflected in their works in both creation and redemption.

We are indebted to the reformers for this insight into the works of the triune God. The ancient fathers were well aware of the prepositions used by the Bible in denoting the three persons: *of* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* the Holy Spirit. Yet they made no mention of a distinction of offices and operations. Luther first taught this clearly in his explanation of the *Apostles' Creed* in the *Shorter Catechism*. The twelve articles of faith were arranged under three main heads: of God the Father and our creation, of God the Son and our redemption, and of God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification. Calvin does not make use of this division. It was introduced into the Reformed churches through the creeds. Guido de Bres employs it here, as do also Ursinus and Olevianus in the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

The word *offices* indicates the task or work which the Bible assigns specifically to the divine persons. The term *operations* stresses the actual accomplishing of the work. The distinction is plainly warranted by the New Testament. Yet the church warns that by this distinction the unity of the Godhead may not be obscured or imperilled. The Bible indeed speaks of the Father as creator of all things, but assigns this work also in a measure to the Son and the Holy Spirit. We read of the Son, "All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made." (John 1:3) Of the Holy Spirit we read, "Thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground." (Ps. 104:30)

This is of utmost value for the child of God. He seeks a proper formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity not as a concession to his reason which seeks systematized knowledge for its own sake, but as a requirement for his heart which aspires to fellowship with God as the highest good. Discussions and debates of past centuries therefore still speak eloquently to him. They are relevant and rewarding, because he recognizes "the

doctrine which is according to godliness." (I Tim. 6:3) Every true believer is in some sense a theologian. He can appreciate what Warfield said, "The character of our religion, is, in a word, determined by the character of our theology: and thus the task of the systematic theologian is to see that the relations in which the separate truths actually stand are rightly conceived, in order that they may exert their rightful influence on the development of religious life. As no truth is so insignificant as to have no place in the development of our religious life, so no truth is so unimportant that we dare neglect it or deal deceitfully with it in adjusting it into our system. We are smitten with a deadly fear on the one side, lest by fitting them into a system of our own devising, we cut from them just the angles by which they were intended to lay hold on the hearts of men; but on the other side, we are filled with a holy confidence that, by allowing them to frame themselves into their own system as indicated by their own natures—as the stones in Solomon's temple were cut each for its own place—we shall make each available for all men, for just the place in the saving process for which it was divinely framed and divinely given."²

This the believing mind seeks to do also with the doctrine of the Trinity. God's truth indicates that to each of the divine persons belongs, as it were, the primacy in performing some of the mighty acts of God. We are not straying from the Scriptures into the arid wastes of speculation, when we assign the great and glorious work of creation primarily to the Father. This the Bible does for us. (I Cor. 8:6; Eph. 2:9) It also speaks frequently of the Son as our Redeemer by his blood. He took upon himself the position of surety for his people (Ps. 40:7, 8) This salvation he wrought by his incarnation, sufferings and death. (Eph. 1:7, 12) We learn further from the word that the Holy Spirit, in communion and cooperation with the other persons, applies the work of grace to our lives as the sanctifier. From him we receive our spiritual rebirth or renewal. (John 3:5, 6) The gospel preaching, which calls us to repentance and faith, is made effective by the Holy Spirit. (I Peter 1:12) As the spirit of adoption he bears us witness, that we are God's children.

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(Rom. 8:15, 16) He joins believers to the church which is Christ's body. (I Cor. 12:13) He strengthens us with power in the inward man. (Eph. 3:16) With him as the spirit of promise we are sealed unto full redemption, for he is an earnest of our eternal inheritance. (Eph. 1:13, 14) By so distinguishing the offices and operations of the three persons of the Trinity, we arrive at clearer knowledge and greater enjoyment of what God has done for our salvation.

The Defense of the True Faith

Because the doctrine of the Trinity is so essential to our salvation, the church has always defended it vigorously. In the turmoil and testing of past centuries we recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This explains why the *Confession* mentions the errors of men who have been long dead. From this, we learn that many modern errors are repetitions of ancient heresies in slightly different dress. The father of lies isn't original enough to think up new errors for each new age.

The orthodox doctrine of God as triune must be maintained first of all against Jews and Moslems. Both religions are monotheistic, accepting as true that God is one. In opposition to Christianity they argue that the doctrine of the Trinity involves us in the worship of three gods. Much Moslem opposition seems to have stemmed from acquaintance with those churches wherein the virgin Mary and many saints were venerated. In their practice the first and second commandments, which admonish us to recognize and worship God alone, were not always consistently upheld. But these deviations do not invalidate the doctrine of the Trinity. The relation of Christianity to the Jewish and Moslem faiths has come into sharper focus in recent years. Religious leaders of these three groups often make common cause in their attack on the forces of materialism and secularism. The argument is frequently heard that since all three recognize only one God, they worship the same God in slightly different ways. Nothing, however, is further from the truth. By denying the reality of personal distinctions within the Godhead, the Jews

and Moslems worship a God from whom true redemptive fellowship is excluded.

More attention is devoted by the *Confession to some false Christians and heretics*. These fall into two groups: those who endanger the unity of God, and those who obscure the personal distinctions.

Marcion, who flourished from 140 to 165 A.D., attempted to reform the church by returning to Christ and the teachings of Paul. He wanted a Christianity completely divorced from and uncontaminated by Jewish influences. Thus he rejected the Old Testament. Of the New Testament he retained only a mutilation of Luke's gospel and ten Pauline epistles. He claimed that Christ as God's son had only a visionary body. He further believed in a second god, called by him the "demiurge" who created the world and revealed the law. Under his curse no one could keep the law. Thereupon the first God sent his son in this visionary body to redeem mankind, with whom the demiurge became so angry that he had Christ crucified.

Manes (also called Mani) was the father of Manicheism. He also taught that Christ only had a visionary body. God created Christ as the ideal man who in this body came to earth to save men by his teaching.

It was Praxeas, who lived about 190 A.D., who taught that the Father became the Son. Thus he rejected the doctrine of three eternal subsistences within the one divine essence. According to him the Father suffered for our sins. Sabellius tried to develop a more orthodox view but fell far short of this by maintaining that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were simply consecutive manifestations of the one divine essence.

On the other side of the scale was the strange notion of Paul of Samosata, called Samosatenus, who taught that Jesus was mere man, although miraculously born. This Jesus became progressively more divine by allowing God to penetrate his earthly life more completely. Thereupon he was adopted by God as the perfect Son.

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The name of Arius is much more widely known throughout the church. He, like Paul of Samosata, was born in Libya and became presbyter and teacher in Alexandria. In opposition to his countryman he maintained that God the Father alone was eternal and divine. Christ was the most exalted of all God's creatures, prior in existence to all others. As the one through whom God created all things, he is called the word, the only-begotten and the Son of God. Arianism, which for a time won a wide following throughout the ancient church, was officially condemned. In our time this heresy has been revived by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

All these notions, many of which are propagated in some form or other by liberal theologians and preachers, attack the fundamentals of the faith. Some fail to do justice to the personal distinctions and fall into the error of teaching a suffering God. Others, by teaching that Christ is less than God, deny that salvation is of God alone.

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity alone safeguards the church against such and similar errors. To be sure we cannot fathom the depths of the divine being. How can finite man ever comprehend the infinite God "who only hath immortality, dwelling in light unapproachable, whom no man hath seen, nor can see?" (I Tim. 6:16) Yet *we know the Father* as our creator, even as we experience his blessed power upholding all things and directing our lives. *We know the Son* as our Savior and Redeemer in his wondrous work in atoning for our sins and reconciling us to God. *We know the Holy Spirit* as our Sanctifier, who dwells in our hearts and bestows the fulness of God's saving grace.

Enjoying such rich knowledge now, we live in the blessed hope *hereafter to enjoy the perfect knowledge and benefit thereof in heaven*. This confession inspires us to lift our voices in adoration,

*"Father of Jesus, love divine,
What rapture will it be,
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
And gaze and gaze on Thee."*

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1. How may proof-texts be legitimately used by the church? 2. What is meant by the experiential appropriation of Christian truth? 3. What is the relation between God's word and Christian experience? 4. What is meant by historical faith? 5. Of what practical significance is the doctrine of the Trinity for believers? 6. How would you justify the anathema pronounced by the synod of Sirmium? 7. How did God more clearly reveal his triune being in the outstanding events of the New Testament? 8. Which problems do we face in connection with the use of I John 5:7? 9. Does the presence of variant readings affect the authority, reliability and infallibility of Scripture? Explain. 10. What is the difference between office and operation? 11. Prove from Scripture the activity of each of the three divine persons in creation, in redemption and in sanctification. 12. Of what specific value is the study of heretical opinion in previous centuries? 13. How has the church herself undermined her witness to the Trinity? 14. May Christians join hands with Jews and Moslems in defense of the doctrine of one God? 15. What was Marcion's heresy? Which groups today show kinship to it? 16. Which churches and theologians champion notions similar to those of Paul of Samosata?

Chapter 10

The Godhead of the Son

We believe that Jesus Christ according to His divine nature is the only begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made, nor created (for then He would be a creature), but co-essential and co-eternal with the Father, "the very image of his substance and the effulgence of his glory," equal unto Him in all things. He is the Son of God, not only from the time that He assumed our nature but from all eternity, as these testimonies,

when compared together, teach us. Moses says that God created the world; and St. John says that all things were made by the Word which he calls God. The apostle says that God made the world by His Son; likewise, that God created all things by Jesus Christ. Therefore it must needs follow that He who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ, did exist at that time when all things were created by Him. Therefore the prophet Micah says: "His goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." And the apostle: "He hath neither beginning of days nor end of life." He therefore is that true, eternal, and almighty God whom we invoke, worship, and serve.

ARTICLE X

THE KEY to understanding the Christian faith lies in its insistence that salvation is of God alone. Wholeheartedly the believer confesses,

*"Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.*

"I bless the Christ of God; . . ."

Because of this conviction, which is as old as the New Testament church, believers feel constrained to define clearly the relationship of Christ to God. This touches the heart of the Christian gospel. If Christ is less or other than God, salvation is no longer of God. But this confession is not a logical deduction. It is rooted in the testimony of God's word which says, "Who is the liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is the anti-christ, even he that denieth the Father and the Son." (I John 2:22)

The *Confession* finds itself in holy company when immediately after setting forth the doctrine of the Trinity it witnesses to the deity of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

The Eternal Sonship of the Savior

When Jesus came with his disciples in the parts of Caesarea Philippi, he challenged them with the question of the ages, "But who say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:15) Notwithstanding

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the clear confession of Simon Peter, men have disagreed through the centuries. The history of the first centuries is replete with unhappy confusion and contradiction. Out of this crucible has come the clear and concise confession of Jesus Christ as the God-man.

In this article we deal specifically with his divine nature. Yet it cannot be considered apart from his human nature, as the *Confession* admits by speaking of him as Jesus Christ.

At first the church needed little reminder of our Lord's humanity. This was consistently proclaimed by the apostles, prophets and evangelists and clearly embedded in the divine Scriptures. Nor was there any doubt as to his deity. Repeatedly he is referred to by church fathers as the Son of God. His sinlessness is unanimously affirmed. Believers everywhere regarded him as the object of divine worship. But with the rise of heresies it became necessary to define more precisely the relationship between the divine and the human in our Lord's life.

The Ebionites under Jewish influence tended to deny his divinity in the interests of maintaining that God is one. In much the same way the Alogi, who rejected John's writings, regarded Christ as mere man although virgin-born. Paul of Samosata taught that the Savior became God after his baptism by being adopted by God. Others sacrificed the humanity of Christ in order to stress his deity. This was done under Gnostic influences, which regarded all matter and therefore a physical body as inherently evil. Undoubtedly this influenced the modalistic monarchians, such as Praxeas and Sabellius. Against them the Alexandrian fathers defended the true humanity of the Savior. Here some like Tertullian and especially Origen did not entirely escape the error of speaking of Christ as subordinate to the Father. Origen regarded Christ as subordinate even in essence. This paved the way for Arianism. At the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) the deity of the Son was officially proclaimed as an essential doctrine of the Christian faith.

Now the question arose how these two natures were related to each other. This problem constitutes the heart of the Christo-

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logical controversies, which did not abate until the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) officially declared the faith of the church in "one and the same God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; . . . to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence . . ."1

The rehearsal of the many errors and errorists which sprang up in the churches is far from edifying. Yet this illumined the precious guidance of the Holy Spirit as he led the church to a clearer and fuller apprehension of the truth. At the Council of Nicea the full deity of Christ was safeguarded by the declaration that Christ was *of the same substance* (homoousios) as the Father and not merely of similar substance (homoiousios). This doctrine comes to clear expression in our *Confession*.

We acknowledge that *Jesus*, who was born of Mary in Bethlehem, suffered all the days of his life and died for our salvation, is the *Christ*. He was appointed and ordained of God to be our Savior. *According to his divine nature, he is the only begotten Son of God*. This name stresses not merely the uniqueness of his relationship to the Father, which is affirmed in some sense also by many heretics, but especially his full deity. Therefore we witness to the eternal generation of the Son by the Father: *begotten from eternity, not made nor created (for then he should be a creature), but co-essential and co-eternal with the Father*. Because Christ is *equal unto the Father in all things*, our salvation is not only of God but also through him alone.

The Evidences for Christ's Deity

That the Bible teaches the Godhead of our Savior is indisputable. So numerous are the relevant texts that page after page might be filled with them. The *Confession* refers to only a few

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of the more outstanding proofs for this doctrine. These may conveniently be presented under four headings.

First of all, the Bible assigns divine names to our Lord. The name *Jesus* is the personal name given by the angel at the time of the annunciation. Variations of this name were often given by the Israelites to their children. Therefore it cannot be said to refer to our Lord's deity. The same is also true of the official title, *Christ*, which signifies "the anointed one." Other names do clearly indicate his deity.

The name *Son of God* is ascribed to him in the New Testament in four senses, which are not always clearly distinguished but at times even combined. When united with the phrase *only-begotten*, it clearly indicates his pre-existence and deity. No one but he could bear this name, because of the unique relationship which he sustained to the Father. He is also called the *Word*, or "Logos," by John who presents a most exalted view of the person of the Lord. As the *Word* he "was with God" and "was God." "In him was life." His glory is that "of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 4, 14) Only by denying the authenticity and authority of John's gospel can the impact of this name which teaches our Lord's deity be circumvented.

The Bible ascribes divine attributes to the Savior. Much is made in the *Confession* of his eternity. Because Scripture teaches that the Son made the world, *therefore it must needs follow, that he who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ, did exist at that time.* More direct evidence is supplied from Micah and Hebrews. Implied, of course, in these testimonies is a confession of several other divine attributes, especially his almighty power and wisdom.

As to the divine works ascribed to the Son of God, reference is made to his activity in the creation of all things. That this is a work of God is clearly taught by the Bible. Several other divine works performed by the Son, such as our salvation, his government of all things, his coming to judge all men and

the resurrection of the dead, are discussed in other articles of *Confession* rather than here.

The final evidence for Christ's deity we find in the divine honors which he receives. *He, therefore, is that true, eternal, and almighty God, whom we invoke, worship and serve.* Such honors may be paid to God alone. "Thou shalt fear Jehovah thy God; and him shalt thou serve, and shalt swear by his name." (Deut. 6:13) The Bible, however commands men to offer such worship to the Son. God has committed all judgment unto his Son, "that all may honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father that sent him." (John 5:21) No distinction is made between the reverence paid to the Son and that which is due unto the Father. That God delights in having creatures worship the Son is further evident from the epistles. "And when he again bringeth in the firstborn into the world he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him." (Hebr. 1:7) Christ himself accepted that adoration from Thomas who confessed him as "My Lord and my God." (John 20:28)

Many reconstructions of the church's confession of Christ have been attempted in modern times. These aimed at discovering "the Jesus of history." People were advised to put aside their perplexities about the dogma of Christ, formulated in the past by the church, and return to the simple gospel stories. Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, earnest seekers and open sceptics alike, tried their hand at writing novels and theological treatises about the man Jesus. He was introduced as the Nazarene whom nobody really knew.

In recent years the pendulum has swung. The attempt to recover the historical Jesus raised more problems than it answered. Large sections of the gospels were rejected and the rest revised beyond recognition, in order to produce a Jesus who could be understood. Since this plainly left the church without a gospel and without a Savior, a reaction was long overdue. The trail to the Jesus of history proved a dead-end alley. Under the influence of the dialectical theology, exemplified especially in the

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writings of Barth, Brunner and their disciples, much greater recognition is now given to the Christ of faith. But here other excesses, equally unscriptural and unacceptable, have been championed. Bultmann, for example, does not hesitate to affirm, "Interest in the personality of Jesus is excluded, and not merely because, in the absence of information, I am making a virtue of necessity. I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus . . . I am personally of the opinion that Jesus did not believe Himself to be the Messiah."² Thus the cord between God's act and fact, between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, between the human and divine natures of our Lord is cut. Also these more recent reconstructions fail to satisfy the believing church. Some of its emphases in contrast with the superficiality of older liberalism are refreshing. Again salvation is proclaimed as an act of God. There is room once more for the mystery of faith. But because it fails to present the full Christ of the Scriptures, this new trend of theological thought deserves to be repudiated by the Christian church.

The Jesus whom we know from the sacred Scriptures we confess as God. He was truly man who lived and died and rose again for us. He was also God, the eternal Son incarnate for our salvation. This is the mystery of Christ, a mystery which no man can comprehend. Yet in humble faith we accept the testimony of God's word. For this purpose it was given. Our faith in who Christ is and what he did is controlled by the Bible. On that basis alone can we speak truly about him. "But these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

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1. Why is the doctrine of Christ's person and natures crucial to the Christian faith?
2. Is Christ in any sense subordinate to the Father?
3. Explain the four adverbs used by Chalcedon to delineate the relation between Christ's two natures.
4. What is the difference between affirming Christ as of the same substance with the Father and as of similar substance?
5. What is meant by Christ as the only-begotten Son?
6. Which divine attributes did Christ clearly ascribe to himself?
7. Of what value for the churches was the search for the historical Jesus?
8. Do the gospels aim at giving a biography of our Lord?
9. What is the relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith?
10. On which grounds do we reject Bultmann's view of Jesus?
11. What does the church mean by the mystery of Christ?
12. What is involved in the church's acknowledgement that Jesus is Christ?



Chapter 11

The Godhead of the Holy Spirit

We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son; and therefore neither is made, created, nor begotten, but only proceeds from both; who in order is the third person of the Holy Trinity; of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son; and therefore is the true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.

ARTICLE XI



CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE is still suspect among many in the western world who consider themselves Christian. The reversal among theologians during the past three decades, calling men back to the teachings of Scripture on God, man and the world, has not changed the popular feeling. Too infrequently we find men and women who count it both duty and delight to meditate on the doctrine which is according to godliness. This lack accounts for much of the church's weakness.

Of the many doctrines lightly dismissed that of the Trinity seems to take first place. Although the spiritual climate has changed radically since he wrote, the words of Thomas Jefferson express the opinions of many in the churches. "When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; . . . when in short we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since his day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines he (Jesus) inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples."¹ Those who live by this notion mutilate the Christian faith beyond recognition.

For religion they substitute morality; for mystery a shallow set of rules; for the gospel man's good works to fellowman.

The story which the Christian church tells to the nations centers in three mighty acts of God—his creation, redemption and sanctification of the race. The believing church triumphantly declares that Father, Son and Holy Spirit together are worshipped and glorified as one God blessed for ever. This note has been captured by the *Confession* which does not hesitate to speak at length of the holy Trinity. It concludes this section with an article on the third person.

The Personality of the Spirit

Often the third person has been referred to by Christian writers as "the unknown God." For this there is no justification. Indeed, our Lord seems to hint at some self-effacement on the part of the Spirit, when he said, "For he shall not speak from himself; but what things soever he shall hear, these shall be speak; . . . He shall glorify me . . ." Yet the Bible is replete with references to him who has made it his business to impart to us the fulness of our life in Christ.

The ancient church has been so slow in setting forth the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Much of this may have been due to a superficial reading of Scripture. The words employed in Hebrew, Greek and Latin to designate the third person stem from a root meaning "to breathe," which also can be rendered "breath." Certain heretics persisted in referring to him in impersonal terms, regarding the Holy Spirit as an impersonal influence. To this day some still speak of him as "it" rather than as "he." This reduction of the third person of the Trinity to an impersonal power or energy of God misinterprets Scripture and robs us of the comfort of our salvation.

It is to the glory of the Reformation and especially Calvin that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit came somewhat into its own. As never before in the church's history his person and work were stressed. In reaction to Rome with its mechanical view of grace the reformers emphasized that God through his Spirit dwells in us to impart a full salvation. Without the Spirit's presence our hearts are dead and our minds are darkened. The Spirit of God gives life and light and liberty. "Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." (II Cor. 3:17) We confess him as *the true and eternal God*.

That the Holy Spirit is personal should be clear to all who know God's word. Many passages clearly indicate this. Although the word "Spirit" is neuter, the pronoun used to designate him is always masculine. He is never called "it" but always "he" in the Bible. Our Lord referred to him as the "Comforter" and not merely as a comfort. (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7) Consistently per-

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sonal characteristics are attributed to the Spirit. He creates (Gen. 1:2); strives with the spirit of man (Gen.6:3); teaches Christ's disciples what they ought to say (Luke 12:12); brings to their remembrance the Savior's words (John 14:26); convicts the world in respect of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8); commands (Acts 8:29); raises the dead (Rom. 8:11); makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be uttered (Rom. 8:26). None of these great and gracious activities can be ascribed to an impersonal law or influence. They are intensely personal and assure us that God himself as Spirit works with and in the spirit of man. John Milton caught the spirit of Biblical teaching concerning the third person of the Trinity when he wrote in *Paradise Lost*,

“And chiefly Thou, O Spirit . . .
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support.”

All God's dealings with mankind are profoundly personal and intimate, searching out the hidden depths of mind and heart and soul. The God who made man in his own image cannot deal with him in any other than an intensely personal way as divine Person. This emphasis the church has sought to safeguard and strengthen by taking seriously the doctrine of the personality of the Holy Spirit.

The Personal Relations of the Spirit

The three persons of the Godhead, so we have seen, are distinguished by their personal properties. These are incommunicable, that is, they cannot be transferred or shared by the other two persons within the holy Trinity. Thus we confess of the Father that he has life of himself, and of the Son that he is begotten from eternity of the Father.

The Holy Spirit *who in order is the third person* is distinguished from the Father and the Son by a property or quality

which is uniquely his own. This the church has called his *procession or spiration*.

The early church settled the deity of the Holy Spirit at the time of the great trinitarian controversies. Not only was the Son declared to be of one essence with the Father but also the Spirit. Here our *Confession* repeats what has been commonly confessed by the believing church: *of one and the same essence, majesty and glory with the Father and the Son*. The fulness of the divine being and attributes belongs also to him. The Bible assigns divine names to him. He is repeatedly called the Spirit of God (I Cor. 3:16), the Spirit of the Lord (II Cor. 3:17) and the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph. 1:13). Peter does not hesitate to identify him as very God (Acts 5:3, 4). Many divine perfections are ascribed to him. Thus David speaks of him as everywhere present (Ps. 139:7-10), while Isaiah and Paul do not shrink from acknowledging that he knows all things. (Isa. 40:13, 14; I Cor. 2:11). All power belongs to him to perform signs and wonders. (Rom. 15:19) He is called eternal (Hebr. 9:14) and holy (I Thess. 1:6). Because creation (Gen. 1:2), the renewal of the face of the ground (Ps. 104:30), our spiritual rebirth (John 3:5, 6) and the resurrection from the dead (Rom. 8:11) are attributed also to the Holy Spirit, the church does not hesitate to affirm that he is God to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son.

But on the precise relation which the Holy Spirit sustains to the other persons of the Godhead there has been much controversy. From this has stemmed the first great division of Christendom into an eastern or Greek and a western or Roman church. This breach became official in 1054, when pope Leo IX excommunicated Michael Caerularius, patriarch of Constantinople, as guilty of nine heresies. The chief distinction between the Greek and Roman churches was the rejection by the former and the adoption by the latter of the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son as well as the Father. Without hesitation the Protestant churches have followed Rome in this matter.

The debate, which had been carried on sporadically for

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centuries and led to the final rupture of the church, has often been ridiculed. Not a few argue that here the church is guilty of theological hair-splitting which is unbecoming. Many refuse to recognize that the issue at stake was and remains important to this day for all who take the doctrine of the holy Trinity seriously.

Before the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) the doctrine of the church on this subject was quite vague and indefinite. Heretics who questioned the deity of the Son also rejected the godhead of the Holy Spirit. Arius maintained that he was the first created being produced by the Son. Although Athanasius asserted that the Spirit was of the same essence as the Father, the Nicean Creed referred to him with an indefinite statement: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The great Cappadocian fathers followed Athanasius in this, as did also Hilary of Poitiers in the west. This position was assailed by Macedonius, the bishop of Constantinople, who held much the same opinion as Arius.

In 381 A.D. the orthodox doctrine of the Holy Spirit was more clearly spelled out. However, because it did not state explicitly that the Spirit is of the same essence as the Father (*homousios*) and did not define his relation to the other two persons of the godhead, the decision of the council produced little harmony. None of these early councils ever asserted that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. The theologians usually contented themselves with asserting his deity and quoting John 15:26, which speaks of "the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father." No one at the time opposed the idea that he likewise proceeded from the Son. This matter was simply not discussed. In the west the procession from the Son as well as the Father was clearly asserted, largely in the interests of removing any notion of the subordination of one person to the others within God.

The first council to declare itself publicly on the issue was the Synod of Toledo (589 A.D.). It inserted the phrase and the Son (*filioque*) into the Constantinopolitan creed. This should not have surprised anyone in the church, since it had been

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confessed in Spain as early as 380 and clearly stressed by Augustine. Opposition was first openly expressed when after the council of Friaul (796 A.D.) some agitated for introducing the phrase officially into the Roman liturgy. Thereupon the Greek monks began to denounce the west vehemently as heretical. At the request of Charlemagne the monk Theodulf defended the insertion of the phrase at great length. He argued that the Spirit was called both the Spirit of the Father (Matt. 10:20) and the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19) To him it was inconceivable that the Father should have another Spirit than the Son. In addition, he appealed to John 16:13-15, where Christ clearly affirmed that all things whatsoever the Father has are also his. Repeatedly the Savior mentioned his own sending of the Spirit upon the disciples. (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:17) All these passages reflect the relation of the Son to the personal subsistence of the Holy Spirit. If this is not affirmed, according to Theodulf, the church will drift into Arianism.

Having reviewed the argument of Theodulf, Charlemagne urged the pope to incorporate the phrase officially into the liturgy. Leo III, however, refused on the grounds that this would greatly offend the Greek churches. This hesitation of the pope did not produce the desired fruit. The eastern churches with increasing vehemence accused the west of treachery and lovelessness, insisting that they had without proper conference and contact changed the ancient faith. In 1014 pope Benedict VIII inserted the phrase into the official Roman liturgy. Only a few decades passed before the unity of church was irrevocably destroyed.

Repeatedly attempts have been made by the west to heal the breach, especially by the councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439). The latter was even attended by the emperor of the east and the patriarch. A compromise formula, which declared that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, was rejected by the east. The Old Catholics under the leadership of Dollinger in 1875 were prepared to make great concessions to the Greek churches in the hope of closer unity. Also these efforts proved futile. Consistently the east has accused

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the west of introducing a new heresy, a godless and false doctrine into the churches. In his discussion of the spirit of Russian Christianity Leo Karsawin argues that the insistence of the west on the *filioque* clause is the deepest cause of its apostasy. Such deviations as the immaculate conception, the infallibility of the pope, the rise of rationalism, and the prevalence of scepticism in western lands he attributes to this. Thus the separation of east and west remains a pressing problem until the present.

All this sounds strange to our ears, the more so since we are tempted to treat the distinction quite lightly. Yet this is far from true.

The difference between the eastern and western churches, which comes into sharpest focus at precisely this point, is far from insignificant, even though it is more easily sensed than expressed. What we find in the Greek and other eastern churches is largely a sterile and speculative theology. This severe stricture can be defended, in spite of the theological and philosophical contributions made by some of its leaders such as Berdyaev. The basic question is whether God's work in the life of man is effected directly and immediately and without his use of history or whether the work of God through the Holy Spirit is bound to the Christ of history and thus to the church as the body of Christ. The east has chosen for the first. As a result, there is evident in its piety a great deal of mysticism. Although the historical revelation of God in Christ is recognized, it plays a very minor role in the lives of the people.

As far as doctrinal formulation is concerned, there does not seem to be much difference between the churches on the surface. The east also links the work of the Spirit with that of the Son. In the *Russian Catechism* the orthodox doctrine of three persons all equally eternal and divine is clearly affirmed. Yet this remains traditional theology. It cannot be denied that the Greek churches have never rid themselves of the remnants of subordinationism. The Father is regarded as the sole fountain, root and cause of the Godhead. Next to him and in practical

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religious thought quite independent of each other are the Son and the Holy Spirit.

To insist on the *filioque* clause remains a duty for the churches today. In recent years more attention has been paid to the Holy Spirit. However, in not a few circles his operations have been in practice divorced from the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the revelation of God in the Scriptures and the visible church. The Holy Spirit, precisely because Scripture indicates that he proceeds from both the Father and the Son, does not work the saving grace of God apart from Jesus who is the Christ. To ignore or deny this will produce a false spirituality, an unwholesome mysticism, a fanatical enthusiasm which leads men astray. It may produce religion and religious zeal, but such will be a zeal without knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ.

The Spirit and the Church

Of signal importance is this confession of the Holy Spirit.

The acknowledgement of his deity, personality and personal relations to the other two persons of the Godhead is made by the church in believing response to the Scriptures. Only because he is *true and eternal God who from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son* can the church receive the gracious gift of full and free salvation.

We confess not only God who is over us and works salvation on our behalf; we adore God who also dwells among and within us, communicating to us day by day all that he has promised us in Christ Jesus our Lord. We participate and participate actively in this redeeming and reconciling grace. It is God the Spirit who renews our lives and calls us into holy fellowship. In this article, therefore, the groundwork is laid for a correct understanding of the Christian religion. It consists not only of objective and historical facts concerning God and his work which are revealed. It includes also the believing, subjective, personal response to that revelation which is rooted in the gracious presence and power of God the Holy Spirit within us. Our knowledge of God would be meaningless and comfortless,

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if all were purely objective. Our minds must be illumined; our wills challenged; our hearts warmed by the word of the living God. All this belongs to the peculiar province of the Holy Spirit who is given us of the Father through Christ. When the *Confession* later speaks more directly and explicitly about the application of grace to our lives, it takes occasion again to refer to the Spirit's operations.

Only among evangelical Protestants has the confession concerning the Holy Spirit come into its own. The eastern churches speak much of the Spirit, but failing to link him and his work with the Redeemer they have been plagued throughout the ages with an unwholesome piety. This has run its riotous course and given birth to such weird practices as burning houses and barns and running naked through the streets. The Roman church has too much forgotten the Spirit's activity and made the communication of God's grace a mechanical process experienced by partaking of the sacraments. Revelation and response, the Christ of the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to go hand in hand in effectuating God's great and gracious purposes of salvation. Therefore the true church dare not for a moment tolerate any divorce between the Son and the Spirit, both of whom together with the Father are worshipped and glorified as the one, true God. Daily her song ascends to heaven,

*"Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
With all Thy quickening powers;
Come, shed abroad a Savior's love,
And that shall kindle ours."*

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1. Why are so many who call themselves Christian averse to doctrine? 2. Why is wholesome morality possible only on the basis of sound doctrine? 3. How would you account for the neglect of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the churches? 4. What is the meaning of the term Comforter? 5. How does the Holy Spirit strive with man? 6. Which political circumstances were involved in the rupture between East and West? 7. Was the action of the West in inserting the filioque clause justified? 8. On which points of doctrine and liturgy does the East differ from the West? 9. Which are some consequences of the divorce of the Spirit from the Son? 10. Is there a difference between confessing that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son? 11. Are there any parallels between Eastern Orthodox and Anabaptist emphases on the Spirit? 12. Does the position of the West (Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed) involve these churches in a rationalism which does injustice to the mystery of the Holy Spirit?

Chapter 12

The Creation of all Things

We believe that the Father by the Word, that is, by His Son, has created of nothing the heaven, the earth, and all creatures, when it seemed good unto Him, giving unto every creature its being, shape, form and several offices to serve its Creator; that He also still upholds and governs them by His eternal providence and infinite power for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God.

He also created the angels good, to be His messengers and to serve His elect; some of whom are fallen from that excellency

in which God created them into everlasting perdition, and the others have by the grace of God remained stedfast and continued in their first state. The devils and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and very good thing; to the utmost of their power as murderers watching to ruin the church and every member thereof, and by their wicked stratagems to destroy all; and are, therefore, by their own wickedness adjudged to eternal damnation, daily expecting their horrible torments.

Therefore we reject and abhor the error of the Sadducees, who deny the existence of spirits and angels; and also that of the Manichees, who assert that the devils have their origin of themselves, and that they are wicked of their own nature, without having been corrupted.

ARTICLE XII

IN ONE of his poems for children Robert Louis Stevenson says,

*"The world is so full of a number of things,
That I think we all should be happy as kings."*

This naive experience of childhood cannot be long preserved in our present world. As soon as we begin reflecting on life, we find that the things of which the world is so full never satisfy the deepest needs of the heart.

Today the world is a problem to thinking men and women. They find it full of difficulties and disappointments. Life is looked upon as man's enemy, hostile to his hopes and antagonistic to his ambitions. This has produced the pessimism which characterizes our day.

Only the Christian gospel gives the right view of the world. It does not seek to compete with science in answering the riddles of life. Its aim is to provide a life-and world-view in the light of which all our activities and aspirations can be properly evaluated. Because heaven, earth and all things have been created by God, the world in which man spends his days is his proper dwelling place for a season. It is the stage on which God displays his glory and works out our redemption. The Christian view of God and salvation therefore takes the doctrine of creation seriously.

Theories on the Origin of the World

Few are those who never asked: Whence came the world and what is its purpose? This has engaged the attention of peoples in every land. Almost without exception they have preserved in myths and legends some notions concerning the origin

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of the universe. Naive and superstitious as many of these tales may be, they express a sense of dependence on some higher power. Yet none gives a clear and correct interpretation of the beginnings of life.

In spite of confusion and contradiction all primitive cosmogonies have certain traits in common. Whether we turn to the early peoples of Asia, Africa or Europe, they speak of a development from the less to the more perfect. Usually they begin with the notion of an originally chaotic condition which becomes ordered and fixed. The appearance of man on the scene is quite generally placed at the end of the process. The predominance of water in the original condition on the earth seems to echo the early verses of Genesis. Much emphasis is laid on the godlike origin of the human race. Man is thought of as sustaining a unique relation to the gods and therefore superior to the animals.

Some of the earliest speculations of the Greeks busied themselves with the search for the origin of all things. Thales found this in water, while Anaximander spoke of an infinite and indefinite substance. Anaximenes insisted that it was air, while Heracleitus professed to find it in ethereal fire. Anaxagoras spoke of the seeds of things, intermingled in the chaos, which were disentangled and arranged by a divine spirit or intelligence. Out of these primitive beginnings Greek philosophy was born, which reached its zenith in Plato and Aristotle whose ideas influenced many Christian thinkers. One of the most baneful effects of this influence was its ignorance of the Creator-creature relationship, so fundamental to any correct understanding of the Scriptures.

Among those who developed a systematic approach to the problem of origins, three theories have been propounded.

The first is the *dualistic* position, presented in many forms. It assumes the presence of two self-existent principles which stand in opposition to each other. In polytheistic religions these are usually a good god and an evil god. In more philosophical presentations the spiritual force (God) is contrasted with ma-

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terial substance. This original matter is regarded as an imperfect and negative substance, sometimes as the seat of evil. Plato, the Gnostics and the Manichaeans described it as subordinate to God, who makes of it the instrument of his will. According to this view God is not the creator but only the arranger of the world. The difficulties inherent in all dualistic positions are apparent. The idea of two equally eternal and self-existent and absolute principles has been quite universally regarded as contradictory and impossible. No assurance can be offered that good will eventually triumph over evil, thus making history virtually meaningless. All that remains on this basis is an eternal process.

Some schools of thought explained the origin of all things on the basis of *emanation*. Here a divine being is presupposed as the ground of all existing things. These are said to proceed directly or indirectly from his being and nature. This notion is characteristic of all pantheistic views which identify God and the world, regarding the latter as the manifestation of the former. The Christian raises very serious objections to this conception. It virtually denies the sovereignty of God by robbing him of his power of self-determination and his authority over all creatures. It also compromises his holiness by making God responsible for evil as well as good in this world.

Much more prevalent and popular today is the theory of *evolution*. Formulated in many ways by many thinkers, it is by no means so modern as some suppose. The idea was not unknown to the Greeks. Under the influence of Darwin, Haeckel and Herbert Spencer it has been widely accepted during the past century. Some evolutionists presuppose the eternity of matter and argue that life has arisen by spontaneous generation. Others assume the existence of a personal God, who is said to direct the processes of nature. Still others merely accept the existence of matter which evolves and leave open the question whether this is eternal or created by God. Many arguments can be adduced against these various evolutionary theories. Christians have consistently rejected them as denials of the

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Biblical teaching. Even those positions which introduce God and his activity at certain points in the evolutionary process to solve the riddles which perplex the scientists have not been viewed with favor by the church. Together with early believers she still confesses: "I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." While refraining from adopting a detailed explanation of precisely how all things were made by God, since this is the task of science rather than of theology, the church opposes any position which obscures this fundamental article of her faith.

The Christian Doctrine of Creation

At the time when the *Confession* was penned, the Christian doctrine of creation was almost universally acknowledged. This accounts for the presentation of the material found in article 12. Little is said about the many modern problems which have arisen in connection with the study of origins, while a great deal is mentioned in connection with the creation of the angels. This latter subject was heatedly discussed and debated in the days of the Reformation.

Although brief on the doctrine of creation, what the *Confession* says is pointed. It affirms in language which cannot be misconstrued that creation is the "free act of God whereby he, according to his sovereign will for his glory, has in the beginning brought forth all things visible and invisible out of nothing, thus giving unto all things an existence distinct from his own and yet always dependent upon him."¹

Several aspects of the creation doctrine are clearly indicated.

First the author of creation is designated: *God the Father by the Word, which is His Son.*

On this score the statements of Genesis 1 and 2 are clear. All things have been made by God and are dependent on the constant activity of his will. That this work was effected through the Son of God, here called the Word, is affirmed by the Bible. "All things were made through him; and without him was not

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anything made that hath been made." (John 1:3) Speaking of the Son, the writer to the Hebrews says, "Through whom also he made the worlds." (Hebr. 1:2) Repeatedly this was emphasized by the church fathers in opposition to the strange speculations of the Gnostics.

Karl Barth in his teaching on creation maintains that Genesis 1 and 2 are not to be read as history. Precisely what is his position is difficult to say. He denies, however, what has been maintained by the Christian church of all ages, rejecting that in and through history, also of creation as recorded in the Bible, God speaks continually to mankind. The Swiss theologian has, moreover, emphasized the relationship of Christ to creation. In doing this, he has both accused Reformed theologians of the past of ignoring Scripture on this score and argued that only in Christ can we have any knowledge of God the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. His forced explanation of several texts which deal with this subject demonstrate to what lengths his speculative genius has carried him. The church today does well to be on her guard against any attempt to rescue the Biblical doctrine of creation by means of such a Christomonism which repudiates all general revelation.

The manner of God's creative activity is described as making all things *out of nothing*. This emphasis on the creation "ex nihilo" is part of the common heritage of all Christian churches. Calvin finds the idea clearly indicated in the word which Genesis 1:1 uses. It is God who calls the things which are not as though they were. (Rom. 4:17) All things result from the word of his command. In the most absolute sense of the word God is the origin and ground of all existence.

Here the church rejects such dualistic notions as those championed by Marcion, who ascribed the material world to the "demiurge." Likewise, she repudiates any attempt to explain the world as emanating from the being of God as taught by the Neo-Platonists from whose notions even Origen was not emancipated. Nor does the church tolerate the modern evolutionary construction concerning the beginning of all things in which the

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sovereign power of God is obscured or denied. Indeed, the church must walk circumspectly when studying creation in the light of Scripture. We may never read more into Genesis 1 and 2 than God has been pleased to reveal to us. By doing so at times in the past she has sharpened the conflict between herself and science unnecessarily. Yet whenever the historicity of the creation account is called into question and reduced to myth or saga, the church is called upon to protest in the name of God's truth.

As to the time of creation the *Confession* merely affirms that this took place *when it seemed good to God*. In simple and sober language the distinction between time and eternity is affirmed. The church refuses to speculate about those matters which have not been clearly revealed in the word. Time began with the inception of God's creative activities, called by the theologians his "opera ad extra."

Calvin remarks most appropriately on this subject, "Therefore he hath been pleased to give us a history of creation on which the faith of the Church might rest, without seeking after any other God than him whom Moses has represented as the former and builder of the world. The first thing specified in this history is the time, that by a continued series of years, the faithful might arrive at the first original of the human race, and of all things. This knowledge is eminently useful, not only to contradict the monstrous fables formerly received in Egypt and other countries, but also to give us clearer views of the eternity of God, and to fill us with greater admiration of it."²

All creation displays a wondrous pattern because God is its author. He was active in *giving to every creature its being, shape, form and several offices*.

Precisely what this phrase means becomes plain from a study of Genesis 1 and 2. Everywhere in the universe we see displayed a marvellous order and fitness, proclaiming the unending power and wisdom of our God. Not only have all things received their existence (being) from God but likewise their shapes and forms. Thus we behold both a remarkable unity

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within an almost infinite variety. In all the works of his hands God has expressed and revealed himself, so that these works proclaim his glory and greatness. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." (Ps. 19:1) With the psalmist we exclaim, "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou are mindful of him? and the son of man that thou visitest him?" (Ps. 8: 3, 4)

In the universe there is nothing useless or unprofitable, since to each of his creatures God has assigned appropriate offices or tasks. Sin has warped the handiwork of God and obscured much of the glory and beauty revealed at the dawn of history, especially within the life of man. Therefore he is not able to see the purpose and profit of every aspect of created order. Yet this is due to his limited insight and corrupt understanding rather than to any imperfection in the work of God. As scientists through the years add to our knowledge of nature, the Christian finds increased opportunities to adore the majesty, wisdom and power of God the Creator and Lord of all.

The essential quality of the created order is its continual and complete dependence upon God. This the *Confession* unqualifiedly affirms, when it teaches us to say of God that *He still upholds and governs them by His eternal providence and infinite power.*

Never may the line of demarcation between Creator and creature be effaced. To do so is to make ourselves guilty of raising man to the level of God, a temptation to which our first parents succumbed so tragically in Paradise. (Gen. 3:4, 5)

Here the Christian takes issue with all deists, who, while still claiming to believe in God, teach that he is so far removed from this world that he does not concern himself directly with its life. We believe with the heart and confess with the mouth, indeed, that creation is distinct from God and may never in any sense be identified with him who is eternal and divine; but at the same time we witness that all creatures are so dependent upon him that they cannot so much as move without the activity of his will. This doctrine of divine providence is discussed at

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greater length in the next article. Here we are to remember that the world can neither exist nor be understood by us apart from the continual government of God.

The purpose of creation is briefly delineated. God has made all things *for the service of mankind, to the end that man may serve his God.*

The Bible unhesitatingly places man at the center of the created order. This harmonizes with its teachings concerning man as image-bearer.

Few teachings of Scripture have been more consistently ridiculed than this. Already in ancient times this view of the church was attacked. Celsus, the arch-enemy of the gospel in the third century, considered the idea absurd. In our own day philosophers and scientists have poured their vials of scorn upon it. But their notions have begotten a pessimistic philosophy of life which robs human life of all meaning, aspiration and hope.

Yet the welfare and happiness of man is not the highest goal of creation. The *Confession* goes a step farther and speaks Biblically when it affirms that God has subjected all things to man's dominion to the end that man may live in obedience to the praise of God. To Noah God said, "Be fruitful, and multiply and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every bird of the heavens; with all wherewith the ground teemeth, and all the fishes of the sea, into your hand are they delivered." (Gen. 9:1, 2) By this act God enables man to serve him in all things to his glory. Only then can man say with the psalmist, who sings praise to God, "O Jehovah, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:6-9) And confronted with the unsearchable judgments and ways of God, Paul exclaims, "For of him, and through him, and unto him are all things. To him be the glory for ever." (Rom. 11:36)

The Creation of the Angels

Much more attention is devoted in article 12 to the existence of the spiritual or angelic world than to the problems surrounding

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of "angels that kept not their own principality, but left their proper habitation" whom God "hath kept in everlasting bonds under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." (Jude 6) Great power is ascribed to them. They are the army of God's mighty heroes, always ready to do his bidding. "Bless Jehovah, ye his angels, that are mighty in strength, that fulfill his word, hearkening unto the voice of his word." (Ps. 103:20)

How great their number is God has not revealed. But that they constitute a mighty host is evident from the Bible. The Old Testament plainly indicates this, "Jehovah came from Sinai . . . from the ten thousands of his holy ones." (Deut. 33:2) In the last book John describes what he saw, "And I saw, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands." (Rev. 5:11) Among them there is definite organization, even though they are not organically related to each other as is the human race. Mention is made of cherubim, who reveal especially the majesty and power and glory of God, and seraphim, who stand about the throne of God and apparently serve the purposes of reconciling man to God. There are also distinctions of rank and dignity among them, for not only are two archangels mentioned by name but we also read of principalities and powers, of thrones and dominions. (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:16; Eph. 1:21)

The *Confession* mentions only two of their tasks. Our attention is directed to their position as *messengers* of the Most High. Often they mediated the special revelations of God. We find them most prominent at crucial seasons in the story of salvation. Upon several occasions they appeared to the patriarchs. Again we read of their ministry when Israel was delivered out of Egypt. In the days of the exile and restoration they were often sent to bring God's messages to men. But especially are they mentioned in connection with the birth, ministry, sufferings, resurrection and ascension of our Lord. In all this they are said *to serve his* (i.e. God's) *elect*.

Their existence and ministry may never be obscured by the

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church. God has spoken too plainly on this subject for us to find any excuse for neglecting the doctrine of the angels. That their ministry continues through the ages is taught clearly. "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?" (Hebr. 1:14) Thus we read that they rejoice over the conversion of sinners. (Luke 15:10) They are said to watch over the believers and preserve them from harm. (Ps. 34:7; 91:11) Jesus even calls attention to their care for the little ones. (Matt. 18:10) They are present in the church (I Cor. 11:10) and seek to learn from her something of the manifold grace of God. (Eph. 3:10) At the close of life they are the ministers of God who convey believers to the bosom of Abraham in glory. (Luke 16:22) Although we recognize and respect them, the church may never venerate and adore the angels who are creatures even as we.

The Devils and Their Activities

Much more is said about the evil than the good angels. This undoubtedly should be traced to the persecutions which the church suffered at the time when the *Confession* was drawn up.

Although the angels were created good, some left their first estate and plunged themselves into irrevocable ruin. The details of their fall are not related in Scripture, since knowledge of this is neither necessary nor profitable for us. Yet there are indications that it was prompted by pride and a desire to be as God. (I Tim. 3:6; Jude 6) These evil spirits are organized under a head, often called Satan in the Bible. This denotes him as the enemy or adversary not first of all of man but of God. He is the destroyer who attacks the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Together with his allies he is superhuman but not divine. Great power is ascribed to these hosts of wickedness, yet they are limited by the sovereignty of God.

Concerning the serious consequences of their fall we are also informed. Satan and his followers apparently sinned without being tempted from without. They are now *so depraved, that they are enemies of God and every good thing*. From this ruin they

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cannot be delivered but *are daily expecting their horrible torments.*

Living in that awful abyss of corruption the devils delight in nothing more than to vent their hatred of God and all good by seeking the ruin of the church. Much is made in Holy Writ of their attacks upon the saints. We are therefore commanded to flee the devil, to resist his attacks, and to be on guard especially when he transforms himself as an angel of light. Yet in all this the evil spirits remain under God's control, who permits their raging but has set definite limits to their destructive work. The result of all these vicious and cruel attacks will be the glory of God who will triumph completely when he comes to judge them publicly and consigns them to the eternal damnation which has been reserved for them.

For some decades this doctrine of the devils was completely obscured in the churches. Since the recent wars and the horrible atrocities which have been perpetrated by the Nazis and later by the Communists, many theologians have turned again to a belief in the demonic. So completely irrational and inexplicable has been the conduct of men and nations, that the ancient teachings of the church on the basis of God's word are receiving a hearing. But most of these theologians still regard the Biblical references as unreliable and tinged with superstition. Not a few have fallen into the dualistic error of regarding these dark and demonic powers as operating quite independently of God's control.

All this makes the warnings of *Confession* up to date. On the one hand, *we reject and abhor the error of the Sadducees, who deny the existence of spirits and angels.* This error is still with us today. In a more refined form it assails our minds and hearts by tempting us to think and live as if such spirits did not exist. On the other hand, we also repudiate the theory of the *Manichees, who assert that the devils have their origin of themselves.* To posit at the heart of the universe next to God an eternal principle of the dark and demonic is Manicheism dressed up for modern times. Such a theory fails to recognize God as God.

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1. Which reasons can you assign for the prevailing pessimism of the western world today? 2. Are there evidences of general revelation in the myths and legends of the heathen? Explain. 3. What is the Babylonian view of the origin of the world? Is it similar to the Biblical account? 4. What is meant by the Creator-creature relationship? How and why is it fundamental to all true knowledge? 5. What is meant by theistic evolution? Evaluate its general approach. 6. How far may the church proceed in officially evaluating scientific theories? 7. How does the Christian doctrine of creation escape the pitfalls of both deism and pantheism? 8. How should Genesis 1 and 2 be interpreted? 9. Show how Barth's view of creation does injustice both to the doctrines of creation and of Christ. 10. How can we harmonize creation out of nothing with the Biblical account of man's creation? 11. How old is the earth? Does the Confession allow for an earth possibly billions of years old? 12. What is the meaning of the word day in Genesis 1? 13. How should we interpret the phrase: after their kind? 14. Does everything have a useful purpose? 15. How does science generally regard man's place in the universe? 16. Of what significance is the doctrine of angels for us? 17. How sharply does the Bible distinguish cherubim and seraphim? 18. What is the relation of Christ to the angels? 19. Does the Scripture allow for the idea of guardian angels for every individual? 20. By what names does Scripture call the evil angels? What do these names mean?

Chapter 13

The Providence of God

We believe that the same God, after He had created all things, did not forsake them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that He rules and governs them according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment; nevertheless, God neither is the Author of nor can be charged with the sins which are committed. For His power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible that

He orders and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even then when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And as to what He does surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire into farther than our capacity will admit of; but with the greatest humility and reverence adore the righteous judgments of God, which are hid from us, contenting ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, to learn only those things which He has revealed to us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.

This doctrine affords us unspeakable consolation, since we are taught thereby that nothing can befall us by chance, but by the direction of our most gracious and heavenly Father; who watches over us with a paternal care, keeping all creatures so under His power that "not a hair of our head (for they are all numbered), nor a sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father," in whom we do entirely trust; being persuaded that He so restrains the devil and all our enemies that without His will and permission they cannot hurt us.

And therefore we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing but leaves all things to chance.

ARTICLE XIII

ALL RELIGIONS acknowledge some form of divine government of the world. Even the heathen have preserved the notion that a higher hand rules the destinies of men and nations. It need not surprise us, therefore, that with one consent the Christian churches have professed to believe in providence. This teaching is etched so clearly on the pages of Holy Writ and follows so directly from the Biblical doctrine of God, that we should rather be amazed that the church's practical life has been sharply divorced from her theory.

In the light of her confession, the church ought readily to approve the testimony of John Flavel, "It is a great support and solace of the saints in all the distresses that befall them here, that there is a wise Spirit sitting in all the wheels of motion, and governing the most excentrical creatures and their most pernicious designs to blessed and happy issues. And, indeed, it were not worth while to live in a world devoid of God and providence."¹

Yet the church is far from agreed on the doctrine of divine providence. Many seem to be getting along quite well without any real conviction that there is "the same God, who worketh all things in all." (I Cor. 12:6) Some differences root in the shifting emphases of Christendom's theologians. Others are the result of the cataclysmic events of the past half century which have prompted men to ask, "Where is now thy God?" (Ps. 42:3, 10) Not a few in every age have been so overwhelmed with personal tragedies that they felt compelled to admit faith in a God too small for their needs. Many who still profess to be Christians cannot in good conscience subscribe to the formulation of article 13. This rejection of the specifically Augustinian and Reformed view of God's providence constitutes one of the chief challenges to the witnessing church today.

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The Corrosion of the Church's Armor

When the believing church seeks to meet the challenges of daily life, she should be clothed in the armor of God's promise. In thought and heart, she knows herself strong in the Lord. This was the steadfast assurance of the singers of the Old Testament, who praised God amid the greatest perils. We hear the sons of Korah singing, "Why art thou cast down, o my soul? and why are thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him, who is the help of my countenance, and my God." (Ps. 42:11) In the full assurance of faith David confesses in the face of his calamities, "I will cry unto God Most High, unto God that performeth all things for me." (Ps. 57:2)

This high note has strangely died away in recent years.

In contrast with the optimism of the nineteenth century, our generation feels defeated and disillusioned. When the tides of the first World War washed their wreckage over Europe, men sought an explanation for the tragedy in the pessimistic philosophy of Oswald Spengler. He was convinced that the western world had entered its winter season. The decades which followed did not make it easier for the church to witness to a God who worketh all things after the counsel of his will. The concentration camps and gas chambers of the Nazis still haunt the hearts of men. Global wars have wreaked mass destruction on tens of thousands who were innocent of any conspiracy against other nations. The stark terror which walked abroad at high noon in Hungary after its ill-fated uprising and still stalks in unnumbered slave-labor camps in Communistic countries is too much with us to make the confession of God's appointment of all things in this world an easy matter. These words may come lightly to our lips, when we worship in our comfortable churches or take our ease in cozy homes. They are apt to sound off-key, when we preach them publicly throughout the nations which have tasted the violence of the wicked.

The incongruity of the doctrine of divine providence in this present world has been felt throughout the ages. Ours is

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not the first to taste the bitter dregs of suffering and sin. We ought to be able to understand why Feuerbach, Freud and Nietzsche regarded this doctrine as merely the pious projection of our own desires. Marx considered the notion that God controls all things as a bourgeois escapism. Many liberals, while still professing to believe in the Christian God, have watered down providence to include only those things which are good and lovely and pleasing. Anything which smacks of evil they assigned to man apart from God's direction. In their theories we see the ripened fruit of humanism, the seeds of which were widely scattered by not only Pelagius and Arminius but also Thomas Aquinas. The good God can only do that which seems good to man. In their views there is little room for wrath and judgment. Even among the pagan Greeks and Romans we find noble expressions of faith in a providence which overrules all things. But when these people faced the fears and frustrations of daily living, they sought refuge for their minds and hearts by explaining the hard facts of life as the fruits of fate and chance. Past ages might well join with our own to sing the raucous song in the last scene of *Cavalcade* on the twentieth century blues which "are getting me down."²

Ever since the Renaissance man's thought has ceaselessly swung between the extremes of optimism and pessimism. The new learning stimulated him to assert his ability to control the world in which he lived. Out of this was modern science born. But today our knowledge has gotten out of control. What was to have been the servant of man is now a Moloch ready to devour his children. The universe has turned out to be man's foe. Here he suffers and struggles and is beaten down by forces too strong for him to subdue. Having lost his way, he feels there is nothing to strive for, love or keep alive for.

In sharp contrast with the anguish of the human race the words of article 13 seem so strange and abstract. Yet they are tried and true. All the statements which the church here makes are pure gold refined in the crucible of her own struggle and sufferings. Before the Reformation the doctrine of divine provi-

dence was abstractly debated in the halls of Roman theological learning. God was redefined in terms of Occam's nominalism, which regarded him as free from all law and capricious in his acts. Man as image-bearer was also regarded as free and unpredictable in his actions. Among the more pious a discussion of the mysteries of divine providence was cut off as unprofitable and apt to make men irreligious. In practice the people and even many of the clergy sought refuge in magic and superstition. The God of the Scriptures was to all practical purposes excluded from their thought and plans. When the Bible was again preached in its purity and relentless persecution was meted out to those who believed its message, the doctrine of divine providence as taught in Holy Writ and expounded by Augustine came alive. Faith once more began to proclaim God and his gracious care of those who trusted in his word.

Faith in divine providence is not an article which we hold in common with non-Christians. To this Calvin calls our attention, when he writes, "For although the minds even of impious men, by the mere contemplation of earth and heaven, are constrained to rise to the Creator, yet faith has a way peculiar to itself to assign to God the whole praise of creation."² There is a general testimony that the same God who made the world is still in control. But only the Christian who lives by God's word can understand and believe and trust what is here affirmed. In all circumstances he has learned to affirm with the prophet, "O Jehovah, I know that the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." (Jer. 10:23) The personal challenge to repentance and faith is the heart of the church's witness to the world concerning the providence of God in these days. Only faith will keep the armor of the church clean and bright from the corrosives of modern unbelief.

The All-Controlling Activity of God

This article begins with a triumphant confession. It speaks of *the same God* who has been confessed earlier. He is the one who *created all things* and thereafter *did not forsake them, or give them up to fortune or chance*. This language needs to be heard again in the streets and homes.

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From the beginning the Christian church took sharp issue with the two prevailing schools of pagan thought on the way in which the world is run. Among the Greeks and Romans were many Epicureans who believed that the world is governed by chance. More noble in several respects were the Stoics who insisted that all things were controlled by fate. Without hesitation the early believers acknowledged that the almighty and gracious God preserves and governs from moment to moment the world and all it contains.

Although this was the common faith of the church, the doctrine of divine providence was not developed until much later. Augustine, who was born in 354 and died in 430, taught in systematic form that everything was under the government of the sovereign, wise and living God of the Scriptures. In his struggle against the Pelagians, who maintained the unrestricted freedom of the human will, he insisted that God controls and directs the evil as well as the good. By stressing the reality of second causes he safeguarded both God's holiness and man's responsibility. Gradually the church of the middle ages departed from this teaching, which was not recovered until the time of the Reformation.

Providence is that continued and continual exercise of divine power by which God as the Creator and Lord of all preserves all his creatures, acts in everything that comes to pass in the universe, and directs all things to their appointed end. All this for the Reformed believer involves a full and honest recognition of the second causes which God is pleased to employ as instruments for his purpose. When a house catches fire, this may appropriately be assigned to the carelessness and neglect of men. When wars sweep through the land, we may properly speak of many secondary causes such as the shortsightedness and wilfulness of statesmen and rulers, the indolence or chauvinism of the people, or the economic pressures which prompt men to seek gain at the expense of others. Likewise, when bountiful harvests cheer our hearts, we may attribute this in a measure to the use of good seed or diligent labor as well as to a happy combination of rainfall and sunshine. But to use the words of

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Calvin, "whoever has been taught from the mouth of Christ, that the hairs of his head are all numbered, will seek further for a cause, and conclude that all events are governed by the secret counsel of God."⁴

Three aspects of divine providence are generally distinguished, in order that we may speak correctly and comfortingly about what God has told us concerning his control of all things. These the church has usually called preservation, cooperation and government.

By means of his preservation God upholds all creatures, maintaining in them those qualities with which he has endowed them at the time of their creation. The Scriptures abundantly testify to this divine activity. "Thou art Jehovah, even thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all things that are therein, the seas and all all that is in them, and thou preservest them all." (Neh. 9:6) The psalmist confesses, "The eyes of all wait for thee; and thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest thy hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing." (Ps. 145:15, 16) The world and its fulness belong to the Lord, who not only upholds his inanimate creation but also sustains life among plants and animals, men and angels. If God would but withdraw his hand from the world for a moment, all would be dissolved.

This affirmation is quite different from the view of "continuous creation" advocated in recent years by Karl Heim. His position is that the world is created each instant out of nothing, just as on the first day of creation. This view is by no means new, having been advocated in one form or another many centuries ago. Yet the church has steadfastly rejected it as contrary to Scripture. What happened "in the beginning" can never be repeated. When certain Reformed theologians used the term, they gave it content quite different from that of Heim, seeking to stress only the continual dependence of all creatures on their Creator in opposition to pantheistic notions which efface the distinction between God and that which he has made. The uniqueness of God's activity in the beginning may never be

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obscured. We read in the Bible, "Of old didst thou lay the foundations of the earth" (Ps. 104:25) and again, "One generation goeth, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever." (Eccl. 1:4)

Yet this doctrine of divine preservation must not be whittled down to a bare minimum. By it the church confesses her faith not only in the activity of God by which he keeps all things in existence. The Bible clearly indicates that the Creator is the overflowing fountain of all life and good, so that his everywhere-present activity is a direct revelation of himself. We can never be satisfied with a view of providence which regards this world merely as a neutral backdrop for God's realization of his eternal counsel. It rather speaks eloquently of the nature and attributes of God. Peter does not hesitate to refer in this connection to the longsuffering of the Lord, when speaking of the long centuries of world history. (II Peter 3:9) Therein his sovereignty is also proclaimed. (Ps. 93:2-4) Asaph meditating on the mighty works of God speaks of his incomprehensibility. (Ps. 77:12, 19) Another sweet singer of Israel tells of the comfort and hope which the knowledge of God's preservation of the mountains gives to those who trust in him. (Ps. 125:2) In the light of his providential activities we learn to know not only that God is but also who and what he is.

Closely associated with preservation is God's cooperation or concurrence. Here we confess that he so acts in and through all his creatures, according to the laws of their being which he himself has created and maintains, that he both causes them to act and to act precisely as they do. Since this has been frequently denied by those who seek to maintain human freedom at all costs, the *Confession* has a great deal to say at this point. Because of the entrance of sin and its consequences in our present world, this confession is possibly among the most mysterious and mystifying which the Scriptures lay upon our lips. More will have to be said about it in the next section. Yet we are to remember that the Bible speaks without equivocation on this point. To Israel, who was commanded to work diligently for livelihood, God commanded through Moses, "But thou shalt re-

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member Jehovah thy God, for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth." (Deut.8:18) Solomon is convinced that "the king's heart is in the hand of Jehovah as the watercourses: he turneth it whithersoever he will." (Prov. 21:1) Even in the lives of devils and sinful men a direct activity on the part of God must be discerned and acknowledged. "Now therefore, behold, Jehovah hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of these thy prophets; and Jehovah hath spoken evil concerning thee." (I Kgs. 22:23) Nor is this toned down in the New Testament. Paul affirms, "And for this cause God sendeth them a working of error, that they should believe a lie." (II Thess. 2:11)

With respect to God's government we acknowledge that he so rules all things that they serve his glorious purpose which can never be thwarted. God alone is king of the universe. Again it must be clearly understood and remembered that this government in no way violates the nature of his creatures. He governs the physical world by means of laws which apply peculiarly to its various aspects. In the government of his moral agents God makes use of moral influences of many kinds. But when all is said and done, the believer in his thought rises above every second cause and attributes the direction of all things to God who works everything *according to His holy will, so that nothing happens in this world without His appointment.*

In this connection we do well to remember that as Christians we refuse to be forced into a choice between determinism or indeterminism. This choice is forced only upon philosophers who in their speculation have failed to reckon with the unique relation which the created order sustains to the Creator. The question is not simply that of man being either free or bound. Man is fully free within the limits of his nature. These have been determined by God the Creator and are upheld by him throughout all of history. But these inherent limitations do not do violence to the constitutional nature and moral freedom of man. The problem, indeed, assumes a different shape when we face the insoluble riddle of sin and its entrance into the world. Here we face the fact of a creature which has corrupted himself by his own voluntary choice. By this act he lost the freedom to choose

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the highest good. But even now man does what he himself wills to do, although it must be asserted with equal vigor that it is God "who worketh all things after the counsel of his will." (Eph. 1:11)

As Reformed believers, therefore, we use only with hesitation the construction of first and second causes, since this can so easily be misconstrued after the fashion of Roman Catholic theology. In the vertical relation between God and man, which operates effectively moment by moment, faith recognizes the mysteries which surpass our comprehension. As we seek to do justice to all the facets of Scriptural truth, we soon discover that our thought is overwhelmed by the majesty and greatness of our God who works all things according to his will and yet in whom there is no unrighteousness at all. Everywhere we see the hand of God in history, directing individuals and nations, believers and unbelievers. Yet we fully acknowledge man's creaturely freedom and responsibility. This double emphasis of God's word convinces us that history is no mere illusion. Much less is it a meaningless mass of idle and isolated happenings. In the words of Berkouwer, "That is the terrible seriousness of history, that God works in it, and that man is responsible for it."⁵

God's Providence and Sin

If we were living in a normal world, a world which had retained the pristine beauty which it manifested when first created by God, the doctrine of divine providence would present no problem to our minds and hearts.

But now sin has entered the world, and with it all the torments and tortures of body and soul which the human race has experienced. As a creature in whom reason has been preserved and to whom choices remain meaningful, man finds himself pondering the imponderables. He seeks an answer to the whys and wherefores which daily obsess his mind. In this activity he betrays himself as an image-bearer of God. Among all peoples there have been those who sought to explain the riddles of life. Without exception they have found themselves confronted with

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that which is inexplicable. No one has yet satisfactorily answered why there should be both good and bad in this world.

The Bible does not solve the problem of sin as it vexes the intellect. It simply affirms that sin is folly; and folly defies all rational explanation. This does not imply that the church refuses to say anything further about the matter. In times past there were pious people who sought refuge in such an escape. Yet their attitude betrays a refusal to wrestle with what God has plainly revealed to us in his word concerning the presence, nature and power of sin. Certain matters are clearly stated. These must be believed, even though we cannot fully harmonize them with our minds.

We face a tremendous problem as soon as we seek to explain the presence and power of sin in a world which is completely under the control of God. Yet the *Confession* strives to face this problem honestly.

Although all things come only by divine appointment, it insists that *nevertheless, God neither is the author of, nor can be charged with, the sins which are committed.* To incline in this direction, even to the least extent, would be to impugn his truthfulness, to deny his holiness, and to sully his great goodness. All Reformed believers, in spite of repeated accusations and calumnies hurled against them and their view of divine providence, reject categorically that God is in any sense the author of sin. Therefore he cannot in any sense be held responsible for and chargeable with it.

But having said this, the believer on the basis of the Scriptures must say much more. In language which cannot be misunderstood it ascribes all things to the activity of God. No creature can so much as move apart from his will. "Jehovah hath made everything for its own end; yea even the wicked for the day of evil." (Prov. 16:4) Speaking of the evils which come upon the nations, Isaiah declares, "For Jehovah of hosts hath purposed, and who shall annul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isa. 14:27) To maintain a freedom of human action apart from God's control in these

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matters is to fly in the face of what God himself has said. Speaking of those who wilfully reject the gospel, Peter does not hesitate to go so far as to state, "For they stumble at the word, being disobedient; whereunto also they were appointed." (I Peter 2:8) Thus God speaks of himself as hardening the heart of Pharaoh and sending an evil spirit upon Saul. In Ezekiel we hear God saying, "And if the prophet be deceived and speak a word, I, Jehovah, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel." (Ezek. 14:9)

The problem comes into its sharpest focus in connection with the death of our Lord. For without hesitation the Bible tells us that this was the will and counsel of God for our redemption. God plainly sent his only-begotten Son into the world, in order that he might die for our sins. To this end God himself arranged and directed all the events of our Savior's betrayal and death. Yet the wicked men who slew him were fully responsible for their deeds. This Peter affirms in these words, "Him, being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye by the hand of lawless men did crucify and slay." (Acts 2:23)

Because of these and many other strong statements which the Scriptures employ to designate God's control over men when they are sinning, Calvin and with him the Reformed churches reject the idea that this consists only in a bare permission on God's part. We refuse to regard God merely as a passive spectator much less as a helpless bystander.

Concerning God's relation to all events and acts of men, including their sins, we confess the following. (1) All such events occur according to God's predetermination and purpose. This is not merely foreknowledge in the sense that God knows ahead of time what men shall do. All uncertainty is ruled out by God's counsel. "Jehovah of hosts hath sworn, saying, Surely as I have thought, so shall it come to pass; and as I have purposed so shall it stand." (Isa. 14:24) (2) This predetermination of God in no way rules out the full moral responsibility of man for his

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acts. He is never forced contrary to his mind and will to do that which is evil. Rather, he commits sin by his own decision. (3) Although the sinful deeds of men occur according to God's predetermination, yet God himself is not the author of sin nor responsible for their deeds. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempteth no man: but each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed." (Jas. 1:13, 14) (4) God, however, controls also the sinful acts of men and overrules the evil which men intend by the good ends which he has purposed. This is clearly evident from the story of Joseph. "And as for you, ye meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive." (Gen. 10:20)

On the basis of these and similar passages of Holy Writ we confess, *For his power and goodness are so great and incomprehensible, that he orders and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner, even then, when devils and wicked men act unjustly.* Much of what the Most High does, especially in connection with the sinful deeds of men and devils, far surpasses our understanding. We are therefore cautioned against prying curiously into the impenetrable mysteries of God's dealings with mankind. Here the church fully recognizes our limitations and forbids us to go beyond that which the Scriptures plainly teach. What we are rather to do is *with the greatest humility adore the righteous judgments of God*, even as the psalmist when commenting on the mighty works of the Lord among all peoples exclaims, "Thy way was in the sea, and thy paths in the great waters, and thy footsteps were not known." (Ps. 77:19) The presence and power of sin in a world which was created good and perfect by God and governed by his efficacious will ever remain an inscrutable mystery to us. Therefore we are counselled to content ourselves *that we are pupils of Christ, to learn only those things what He has revealed to us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.*

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The Consolations of God's Providence

The *Confession* was written in times of severe persecution. Thousands of Reformed believers were cruelly put to death by the authorities largely at the instigation of the Roman church and priests. For many of these true believers the question arose how their sufferings could be harmonized with the Biblical teaching of God's gracious and fatherly care of his own. Yet as they clung to the word they found *unspeakable consolation* in its promises which assured them that the Sovereign of the universe never slumbers or sleeps. Their God was able to avert all evil or otherwise turn it to their profit.

To them God was not for a moment removed from the activities of life. They urged as their deepest conviction that all things happened *by His holy will*. In all things, even their sorrows, pains and griefs, they recognized and professed the direction *of our most gracious and heavenly Father*. For them there could be no doubt either that God loved them with an eternal and unchangeable love or that he was able to control all things. All creatures, including even their most inveterate enemies, were in the hands of the Lord.

Thus they urged a complete and childlike trust in God. To them this was the secret of a blessed and victorious life for the children of God. Here lies the challenge of the doctrine of God's providence for believers in every age. Only in the measure in which they confide in the sovereign and gracious rule of the heavenly Father will their lives be free from worry, fear and doubt. This produces within their hearts a peace which passes all understanding and enables them to look beyond the dangers and disappointments of this life to the eternal inheritance which is reserved for all them that trust the mercies of the Lord. Also the *Heidelberg Catechism* speaks of this spiritual comfort which accrues to those who look to God. The profit of knowing that God has created and by his providence still upholds all things is "that we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and with a view to the future may have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall

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separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move."⁶

Modern Denials of God's Providence

The *Confession* realized that faith in God's providential appointment of all things is under repeated attack. It therefore singled out one great foe and thereby condemned also all other views which militate against what the Bible plainly teaches. *And therefore we reject that damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God regards nothing, but leaves all things to chance.* Any theory which obscures, minimizes or repudiates the continual and comprehensive activity of God in this world must be regarded as suspect and unscriptural.

Since the days of the Reformation the doctrine of divine providence has been subjected to many attacks. With the rise of the natural sciences men mocked the idea of miracles and acknowledged rather the reign of natural law. God has either been far removed from the activities of the human race and shut up in his heaven or else been redefined as an impersonal force to be equated with natural law. For some generations a spirit of boundless optimism concerning the future of mankind prevailed. It was argued that the race was climbing continually onward and upward, as new discoveries concerning man and his world were made. So completely was everything under human control, that many were confident that within the foreseeable future sickness, famines and wars would be successfully relegated to the dark ages of the past.

The temper of the times has changed, and with it the temper of men's minds.

All the horrible events of the past fifty years have compelled men to face anew the reality of evil. Instead of indulging in optimistic visions of the future, the leaders have sounded warnings of the coming of a new dark age. Today it is fashionable to embrace a nihilistic philosophy which argues that nothing in this life makes sense. Those who still remember the historic

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Christian confession of divine providence speak of the demonic, the irrational forces which work for disorder and destruction. Not a few remain convinced that our scientific knowledge prohibits the intelligent from putting trust in a personal and sovereign God whom they have never seen. The best that worldly thought offers is to take life as it is with the courage of whistling in the dark. Yet this best has torn hope from the human heart. The easiest way out of the impasse is to stop thinking. Where this fails, men try to drown their sorrows in the mad pursuit of pleasure. If then the tears still flow and the heart breaks, only suicide remains as an escape from the meaningless round of a life filled with problems too great for the mind of man to solve.

The Christian has a vital message for today's world. His faith that God rules all things wisely and well, even though we cannot fathom his purposes or understand his ways, gives peace and courage to those who take the word of the Lord seriously. Faced with an existence too complicated for our minds to unravel, the Christian lifts his heart to God and exclaims with Paul, "O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out . . . For of him, and through him, and unto him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen." (Rom. 11:33-36)

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1. Are there similarities between the Christian and pagan views of God's government of the world? 2. Are difficulties and calamities conducive to spirituality? 3. What were the views of Oswald Spengler? 4. Why is it so difficult for American Christians to take the doctrine of providence seriously? 5. Show how Pelagians and Arminians do injustice to the Biblical doctrine of providence. 6. What are fate and chance? 7. What was the fallacy of Occam's nominalism? 8. What were the positions of the Stoics and the Epicureans? Do they have disciples today? 9. What is meant by second causes and how do they operate? 10. Does the doctrine of second causes infringe on God's sovereignty? Explain. 11. How did some Reformed theologians speak of continuous creation? Was this justified? 12. Is it legitimate to conclude from external events to God's attitude? Explain. 13. How can God send a working of error without being morally responsible for man's sin? 14. Why has the church refused to be chained by the dilemma of determinism-indeterminism? 15. How can a meaningful philosophy of history be constructed only on the basis of faith in God's providence? 16. What is the essential nature of sin? 17. Is it wrong for believers to ask why certain events happen? 18. On which grounds have Reformed theologians refused to ascribe sin's entrance into the world to mere permission on God's part? 19. Is it intellectually defensible and honest to claim that God's relation to sin exceeds our comprehension? 20. Which limits may never be transgressed when speaking of God's control of all things? 20. How can we harmonize suffering with the infinite love of God? 22. Is all worry sinful? 23. What is nihilism? What forms does it take today? Explain its appeal. 24. What are miracles? Do they require a suspension of the laws of nature?

Chapter 14

The Sin of Man

We believe that God created man out of the dust of the earth, and made and formed him after His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God. But "being in honor, he understood it not," neither knew his excellency, but wilfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life,

which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he has lost his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and retained only small remains thereof, which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse; for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness, as the Scriptures teach us, saying: "The light shineth in the darkness, and the darkness apprehended it not"; where St. John calls men darkness.

Therefore we reject all that is taught repugnant to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin, and "can receive nothing, except it have been given him from heaven." For who may presume to boast that he of himself can do any good since Christ says: "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him?" Who will glory in his own will, who understands that "the mind of the flesh is enmity against God?" Who can speak of his knowledge, since "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God?" In short, who dare suggest any thought, since he knows that "we are not sufficient of ourselves to account anything as of ourselves, but that our sufficiency is of God?" And therefore what the apostle says ought justly to be held sure and firm, that "God worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." For there is no understanding nor will conformable to the divine understanding and will but what Christ has wrought in man; which He teaches us, when He says: "Apart from me ye can do nothing."

ARTICLE XIV

MANY VALUABLE things come in small packages.

In daily life we soon learn that it's not quantity but quality that counts. The costliest diamonds weigh but a few carats. A ten thousand dollar banknote slips into a small place. In somewhat the same way this article in comparatively few sentences presents some of life's most significant principles. It summarizes God's revelation concerning man in the light of which alone we can learn to know ourselves truly.

Among the most important Christian doctrines are the ones outlined here. Our original dignity as well as our present sinful state are described. Not until we understand how God created man for the purpose of glorifying and enjoying him forever, will we be able to realize the abyss into which the human race has plunged itself or the divine mercies which alone can save us.

These doctrines, therefore, are of profound significance for the Christian life. They illumine the struggles of the human heart which cries for peace with God. They point to the resting place which the soul finds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Several phrases can be understood only against the background of great controversies for sound doctrine. Here we see in sharp focus the differences between Pelagius and Augustine, between Erasmus and Luther, between Roman Catholic and Reformed theology. Since doctrine is of one piece, divergent convictions on man's constitutional nature and his fall imply radically different conceptions of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

The Dependence and Dignity of Man

Great principles are the mark of a great mind.

The church in her witness to the world does not concern

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herself with expendable frills and fripperies. What she proclaims is the message of God concerning sin and grace. If in the manufacture of a watch or plane exact measurements are essential, how much more necessary is it to speak precisely when considering the nature and destiny of our lives.

This article, however, is not a theological treatise. Its perspective, to use the happy phrase of John Mackay, is not that of the balcony but of the road. Here we listen to the pilgrim who sees himself in the light of God's will for man's life, realizes both his unwillingness and inability to return to him who is his life, and rests his case in the everlasting mercies. This accounts for the structure of the material. Although the doctrine of man's creation in the image of God is clearly outlined, much more attention is devoted to the consequences of sin, especially the bondage of the will. The facts so clearly stated in God's word are not for a moment questioned. The believer refuses to reduce creation to a myth, an imaginative story which is told only for the purpose of illumining abiding truths. But while confessing the historicity of the record in its every detail, he is concerned at the same time with their significance for his life. What is at stake is the glory of God and the salvation of his soul. Together with the believing church of all ages he refuses to give quarter to any notion which obscures the trustworthiness of God's word at this point.

Already in the previous article we confessed that God made all things as seemed good unto him, giving to every creature its being, shape, form and several offices. Now the implications of the doctrine of creation for man are discussed. Man, according to the Scriptures, is the chief of all God's works. He outranks even the angels of heaven. "For not unto angels did he subject the world to come, whereof we speak. But one hath somewhere testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man, that thou visitest him? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: Thou didst put all things in subjection under his feet." (Hebr. 2:5-8)

Here the church acknowledges both the dependence and

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dignity of mankind. As a creature he is completely dependent upon God, who fashioned him both body and soul. The former was fashioned from the elements which are found on earth. The Bible speaks of this as "the dust of the ground." (Gen. 2:7) This phrase does not mean mud, as some sceptics irreverently declare. But lest man form too high an opinion of himself, it is recorded that constitutionally man is "of the earth, earthy." (I Cor. 15:4) This thought has been frequently expressed in the devotional literature of the church. Many of the same laws which limit other creatures operate in his life. He is a creature of time and space. Yet to reduce him to the level of brute creation is unwarranted. Man is more than a rational animal. His soul or spiritual nature was breathed into him by God, thus setting him apart from all other beings.

The *Confession* adheres, without mentioning this explicitly, to the usual Christian opinion on man's constitutional nature. We speak of him as composed of body and soul. This view is called *dichotomy*. Under the influence of Greek philosophy some theologians have espoused *trichotomy*, the opinion that man is composed of body and soul and spirit. The soul is then usually regarded as his sentient life which serves as an intermediary or link between the physical and spiritual world. Although prevalent among the early Greek fathers, it was rejected by Athanasius and especially by Augustine with the result that in western Christendom it has been commonly accepted that man consists of body and soul. This is the prevailing emphasis of the Bible. Yet it does not allow for the idea that man is a duality, consisting of two rather distinct and disparate parts each of which develops along its own lines and according to its own powers. Every act is regarded as an act of the whole man. The intimate relation which body and soul sustain to each other according to the Bible may never be ignored. Christians refuse to fall into the error of regarding the body as of little worth; much less as being inherently sinful. It is never the soul in isolation which sins; man sins. It is not only the body which suffers and dies; man is said to suffer and die. In the glorious work of redemption, Christ reconciles and restores the whole man, both body and soul, to the fellowship of God.

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Both the dependence and dignity of man come into sharpest relief when we discuss his creation in the image of God. This is spelled out for us in some detail. *We believe that God . . . made and formed him after His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God.*

Many crucial debates in theology have centered around this subject. The earliest fathers did not deal with the matter explicitly, even though references to God's image in man are abundant in their writings. Not until the time of Pelagius and Augustine was the significance of this Biblical doctrine more clearly recognized and expressed. Several aspects of Augustine's teaching have exerted a great influence especially on evangelical Protestant theology. He refused to endorse the distinction which Irenaeus made between *image* and *likeness*. Although admitting that the latter word is vaguer than the former, he believed that the distinction should not be pressed. The image of God he discovered not in the body but the soul of man. It comes to clearest expression in man's rational nature, which distinguishes him radically from the animal world. Frequently Augustine referred to those texts which speak of man's dominion over all things. According to him what man lost by his wilful transgression in Paradise has been specified in two statements of the apostle Paul. (Eph. 4:23, 24; Col. 3:9, 10) These passages are of greatest importance for understanding wherein the divine image in man's life consisted.

Both Luther and Calvin followed the lead of Augustine on this subject. Some of the statements of Calvin demonstrate this clearly. "A solid proof of this point may also be gathered from man being said to be created in the image of God. For though the glory of God is displayed in his external form, yet there is no doubt that the proper seat of his image is in the soul. I admit that external form, as it distinguishes us from the brutes, also exalts us more nearly to God . . . Only let it be decided that the image of God, which appears or sparkles in these external characters, is spiritual."¹ He repudiated the notion, which has become current in another form in the dialectical theology, that

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man is created after the image of Christ. We are made after the image and in the likeness of the triune God. The closest we find to a definition is outlined thus, "The term, therefore, denotes the integrity which Adam possessed, when he was endued with a right understanding, when he had affections regulated by reason, and all his senses governed in proper order, and when, in the excellency of his nature, he truly resembled the excellence of his Creator. And though the principal seat of the Divine image was in the mind and heart or in the soul and its faculties, yet there was no part of man, not even the body, which was not adorned with some rays of its glory."² More specifically he would deduce the precise aspects of this image from what Paul says concerning our spiritual renewal in Christ, alluding again to the same texts which Augustine mentioned. "Now, we may see what Paul comprehends in this renovation. In the first place, he mentions knowledge, and in the next place, sincere righteousness and holiness; whence we infer, that in the beginning the image of God was conspicuous in the light of the mind, in the rectitude of the heart, and in the soundness of all the parts of our nature."³

With this analysis of the image of God in man the *Confession* agrees almost literally. Man was not fashioned in a state of moral or spiritual neutrality but endowed by God with positive holiness. Having received as part of his nature these excellent gifts, he was fully capable as prophet to know the living God, as priest to dedicate himself in service and praise, and as king to have dominion under God over himself and all creatures.

The Tragic Fall of Man

From this state of excellency and glory Adam, the first father and covenant head of the human race, fell. In the *Confession* little is actually said about the fall itself, but much about its consequences.

How soon after creation this took place is not revealed. On the circumstances surrounding man's sin, however, the Bible

does not leave us in the dark. To some of these the *Confession* alludes. First of all, it was a personal act. Man being tempted of the devil did not understand the honor with which God had clothed him nor the excellency of his endowments. The reference seems to be to Psalm 49:20 and is open to some questionable interpretations. The impression may be left that within the mind and heart of our first father there was a measure of imperfection to which the tempter could attach himself and thus ruin the life of the human race. Such a construction, of course, would jeopardize the statement of God that his creation was good. In Reformed theology it has usually been conceded that Adam, although perfectly capable of willing in accordance with God's will, was created in a state of relative knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He had not yet attained the highest degree of excellence for which God had destined him. To this end he needed to be confirmed in the way of complete covenant obedience to his maker. In Paradise he was in a position of being able either to resist or succumb to the temptation of disobeying God.

In addition, the sin of our first father was voluntary. Although capable of willing *agreeably to the will of God*, he *wilfully subjected himself to sin*. This rendered him entirely without excuse and would completely justify God, had he willed to leave man without any hope of salvation. Never does the Scripture countenance the notion that man was compelled to sin. The eternal decree of God, indeed, rendered the entrance of sin into this world by man's voluntary transgression certain. Yet this may never be so construed as if God were in any sense responsible for man's fall. That this idea is abhorrent is clearly taught in the Bible. "Far be it from God that he should do wickedness and from the Almighty that he should commit iniquity." (Job 34:10) The New Testament confirms us in this witness to God's holiness. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempteth no man: but each man is tempted, when he is drawn away by his own lust, and enticed." (Jas. 1:13, 14) All deterministic views which regard sin as a necessity

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inherent in either the structure of the world or the nature of man are categorically rejected by the Christian believer. Not God but man is fully responsible for sin and all its consequences in the world.

This sin was decisive for the life of both Adam and his descendants. Because of sin *death and the curse* entered the world. By his voluntary transgression Adam became the slave of sin and suffered all its consequences. This excludes the notion that even apart from sin man would have succumbed to physical death. He was created immortal, not only in that his soul was endowed with endless existence but also that his body was free from the power of death. God announced death as the penalty for disobedience. "For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:17)

Finally, we acknowledge on the basis of God's word that man fell at the instigation of another. His fall was occasioned by *giving ear to the words of the devil*. The temptation to transgress *the commandment of life, which he had received*, came from without. Through the serpent Satan spoke to beguile our first parents. He first approached the woman, arousing within her heart doubt concerning God's command which forbade them to partake of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These seeds of unbelief stimulated the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the vainglory of life within her and prompted her to disobey. "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat." (Gen. 3:6) Thereupon she tempted her husband, who immediately joined her in rebellion against God. The story, so often represented as a myth or symbol by modern theologians, is affirmed as history by Christian believers. The whole structure of Christian theology is radically affected by whether or not we maintain the historicity of Genesis 3. Those who reject the story of the fall of necessity adopt views of the image of God in man, the nature and consequences of sin, and even the essential character of God's grace in Christ radically different than those championed by historic Christianity. Without

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hesitation and compromise the church should repudiate every attempt to make the story of the fall more palatable to modern man.

The Consequences of Sin

The results of the first transgression are sketched in somber colors.

Here we deal with material of utmost practical concern to all who hear the Christian gospel. Without the true knowledge of our miseries resulting from sin's entrance into the world, the gospel of God's saving grace echoes in a vacuum. Here the words of Jesus are validly applied, "They that are whole have no need of a physician; but they that are sick. I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:31, 32) The doctrine of sin is to be proclaimed not from some sadistic impulse to wound the sensitive heart but as an essential ingredient of God's message of salvation to men.

By his transgression man first of all *separated himself from God, who is his true life*. That this is the essential character of death we learn from the psalmist, "For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish." (Ps. 73:27) Man in revolt is neither able nor willing to seek the face of God. As soon as they had sinned, our first parents hid themselves from the presence of the Lord. (Gen. 3:8) As a flower, severed from the plant which sustains its life, soon withers and dies, so man's wilful separation of himself from God involved him in the curse of death. This was the penalty meted out for his disobedience to *the commandment of life*. Death is not annihilation, as the Seventh Day Adventists and other sects maintain, but rather the spiritual separation of man from the life of God. Thus corporal or physical death inevitably follows, by which the bond between body and soul is dissolved. Thereupon man is plunged into eternal death, the state of final and irrevocable separation from the blessedness of God.

The second result mentioned is that man *corrupted his whole nature*. All the light with which he had been originally endowed

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was turned into darkness. The contagion of sin spread at once throughout the whole nature of man. No part was left untouched. *Being thus become wicked, perverse and corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God.* No longer could he know, love and serve his creator. This is man's total depravity which vitiated every part and faculty of his body and soul. On the extent of this corruption within man's life the Bible leaves us in no doubt. "And Jehovah saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen. 6:5) "Jehovah looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand that did seek after God. They are all gone aside; they are together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Ps. 14: 2, 3) Nor is the judgment of the New Testament on man's total corruption as a result of sin any less severe. Here men in their natural state are described as walking "in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart; who being past feeling gave themselves up to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness." (Eph. 4:17-19) This corruption, indeed, did not fully manifest itself at once in the life of the race. Yet man immediately recognized a radical change in his actual condition, being seized with a consciousness of both shame and guilt.

The last result mentioned in this connection is that man *made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death.* This was the penalty which his transgression deserved, even as he had been forewarned by God at the time when the probationary command was given to Adam and Eve in Paradise. The issues of man's life as sinner are clear. Paul affirms, "For the wages of sin is death." (Rom. 6:23) This judgment is hauntingly echoed by John Donne, when he sings of himself,

*"I am a little world made cunningly
Of Elements, and an Angelic sprite,
But black sin hath betray'd to endless night
My world's both parts, and, oh, both parts must die."*

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The Remnants which Man Retained

Sin has so corrupted and perverted the life of man, that he must learn to say the hard words of the apostle, "But I am carnal, sold under sin." (Rom. 7:14)

This lesson does not come easily to man in revolt against God. The bankruptcy of his intellect, his will and emotions, yea, of his whole life, is the last confession he cares to make. In his refusal to recognize the total corruption of his nature, he seems to find a large measure of support in experience. The life of the human race testifies abundantly that man is still in possession of his mind. He explores the heights of heaven and the depths of earth and his own soul, searching, discovering, analyzing and describing what his restless mind has uncovered. In art and music his creative imagination has produced things of lasting loveliness. Among all nations there have been retained norms determining what is right and wrong. Outside the pale of God's special and saving revelation individuals have appeared whose lives compel the admiration of the ages for their profound insights and piety. Even Calvin, who has been so persistently maligned as offering the most somber and sordid description of human nature, does not hesitate to write. "Whenever, therefore, we meet with heathen writers, let us learn from that light of truth which is admirably displayed in their works, that the human mind, fallen as it is, and corrupted from its integrity, is yet invested and adorned by God with excellent talents. If we believe that the Spirit of God is the only fountain of truth, we shall neither neglect nor despise the truth itself, wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to insult the Spirit of God; for the gifts of the Spirit cannot be undervalued without offering contempt and reproach to the Spirit himself."⁴

To this conviction of Calvin, the father of the Reformed churches and one of the ablest teachers whom God has ever granted to his church, our *Confession* attaches itself. Of the natural man we do not hesitate to declare that although *he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God* there have been left to him *small remains*. Precisely because of the cautious way in which this phrase has been inserted into the

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Confession at this point, the nature and extent and value of these *small remains* have been heatedly debated in the churches.

In the opinion of some this acknowledgement appears to be a compromise of the doctrine of total depravity. If man has actually *lost all* of his original endowments, how can anything still be left to him? Is this possibly a concession which Calvin and with him the Reformed churches have made to the semi-Pelagianism of the Roman Catholic church and the Pelagianism of the humanist without being fully aware of what they were saying?

What is really involved in this debate is the problem of the extent to which man lost the image of God by his wilful transgression. That his life was radically changed, not only in its external circumstances but also in its inner powers and desires, has been maintained by all Christian churches. On the degree to which this corruption and perversion has affected him there are irreconcilable differences. According to Rome God endowed man at creation with the natural gifts of immortality, reason and free will. In addition, the supernatural gifts of divine sonship, the full control of all his senses by reason as a golden bridle, and freedom from all suffering and death were conferred. By the fall our first parents forfeited these supernatural gifts, with the result that they and their descendants were impaired in all the faculties and parts of both soul and body. Man, however, retained both his rational nature and moral freedom. In a very real sense, he is able apart from God's grace to know the truth and do the good. As a result, Rome does not proclaim the need of grace to restore life to its proper functioning and purpose. Man left to himself can attain to a large measure of true knowledge about himself and the world. All he lacks is the fulfillment of his life by entering into fellowship with God. The right to and experience of divine sonship are supernaturally bestowed by God's grace in Christ. Of this grace the church is the custodian.

Against such a construction of the results of sin the reformers with one voice protested. They emphasized once again the teach-

ings of Scripture as formulated so well by Augustine on this score, teachings which Rome still officially claimed to accept but which to all practical purposes she had clearly repudiated. Man's nature was totally corrupted. He lost not merely supernatural gifts; he lost *all his excellent gifts which he had received from God.*

But how, then, could the Reformed believers still maintain that man *retained only small remains thereof?* They felt constrained on the basis of the universal testimony of the Scripture to make certain distinctions when speaking of the image of God. Usually they spoke of that image in the broader and in the narrower sense. By the former they designated such endowments as immortality and a rational and moral nature; qualities which sharply distinguish human life from brute creation. By the latter they meant the true knowledge, righteousness and holiness with which this nature of man was infused at the time of its creation. This latter man lost as a consequence of his sin and separation from God, while the former was retained. Yet this distinction, widely accepted in the Reformed churches, is open to some severe strictures. While it possibly must be used for want of better terminology, it may easily lead to misunderstanding. For surely this image of God in the broader sense was profoundly affected by man's sin. The immortality which all men as sinners possess, namely that they shall exist forever, is of a vastly different quality than that with which Adam was endowed in the state of rectitude. Nor does man's rational and moral nature function properly in his sinful condition. On this score the *Confession* leaves us in no doubt as to its convictions: *for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness.*

Man indeed has retained his human nature. This has not and cannot be obliterated. Because of the *small remains* left within him, the natural man has some conception of God and morality. Reformed theologians with but few exceptions have maintained that the unregenerate can perform natural, civil and outwardly religious good. For this conviction they appealed to several Scriptural passages. "And Jehovah said to Jehu, because thou

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hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes . . . thy sons of the fourth generation shall sit upon the throne of Israel." (II Kgs. 10:30) Our Lord said, "And if ye do good to them that are good to you, what thank have ye? for even sinners do the same." (Luke 6:33) Such outward conformity to God's will is spoken of also by Paul, "For when the Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these not having the law, are the law unto themselves: in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts." (Rom. 2:14, 15)

The presence of these *small remains* is not to be explained by minimizing the total corruption of fallen human nature but rather by attributing it to God, who restrains sin within man's life and enables him even apart from saving grace to do those things which outwardly conform to his law. These are not proofs of any natural goodness in man but rather evidences of God's general benevolence to the sons of men. Thus Calvin has said, "But we ought to remember, that amidst this corruption of nature there is some room for Divine grace, not to purify it but internally to restrain its operation . . . Thus God by his providence restrains the perverseness of our nature from breaking out into external acts, but does not purify it from within."⁶ These remains of the image of God within man, significant as they are for the development of the human race according to God's plan, are never to be construed as a common meeting-ground for regenerate and unregenerate. Nor are they stepping-stones by which man can attain to salvation. The Reformed churches have always insisted on the radical difference between common and special grace, not in the sense that there are two kinds of grace within God but that the grace of God manifests itself in different operations and to different classes of people. To confuse these is to endanger the antithesis between the saved and the unsaved and to fall into the errors of those who minimize the consequences of sin in man's life. Yet these remnants of the image of God, which are preserved by him but ever and again perverted in one direction or another by the natural man, are *sufficient to leave man without excuse.*

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The Bondage of the Will

Having said all this, we are now ready to draw the inescapable conclusion. On the basis of God's word we are constrained to affirm that the natural man is incapable of turning unto God in true faith. He *is but a slave to sin*.

In connection with the doctrine of total depravity the question naturally arose whether man had completely lost the freedom of his will. Possibly on this subject more ink has been spilled and more words spoken than on any other in the field of Christian theology. Here the convictions of individual believers and churches seem to be irrevocably contradictory. Many of the differences, however, evidence an almost hopeless confusion caused by a want of careful definition. The Reformed faith has often been accused, even by those who should because of their apparent commitment to the Scriptures be sympathetic to its formulations, of championing a determinism which regards men as mere stocks and blocks. Often this religious problem, whether sinful man is able to seek after God apart from divine grace, has been confused with the more general philosophical problem of freedom. Thus Calvin expresses regret in his illuminating and instructive discourse on the subject that the term free-will was ever introduced into Christian theology.

In a certain sense man has lost his moral freedom; in another sense he still retains it in spite of the serious consequences of sin.

When man fell into sin, he kept as a constitutive part of his human nature a certain freedom of the will. This should be more explicitly defined as the liberty to choose as he pleases in full accord with the dispositions and tendencies of his soul. The Scriptures plainly intimate that he remains a responsible moral agent. He is not under constraint or compulsion of any force outside of himself to do that which goes contrary to his insights and desires. Because he can still acquire knowledge, recognize certain moral distinctions of good and evil, feel within himself obligations which he ought to discharge and can in a measure appreciate the distinction between virtues and vices,

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the choices which he makes are always intensely personal and spontaneous and therefore responsible. To this all Christian thinkers, Calvin included, agree.

This, however, was not the bone of contention either in the struggles of Augustine against Pelagius or of the reformers against the Roman Catholic church and the humanists. The dispute centered on the profoundly religious question whether the natural man was in possession of the insight and disposition of soul to choose freely the will of God for his salvation. To this question Augustine and the reformers believed that the Bible replied with a resounding No! The good and the evil in this religious sense never stand before him as two possible choices, either of which he is free to make. Since the fall human nature has an undeniable and irresistible bias for sin. Man cannot apprehend and love the things of God. He refuses to seek the highest good and delights himself rather with lies and vanities. "Thus there is left to man such a free will, if we choose to give it that appellation," Calvin concluded, quoting with approval the opinion of that greatest of the ancient church fathers, Augustine, "that he can neither be converted to God nor continue in God but by grace; and that all the ability which he has is derived from grace."⁶

This our *Confession* amply substantiates from the word of God. The basic principle is enunciated in the words of John the Baptist, "A man can receive nothing, except it have been given him of God." (John 3:27) Nor is it possible for man to do any saving good apart from God's grace. The coming of man to the Savior is ascribed to God alone. "No man can come to me, except the Father that sent me draw him." (John 6:44) In the light of this passage all the notions of the Pelagians and semi-Pelagians are exposed as untrue and untenable. Nor is man in any position to take credit for any works which he performs. Every inclination of his heart and disposition of his soul is contrary to the will of God, "because the mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be; and they that are in the flesh cannot please

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God." (Rom. 8:7, 8) Nor do the small remains of God's image within the natural man enable him to attain a true and saving knowledge of the Lord. "Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged." (I Cor. 2:14)

This complete dependence of man upon the grace of God is not confined to the unregenerate state. Also believers, having been endowed with new life, can continue in the way of the Lord only by grace. Therefore the apostle affirmed of himself in the discharge of his apostolic mission, "Not that we are sufficient to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God." (II Cor. 3:5) In another place he wrote to the early Christians, "It is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:13) We therefore confess with the church of past ages, *For there is no understanding nor will conformable to the divine understanding and will but what Christ has wrought in man which He teaches us, when he says: Apart from me ye can do nothing.*

This confession of the church is exceedingly relevant for our day.

Our generation, to use the phrase of a modern writer, is on the threshold of a new dark age. Evil is rampart in our world. With all his technological advance, man finds himself unable to build a safe and sound world. Every new invention, while catering to his comfort and convenience, affords increased opportunity for the enslavement of man either by himself or others. Demonic forces have been unleashed within the past decades to drive men to wits'-end corner. All avenues by which he seeks escape for himself and his fellow-men are blocked, for

*"The door was false—no key
Or lock, and I was caught
In the house; . . ."*

The older liberalism which so proudly proclaimed man as the master of all things has yielded to new theories. In dialectical

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theology man is represented as sinner who is actually engaged in rebellion against God. He repeats this act of sinning continually, not so much because it is a habit but because of the distinctive character of sin itself. It is totally irrational and inexplicable. It does not root in the primal transgression of our parents in Eden as a historical fact. Rather, it is the dark shadow which appears everywhere to make man a problem to himself. But by denying the historicity of the Biblical account of man's creation and fall, this theology reduces the doctrines of sin and grace to human constructions. With a possible easing of the tensions of our times, these ideas may well be changed.

There is no answer to the plight of man other than the power of God. And that redeeming and reconciling power is proclaimed in the word which liveth and abideth forever. It tells of the creation of man in God's image within history. It depicts the historical fall of the human race at a specific time and in a specific place by the specific father and covenant head of the race. It announces that God wrought salvation in history when "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as the only-begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) These are the facts. And only those who with a believing heart appropriate the acts and facts of God know the true answer to the problems which perplex the modern man. That makes this confessional statement so relevant and refreshing today.

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1. Why and how has man become a problem to himself today?
2. Show how the several phrases of this article arose out of the religious situation of its day. 3. What does Mackay mean by his distinction between being on the balcony and being on the road?
4. In which sense is man superior to the angels? 5. Why have the Reformed churches rejected trichotomy? 6. On what grounds do Christians hold the body in high esteem? 7. Why is a proper formulation of the doctrine of the image of God essential to Christian theology, education and philosophy? 8. How did Calvin delineate the image of God in man? 9. How could a perfect man be tempted by sin? 10. What is the Roman Catholic conception of the image of God? 11. What is meant by the covenant of works? Is there Scriptural evidence for this teaching? 12. Did plants and animals die before man's fall? 13. Which elements are found in the temptation of Adam and Eve?
14. How does the doctrine of salvation imply a clear conception of sin and its consequences? 15. On which grounds do we reject the theory of the annihilation of unbelievers at death? 16. What is the state of the soul after physical death? 17. Distinguish the words wicked, perverse and corrupt. 18. In which sense is man alienated from the life of God? 19. How did Calvin explain the remnants of truth, goodness and beauty left in man after the fall? 20. What is the Roman Catholic view of man's fall and its consequences? 21. In which sense are the Gentiles a law unto themselves? 22. How can the church maintain both the teaching of common grace and of the antithesis between regenerate and unregenerate? 23. In which sense is man's will free, and in which sense is it enslaved? 24. Wherein does the Reformed view of man as sinner differ from that of dialectical theology?

Chapter 15

Original Sin

We believe that through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature and a hereditary disease, wherewith even infants in their mother's womb are infected, and which produces in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof, and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind. Nor is it altogether abolished or wholly

eradicated even by baptism; since sin always issues forth from this woeful source, as water from a fountain; notwithstanding it is not imputed to the children of God unto condemnation, but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them. Not that they should rest securely in sin, but that a sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death.

Wherefore we reject the error of the Pelagians, who assert that sin proceeds only from imitation.

ARTICLE XV

FOR GENERATIONS the children of America were instructed in the *New England Primer*. Its use of Biblical material began as soon as they learned the alphabet which was introduced with the couplet

*"In Adam's fall
We sinned all."*

Long ago this *Primer* has been replaced by other texts. Radically different educational theories have reflected the changing temper of the nation. People might still say many nice things about the Bible as literature and a moral guide. But they no longer believed its basic doctrines.

One of the Biblical teachings which has been subjected to ridicule and rejection is that of original sin. On it there have been perhaps more misunderstandings than on most other teachings of Scripture. For the conviction that there is an inescapable bond between the historical Adam and all mankind with the result that "there is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10) there is little room in the modern mind. Championing a totally different conception of man and sin, the majority who still like to be called Christians are compelled to a radically different view of God's grace in Christ than that to which the historic Christian faith witnesses. Profoundly disturbing as are the newer insights of psychology and psychiatry, these have not induced a return to the old faith. If not with the lips at least with the heart men still seek their slim comfort in Swinburne's song,

*"Glory to man in the highest,
For man is the master of things!"*

Before we consider the doctrine of God's grace the *Confession* calls us to reflect seriously on the seriousness of man's fall

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into sin. Here we face the either-or, where all compromise is impossible. We must look for the reconstruction and reformation of man's life either within himself or in God. Our choice will in large measure be determined by whether we bow before the realistic and humiliating appraisal which the Bible gives of ourselves. In every age, our own included, this is both "a stumbling block and . . . foolishness." (I Cor. 1:23)

Pelagius versus Augustine

The material found in articles 14 and 15 belongs together. Here we deal with what the Reformed fathers have called the doctrine of free will. This should be somewhat more carefully defined in our time, since the debate concerning the freedom of the will has assumed much wider proportions in our day under the influence of basic philosophical questions which have been raised and debated. In the days of the reformation the discussion concerning free will had a very specific reference. It did not concern itself with the problem of determinism or indeterminism in the light of man's relation to his environment. Nor was the interest then primarily a psychological one. The whole debate focussed itself sharply around the profoundly religious question whether or not man was able apart from the saving grace of God to do anything that was truly good. This issue is still relevant in any discussion of the church with the modern Pelagians and semi-Pelagians within both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

Before anyone is able to appropriate and appreciate fully the message of salvation in Christ Jesus, he must come to the knowledge of himself. In the mirror of Scripture he must see himself for what he really is. With this reflection of human nature the present article concerns itself.

To know himself remains one of man's most difficult and devastating experiences. The Greeks might pass off advice to "know thyself" in a casual phrase; the Christian church alone understands the bitterness of the dregs which the cup of true self-knowledge holds. Its significance has been correctly assessed by

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J. S. Whale, when he said, "This is the ultimate question behind the vast debate, the desperate struggles, of our times. Ideologies—to use the ugly modern jargon—are really anthropologies; they are answers to that question which man has not ceased to ask ever since he began asking questions at all; namely, What is man?"¹

At this point we do well to recollect the controversy between Pelagius and Augustine on the doctrine of man and grace which has disturbed the church ever since.

Were we to meet Pelagius on the street and hear a little of his life's story, we would undeniably find ourselves drawn to him. In many respects he was an attractive and admirable person. Early in the fifth century, after some years of wandering in the East, this British monk visited Rome, at that time rapidly assuming a position of spiritual leadership in the Christian church. As a model ascetic who strove to do the will of Christ, he had sold all his possessions and contented himself with the barest necessities of life. Repeatedly he refused to permit himself even the pleasures common to many who had taken monastic vows. In Rome he was soon scandalized both by the worldliness of the church and the loose morals of the people. This laxity he believed was simply the result of ignoring man's responsibility to the moral law of God.

According to Pelagius the issues at stake were simple. In much the same fashion as the man-in-the-street today he regarded the Christian life as a matter of "do's" and "don'ts." God had revealed his will for man's life in the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. Everyone was therefore obligated to discipline himself accordingly and thus secure the favor of the Lord. By working at this steadily, man was in a position to perfect his life upon earth. Indeed, all were without exception sinners. But this was the result not of any inherent evil in man but rather of following the wicked examples of others. "Everything good and everything evil, in respect of which we are either worthy of praise or of blame, is done by us; not born with us. We are not born in our full development, but with a capacity

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for good or evil; we are begotten as well without virtue as without vice; and before the activity of our personal will there is nothing in man but what God has stored in him."²

The basic teachings of Pelagius are clear. All sins are individual and specific acts. There is no necessary and organic connection between Adam and the rest of the race. Indeed, we all follow the bad example of our first father and therefore need the grace of Christ which is received when we believe and are baptized. Then by doing penance and following Christ's teaching and example, we can attain to a holiness in life which pleases God. Only in this way, so Pelagius affirmed, could man's moral responsibility be salvaged in an increasingly corrupt and sinful age.

Against this simplicistic moralism, which cut the heart out of the Christian gospel, Augustine protested vigorously. He knew too well from personal experience the iron chain which sin had forged for all mankind. "I was bound, not with another's chain, but by own iron will," he complained in his *Confessions*. "My will the enemy held, and thence had made a chain for me, and bound me. For of a froward will was a lust made; and a lust served, became a custom; and custom not resisted became necessity. By which links, as it were, joined together (wherein I called it a chain) a hard bondage held me enthralled."³ This experience rather than the optimistic opinion of Pelagius he believed the Bible taught as the natural condition of all men.

Before the days of Augustine the church fathers had indeed discussed the plight of man and the gracious power of God in Christ. The question whether this was inherent in all men and should be attributed to Adam's fall, however, had not been clearly resolved. Augustine could quote many church fathers who seemed to support his views. Yet Pelagius and his followers also appealed with good reason to many early Christian writings. No other alternative remained but to hear what the Scriptures said.

On the subject of original sin Augustine had much to say. He counselled his readers to remember that here the church

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is dealing with mysteries which our reason cannot comprehend. In preaching nothing ought to be set forth with greater clarity than this doctrine, yet the mind must ever remember that nothing is more incomprehensible than the problem of sin. Without equivocation he taught that man apart from God's grace can will only that which is sinful. This is a hereditary and fatal taint which stems from Adam's fall. That the Scriptures speak on this point is his conviction, for they affirm, "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned." (Rom. 5:12) Without exception all men are guilty before God. He called to mind that David bewailed his own state bitterly, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight." (Ps. 51:4) In this lamentation the psalmist referred not to a few specific and overt deeds but to his whole being as corrupted and condemned before God. "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Ps. 51:5)

If Pelagius stoutly maintains that little children are devoid of such sin, he must for the sake of consistency exclude them from Christ. According to Augustine this is the fatal consequence to which the Bible itself compels his opponent. The Scriptures plainly teach that Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32) The Savior came to seek and to save that which was lost. (Luke 19:9) He is the lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world (John 1:29), and surely children are part of this world. Of himself the Savior said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) One text after another was cited by Augustine to demonstrate the universality of sin. The conclusion which this overwhelming evidence forced upon him was that all men are by nature lost in sin, unable and unwilling to do the good, and shut up under the wrath of God.

Men before and since Augustine have searched in vain for some other satisfactory answer to the problem of man's corruption. Some regard it as a remnant of man's primitive state

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which can only be escaped by the disciplines of education and public opinion. Others, including many of the newer voices in Protestant theology, insist that somehow evil is structural in the universe and human nature. Only the Bible diagnoses correctly the horrible disease with which our race is plagued, and therefore it alone can prescribe the proper cure. No earthly power can save man from his hereditary depravity. No man can rescue himself from his lost condition. Only the grace of God in Christ can renew our hearts and lives, so that we once again can both desire and do that which is good in the eyes of the Lord. Salvation in all its fulness is alone of God in Christ.

The Reformation and Original Sin

To understand why the doctrine of free will in the sense of man's ability to do that which is good in God's sight was such a burning issue in the days when the *Confession* was written, we should survey what took place within the church after the historic controversy between Pelagius and Augustine.

After much discussion and debate, in which the feelings of men often rose to fever-pitch, the church officially repudiated Pelagianism and adopted the Augustinian view. This victory was scored at the Council of Ephesus in 431. However, the views of Pelagius did not die. From time to time mediating positions, more attractive to men, were championed in the church. The important Council of Orange (529) authorized a moderate Augustinianism.

During the middle ages this was increasingly overshadowed by a new emphasis which taught that the grace of God was communicated to man in the sacraments, when their operation was not impeded by any wilful unbelief or sin on the part of the communicant. Such a view of the means of grace was intimately associated with a new theory of man's creation in the image of God. Little by little the back door of the church was opened to the Pelagian heresy. It was now asserted that man's original righteousness (the state in which Adam had been created) was not a natural endowment but a supernatural gift. When man sinned, this gift was lost, with the result that human nature

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was gravely weakened but not radically corrupted. Men are now born in a somewhat neutral condition, neither positively sinful nor positively holy. Original sin, with which all men since Adam have been burdened according to the church's teaching, must not be regarded as an inherent depravity out of which positive evil proceeds as water from a fountain but rather as the absence or privation of all good within him. Because man lacks the original gift of positive holiness, he is now unable to hold his lower nature in check. Yet according to the later refinements in Roman Catholic theology original sin may not be identified with concupiscence, the evil desires or lusts which are found in the natural man. These are properly speaking not sinful, until they manifest themselves in positive deeds. This is now the official doctrine of the Roman church, especially since Pope Leo XIII in his bull *Aeterni Patris* advocated the recognition of the theology of Thomas Aquinas as approved Roman theology. Thus the historic Christian view of man's spiritual inability to do the good and his complete dependence on divine grace, once officially adopted by the church, has been surrendered. This is the basic heresy of Romanism.

Against such an ambivalent conception of man's condition which both in theory and practical piety gained ground in the medieval church, the reformers protested with one voice. Nearly all the errors of Rome by which the pure Christian gospel was perverted, they believed stemmed from this source.

On this score Luther and Calvin were in full accord. Some of the phrases which they employed have been sharply criticized by later theologians as so one-sided that they obscure the moral and spiritual responsibility of men. Yet these should be interpreted carefully in the light of the context in which they appear and the warfare for the truth which they felt compelled to wage in their day. The sixteenth century, much like the fifth during which Augustine labored, was a time in which man was a problem to himself. At an early date Luther found himself in debate with Erasmus, who as the spokesman of a moralistic humanism had revived and was defending many Pelagian notions concerning human nature. Calvin in a masterful way championed the

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Augustinian position against Pighius. Involved in all these disputes on the freedom of the will was the doctrine of original sin. And although there was little systematic debate between Rome and the reformers on this issue, Calvin protested publicly against the positions adopted by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). These according to him championed a view of human nature which was even more deceptive and dangerous to true piety than outspoken humanism.

Even the common people were involved in these disputes. There had appeared in 1547 in Paris a small book which, if its contents were believed, would prove fatal to the development of the reformation. Written by the monk Nicole Grenier, it was entitled *The Shield of Faith*. In it the author attacked the teachings of Luther as a fulfillment of the prophecies of Jude, who had warned the early church that "in the last time there shall be mockers, walking after their own ungodly lusts. These are they who make separations, sensual, not having the Spirit." (Jude 18, 19) Now as a faithful shepherd he aimed at bringing the pure gospel back to the people who were so easily misled because they did not know the Scriptures of God. Instead of appealing to God's Word, however, Grenier usually only alluded to the Bible while quoting at length from many of the church fathers. The opening section dealt with the question of man's free will. Written in the form of a dialogue between two travelers, one on the good (Roman Catholic) road and the other on the wrong (Protestant) road, its message could be easily understood by the common people. This book enjoyed a wide circulation in the southern Netherlands, where de Bres lived and labored so long. Small wonder that this reformer felt compelled to deal so directly with the question of free will not only in his work on *The Rod of Faith* but also in the *Confession*.

The Nature of Original Sin

Today man has once again become a problem to himself. He longs to know who he is and where he is going amid the insecurities and urgencies of our world. The *Confession*, which speaks to and for the church living in crisis, does not deal

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with many of the philosophical questions involved in the problem of human freedom or bondage. It deals with the most radical and fundamental of all issues—the religious question of whether man is able and willing to live according to the will of his Creator. Not until this is settled will we be ready to see other aspects of the problem in their proper perspective.

In this article the *Confession* once again unashamedly endorses the Augustinian position, especially as this was set forth by Luther and Calvin.

First of all, it teaches that the disobedience of Adam had far-reaching consequences for the human race. Through our first father all men have without exception become guilty and depraved in the sight of God. This includes not only those who wilfully transgress the moral law but also those in whom some knowledge of God and virtue has been preserved. Without equivocation the stain of original sin is extended to all: *we believe that through the disobedience of Adam original sin is extended to all mankind.* Here sharp issue is taken with two positions. On the one hand the church repudiates all Pelagianizing tendencies which recognize sin only in individual acts. It refuses the opinion that, although all are sinners, men sin by imitation. The root of sin lies within the human heart. Its origin must be traced back to Adam. On the other hand, the church will not be misled into supposing that somehow sin belongs to the structure of the universe. It refuses to blame God for man's transgression. It will not cast a dark shadow on the created order, which God in the beginning pronounced very good. (Gen. 1:31) Thus she disowns any affiliation with those philosophical and theological views, so prevalent today, which regard all existence as somehow inescapably tinged with evil. This accounts for her opposition to dialectical theology. The church insists on taking the historical Adam seriously.

We are further reminded of the fatal nature of original sin. *It is a corruption of the whole nature and a hereditary disease.* Although the "faculty psychology" which divided man's life in several faculties or rather distinct parts was widely accepted

by the medieval church, there was little room for it in reformation theology. Sin is said to affect not only the will of man, rendering him unable and unwilling to do that which is good in God's sight; it has warped his whole being. Here the reformation insights differed radically from Romanism as well as from humanism. Man left to himself is unable to attain unto the saving knowledge of God's truth, even when this is set before his very eyes, because his intellect has been darkened. He is blind as well as disobedient; hating God, his neighbor and himself, while cleaving to that which is evil. Man himself has been tainted and perverted by sin which dwells in him. T. F. Torrance has given a succinct summary of Calvin's doctrine of total depravity, with which the early Lutherans as well as the Reformed agreed. "This is a total judgment in the sense of the dynamic relation which Reformed theology thinks of as between God and man; but such a total judgment would be utterly impossible on the Scholastic view of man, and of evil as defined as negation, and as involving necessarily privation of being. Total depravity does not entail on the Reformed view any ontological break in man's relation with God, but it does mean that the essential relation in which true human nature is grounded has been utterly perverted and turned into its opposite. Thus, it views sin as properly of the mind, and thinks of it as an active perversity which drags the whole man into pollution and inverts the whole order of creation. Sin is such a total affair that it suborns the good gifts of God, and indeed the whole man, who is maintained in being by the very grace of God, and directs man into an active relation of enmity to God. That is the astonishing revelation of sin which is given in the Gospel."⁴ Man was created to live in and unto God in fellowship. But by sin the covenant-keeper has become the covenant-breaker. Quantitatively he has lost nothing of his nature in consequence of the fall, but qualitatively he has perverted himself and inverted his relationship to God who is his life. For "this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil." (John 3:19)

With the church of all ages we also confess that this origin-

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al sin is transmitted from Adam to all his descendants. It is a *hereditary disease* from which there is no escape, other than the grace of God. Sin does not assume its fatal proportions when first we consciously transgress the commandments of God. These overt acts are but outward manifestations of a corruption which dwells deep within our hearts and dominates our whole life. Before birth it affects and afflicts us, since *even infants in their mother's womb are infected* with it.

All the days of his life Augustine struggled with the problem of its transmission without ever becoming satisfied that he had discovered a complete answer to this perplexing question. In the early days of the reformation its corrupting influence was stressed, since this was the specific issue involved in the discussion concerning the ability of man to do good in God's sight. Yet not for a moment did they deny that it equally involved man in guilt. *It is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind.* Later the distinction between original guilt and original pollution was more precisely made. With a clearer insight into Adam's position not only as our first father but also as covenant head and representative, they indicated more specifically how this sin was transmitted. Not only is this corruption passed on to us from our parents before birth, but we are personally involved in its guilt through Adam's act as our representative in the first transgression. Yet these two aspects may not for a moment be divorced.

Here we may not attribute unrighteousness to God, as if he contrary to justice holds us responsible for the sins of someone totally unrelated to us. No better representative could have been provided us by God. No more favorable circumstances for establishing the entire human race in full fellowship with God can be imagined than those which prevailed in the state of rectitude. All men everywhere are organically, covenantally united in their first father. Where this is denied, both the constitution of man and the unity of the race are obscured. By indicating these dominant emphases throughout its message the word of God explains also our plight.

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But therein lies our hope of redemption. Precisely because the race has been constituted as an organism, not as so many distinctly isolated individuals, the eternal Son of God by assuming flesh and blood became one of us. By identifying himself with the race as its representative, he could bear for us the wrath of God against sin and restore us to divine fellowship. He who denies the bonds which bind all men to Adam must adopt another reconstruction of redemption through Christ the second Adam than that which the Scriptures teach. For "as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22)

Original and Actual Sin

Many objections have been raised against the doctrine that all men are sinners in Adam. Some of these are of far greater weight than others and therefore perplex our minds even today.

It has been frequently asserted that this construction of human nature cannot be harmonized with man's moral obligation. How can anyone be held responsible for that which he is unable to do? This, however, fails to take seriously the doctrine of man's creation in the image of God. Since man fell by his wilful disobedience, our present corruption may never be attributed to the Creator. Our inability and unwillingness to do the good is self-imposed. Pelagians and Semi-Pelagians argue that this doctrine also destroys every good argument for using the means of grace. Yet here the objectors fail to discern what is at stake. The natural man must be confronted with the demands of the holy and just God. These have been ordained of God to bring him to a consciousness of his sinful and lost condition. To be sure, apart from the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, he will never see himself as he truly is. This, however, is not the result of having lost any faculty or part of his constitutional nature. He still has reason and conscience, which now are in a state of active and continual rebellion against God. Sin has not changed man ontologically (as far as his being is concerned) but ethically (as far as his judgment concerning good and evil in relation to God are concerned). God has assured us that

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he is pleased to make use of the means of grace unto our salvation. "For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom knew not God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." (I Cor. 1:21) The means are effective unto salvation, not because of any inherent power within them nor because of man's natural ability to evaluate them properly but because they are accompanied with the presence and power of God's Spirit. Above all, those who reject the doctrine of original sin argue that this teaching makes God responsible for our sins. But this is no more true of the Augustinian presentation than of the Pelagian scheme which seeks to limit God's control over man's sin to foreknowledge, as Jonathan Edwards has pointed out. For surely if God knew beforehand that man would sin, would not on any Pelagian viewpoint the holiness of God have compelled him to do something about the situation and thus free himself from all complicity in sin's entrance into the world? Only a God who in no sense is sovereign over his own world can be absolved on the premises of Pelagianism. And such a God is a far cry from the God of the Scriptures. Also, the objectors fail to discern that the church has always recognized an intimate relation between original and actual sin. We are not helpless victims who are forced contrary to nobler insights and desires to do that which is evil. Sin rises from the hidden springs of our self-hood, which although perverted has still retained some consciousness of its moral and spiritual responsibility to do that which is good. It is not due to any limitation which God has put upon man's being but the result of the self-imposed choice of man in the beginning.

The picture which is drawn for us of man's life is dark indeed. We confess that this original sin *produces in man all sorts of sin being in him as a root thereof, and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind.*

Original sin is the fountain from which all our actual sins spring. The latter may not be construed, however, as consisting only in external acts, All conscious thought and volitions which

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spring from the corrupted nature, our concupiscence so to speak, is also actual sin. Much of this is interior in man, such as doubt, evil design and lust. Here the Scriptural position is much more radical and realistic than the notions championed by those who lean to Pelagianism. Sin has its seat in our heart out of which are all the issues of life. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9) Our Lord called attention to this foul fountain, when he said, "For out of the heart come forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, railings: these are the things which defile the man." (Matt. 15: 19, 20)

The Bible indeed recognizes certain degrees of guilt. Frequently the heathen, who live in ignorance of the way of salvation in Christ, are sternly rebuked for their sins. Yet their guilt is never recognized as being so heavy as that which rests upon all who have received special revelation. The Old Testament further distinguishes between sins committed presumptuously, called sinning "with a high hand," and those into which men fall as the result of ignorance, weakness and error. (Numb. 15: 29-31) Yet evangelical Christians repudiate the distinction made by the Roman Catholic church between venial and mortal sins, the former performed involuntarily and often forgiven even without confession while the latter being wilfully done render the sinner liable to eternal punishment. This distinction fails to do justice to what the Bible says about the heinousness of all sin. "Everyone that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." (I John 3:4) Even those who make the distinction are compelled to acknowledge that it is exceedingly difficult and even dangerous to attempt a judgment on which sins are mortal and which venial. While therefore we confess that there are gradations in sin and degrees of guilt to which are attached different degrees of punishment, we maintain with God's word that even those sins which appear small in our eyes and are committed thoughtlessly greatly offend God and deserve to be punished with death.

In the light of Scripture the believer learns therefore to disapprove of and condemn not only the external acts which

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daily mar his life. He condemns himself. This is the breaking-point between Pelagianism and Augustinianism, between paganism and Christianity, between a justification of man and a justification of God who as judge condemns our whole life as sinful in his sight. This was the experience of the saints whose stories are recorded for our instruction and edification. When Job came to himself he acknowledged, "But now mine eye seeth thee: wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5, 6) Isaiah upon seeing the glory of God complained "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." (Isa. 6:5) Becoming painfully aware of the conflict which raged within him, the apostle exclaimed, "Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24) All these learned the important lesson that they had not merely committed sins but were sinful in the sight of God. Without this recognition man never understands his need of complete renewal and restoration unto God which comes by grace only.

The Grace of God in Baptism

At this point a seemingly new idea is injected into the church's witness. Quite unexpectedly we hear her acknowledging what she believes about the efficacy of baptism. *Nor is it altogether abolished or wholly eradicated even by baptism; since sin always issues forth from this woeful source, as water from a fountain.*

What we believe about the sacraments is stated much more systematically and fully in several articles towards the close of the *Confession*. In connection with our consideration of the church and the means of grace the question concerning the nature, efficacy and proper use of the sacraments will be considered. Yet because of the organic character of Christian doctrine we can not study any teaching in isolation from the others. Each sustains a specific relationship to all the rest. Doctrine is the expression of our reflection upon God and his works in so far as he has been pleased to reveal himself to us. We are not dealing with a set of abstract principles. Ours is the task of

confessing what God has done and is doing for the salvation of all those who look to him with a believing heart. We therefore never discuss the knowledge of our sinfulness apart from some consideration of his wondrous grace in Christ Jesus which alone can save us from ourselves.

Here we notice once more how profoundly intertwined both with Christian experience and the problems of that age the testimony of the *Confession* is. One of the crucial points in dispute between Rome and the reformation was whether or not original sin was completely abolished in baptism. In the course of the discussion the distinction between Augustinianism and the semi-Pelagianizing tendencies of the Roman church came into sharp focus. Augustine had taught that concupiscence, the law of sin and the flesh wherein original sin manifests itself in man's life, involved him in guilt and made him liable to eternal punishment. In baptism this is forgiven him for the sake of Christ's merits, so that upon several occasions this church father speaks of the baptized as having no sin. By this he indicated that those who receive baptism are free from the guilt of sin; not necessarily from its corrupting and vitiating power in their lives. The Roman church, however, had shifted ground since the days of Augustine. It embraced and perfected a mechanical theory of the sacraments as admirably suited to communicate the grace of God subjectively as long as no impediment was present. The need for living by daily, personal, joyful faith in the grace of God in Christ Jesus was increasingly obscured by this conception. It was maintained by the theologians that after baptism there is nothing in man which God hates. Concupiscence which still remains is to be considered a small matter, not inherently evil. All that man needs to strengthen him in his desire to subdue and restrain this concupiscence is faithful partaking of the sacraments in their proper order. The reformers insisted on a complete and unabashed return to Augustine's conception of original sin, with its radical judgment on man's depravity and daily need of grace. But to do so involved the rejection of the entire Romish system of penance by which the baptized (regenerate) were enabled to live according to God's law, by their good works make repara-

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tion for their sins on the basis of Christ's work, and thus in a measure make themselves worthy of eternal life.

Involved and intricate as were the details of this dispute, the reformers sensed what was at stake. Rome seriously threatened the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. Not so much faith as works were stressed as well-pleasing to God. All this seemed to spring in a sense from the simple insistence that in baptism all original and actual sins, committed up to that moment, were effectively washed away. The baptized began a new life with the assurance that by faithfully submitting to and receiving the ordinances of the church he would receive assisting grace to walk in the Lord's way.

This characterization of Christian experience was too grossly superficial and blatantly contrary to Scripture to go unchallenged. Rome had seemed again to shift successfully her gospel emphasis from the full grace of God to the mediation of the church; from the demand of a lively faith to an endorsement of good works as meritorious.

The present reading of the *Confession* differs somewhat from the original. De Bres had simply affirmed, "Nor is it abolished even by baptism." The article was expanded by the synod of Dordt (1618-19), very likely to state more expressly that the Reformed view of the sacraments did not reduce them to mere signs. As the article now reads, it registers a protest both against the Zwinglian and against the Roman Catholic and even Lutheran conceptions. Although de Bres did not countenance any of these views, his aim was not polemical. He simply desired to maintain the historic Christian position that the sacrament of baptism does not automatically restore the freedom of the will, as the Romanists had argued. Original sin still remains within those who are regenerated as a fountain and root of sin. The guilt which is attached to this condition of the natural man is completely pardoned, but against its power Christian believers must wage holy warfare all the days of their life.

Here, then, we hear the overtones of the glorious gospel of grace. This note is clearly sounded. *Notwithstanding it is not*

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imputed to the children of God unto condemnation. Baptism does not work *ex opere operato*. It must always be appropriated in faith, since it signifies and seals to us the promises of our gracious heavenly Father as a later article will clearly explain. Such faith is found only in the hearts of God's people. But because there has been produced within them a deep sense of their own sinfulness, the Biblical doctrine of original sin might easily incline them to despair of any increase in faith and godliness. Thus their attention is directed to the sovereign mercies of the Lord, who of mere grace no longer imputes this sinful nature unto them even though it might properly serve to condemn them. Here we listen to the joyful note of Romans 8:1-4, "There is therefore no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

The Daily Tension in Christian Experience

Realizing both the sovereign grace of God in freeing us from our deserved condemnation and also our responsibility to walk in the ways of his gospel, the *Confession* leaves no room for a heedless and careless life on the part of the Christian believer. Therefore de Bres had added: *Not that they should rest securely in sin, but a sense of this corruption should make believers often to sigh, desiring to be delivered from this body of death.*

It is apparent that this message from de Bres' own hand was borrowed from Calvin who wrote in the same connection, "Baptism, indeed, promises us the submersion of our Pharaoh, and the mortification of sin; yet not so that it no longer exists, or gives us no further trouble; but only that it may never overcome us. For as long as we live immured in this prison of the body, the relics of sin will dwell in us; but if we hold

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fast by the promise which God has given us in baptism, they shall not domineer or reign over us . . . These things are not said in order that those who are already too prone to do evil may securely sleep in their sins, but only that those who are tempted by their corrupt propensities may not faint and sink into despondency; but that they may rather reflect that they are yet in the way, and may consider themselves as having made some progress, when they experience their corruptions diminishing from day to day, till they shall attain the mark at which they are aiming, even the final destruction of their depravity, which will be accomplished at the close of this mortal life. In the mean time, let them not cease to fight manfully, to animate themselves to constant advances, and to press forward to complete victory.”⁵

From this we learn how unfair is the charge that this doctrine makes men careless and profane by removing every incentive to living a new and holy life in the sight of God and man. The quotation from Calvin may not be construed to mean that he and with him de Bres and other followers of his found the root of sin in the body. The language which is employed has been lifted almost bodily from the Scriptures. Paul speaks of “the body of sin” (Rom. 6:6) and “the body of death.” (Rom. 7:24) The apostle does not balk at using strong language when affirming, “For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing.” (Rom. 7:18) There has been a sharp and still unresolved debate whether Romans 7 refers to the life of the believer or to man’s natural condition apart from God’s grace. That it undoubtedly seems to be the former is apparent from its setting in the whole argument of this epistle. Further, it follows from the stern admonitions with which Paul addresses believers repeatedly. “Having therefore these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” (II Cor. 7:1) And again, “For ye, brethren, were called for freedom; only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh.” (Gal. 5:13) Even as Paul does not identify sin with the physical or material, so the re-

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formers while using his language freely refused to fall into such a gross error.

In these and many other passages of Holy Writ the tension in Christian life and experience is admirably set forth. This has been reproduced for us in the writings of the reformers, including our *Confession*. De Cherbonnier completely misunderstands and misconstrues the positions of Augustine, Luther and Calvin, when he attempts to argue that they are brothers under the skin with Pelagius and produced a new race of Pharisees who perverted the grace of God into a new legalism.⁶ That such Pharisaic legalism has never been completely eradicated from their churches all evangelical Christians must and will admit. But this proceeds not from the doctrine of sin and grace as affirmed by the Scriptures and in their creeds; it springs from man's sin which always remains in him as a *woeful source* of such wickedness. Against this he must and will wage ceaseless warfare all the days of his life.

On the one hand the Christian recognizes the riches of divine mercy and glories in them. Baptism is to him a sign and seal of God's promises which he daily embraces by faith. Thereby he is assured that there is no longer any condemnation for him, since he is in Christ. In that confidence he may live and die happily. But so far from enabling him to rest comfortably while still indulging the appetites of the flesh, these assurances of grace stimulate him to a lifelong struggle against sin. Daily in the light of the Biblical doctrine of original sin he recognizes the woeful source from which all his sins spring. He is the sinner who in the totality of his being reacts and rebels against God. In the almost impenetrable recesses of his inner life the believer finds not one but two of him; two who increasingly recognize each other for what they are and therefore engage in mortal combat. How well he begins to understand Paul's confession, "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members." (Rom. 7:22, 23) He is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; one who Janus-like seems to look in opposite directions

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at the same time. Poignantly he wrestles against the remains of sin which are still found within him against his own will and rear their ugly heads repeatedly. With Edward Martin he says of himself,

*"Within my earthly temple there's a crowd.
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud.
There's one that's brokenhearted for his sins;
And one who, unrepentant, only sits and grins.
There's one who loves his neighbor as himself,
And one who cares for naught but fame and pelf.
From much corroding care would I be free,
If once I could determine which is me."*

For the Christian, struggling against this old nature, the true knowledge of himself comes in the light of the revelation of God's grace in Christ Jesus our Lord. Then the outcome of the uneven conflict is no longer in doubt. Because he no longer trusts himself, he learns to lean day by day more heavily upon the wondrous mercies of the Lord signified and sealed to him in baptism. Indwelling sin is powerful indeed, but more powerful still are the everlasting mercies imputed and imparted to him in Christ. He understands what the apostle meant, when he admonished the early Christians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12, 13)

The victory belongs to the believer in and through the Savior who is *the true object presented* by baptism, "seeing that his divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that called us by his own glory and virtue: whereby he hath granted unto us his precious and exceeding great promises; that through these ye may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust." (II Pet. 1:3, 4)

This is God's answer to men and women who have become problems to themselves.

At the root of all our problems lies the problem of sin. The church glories in her calling to proclaim to the whole world

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in every generation that the dark night of sin has been driven away by the light of God's grace in Christ. He alone is the light of the world, the hope and desire of all nations, the immutable and immeasurable source of divine grace which is always greater than all our sins. "And in none other is there salvation; for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

1. Which new insights of psychology and psychiatry seem to affirm man's radical sinfulness? 2. How would you explain the statement that ideologies are really anthropologies? 3. With what basic problem was Pelagius originally concerned? 4. Show how the teachings of Pelagius undermine the doctrine of grace. 5. Did Augustine deduce his views from personal experience or Scripture? 6. Why is the doctrine of original sin incomprehensible? Does this mean that the church can say nothing about it? 7. Why do we repudiate the idea that evil is structural in the universe? 8. Wherein did the Council of Orange differ from Augustine? 9. What is concupiscence? How do Roman Catholics and evangelicals differ in interpreting it? 10. Show how Roman Catholic doctrine has made basic concessions to the Pelagianism which it once officially rejected? 11. Who was Erasmus, and what were his views on man and sin? 12. Prove from Scripture the organic unity of the race. 13. If man is dead in sin, why does the Confession speak of original sin as a hereditary disease? 14. What is the significance of the Reformed view that sin is an ethical and not an ontological break with God? How does this differ from the Roman Catholic construction? 15. What is meant by original guilt and original pollution? 16. Is original sin imputed mediately or immediately? Prove from Scripture. 17. Which chief objections have been raised against the doctrine of original sin? 18. On what basis may we rightly urge the unconverted to use the means of grace? 19. How did Jonathan Edwards deal with the problem which Pelagians can solve no better than the Augustinians? 20. What is the specific relation between original and actual sin? 21. Why did de Bres introduce the question of the efficacy of baptism at this point? 22. What was Augustine's view of baptism? Wherein did it differ from that held by the Reformed churches? 23. What is the Roman Catholic view of the efficacy of baptism? 24. Why was it necessary to show that Reformed believers did not endorse a careless life? 25. Do all Christians experience the conflict between good and evil within them?

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THE
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THE
Church's
WITNESS TO
THE
World

P. Y. DE JONG

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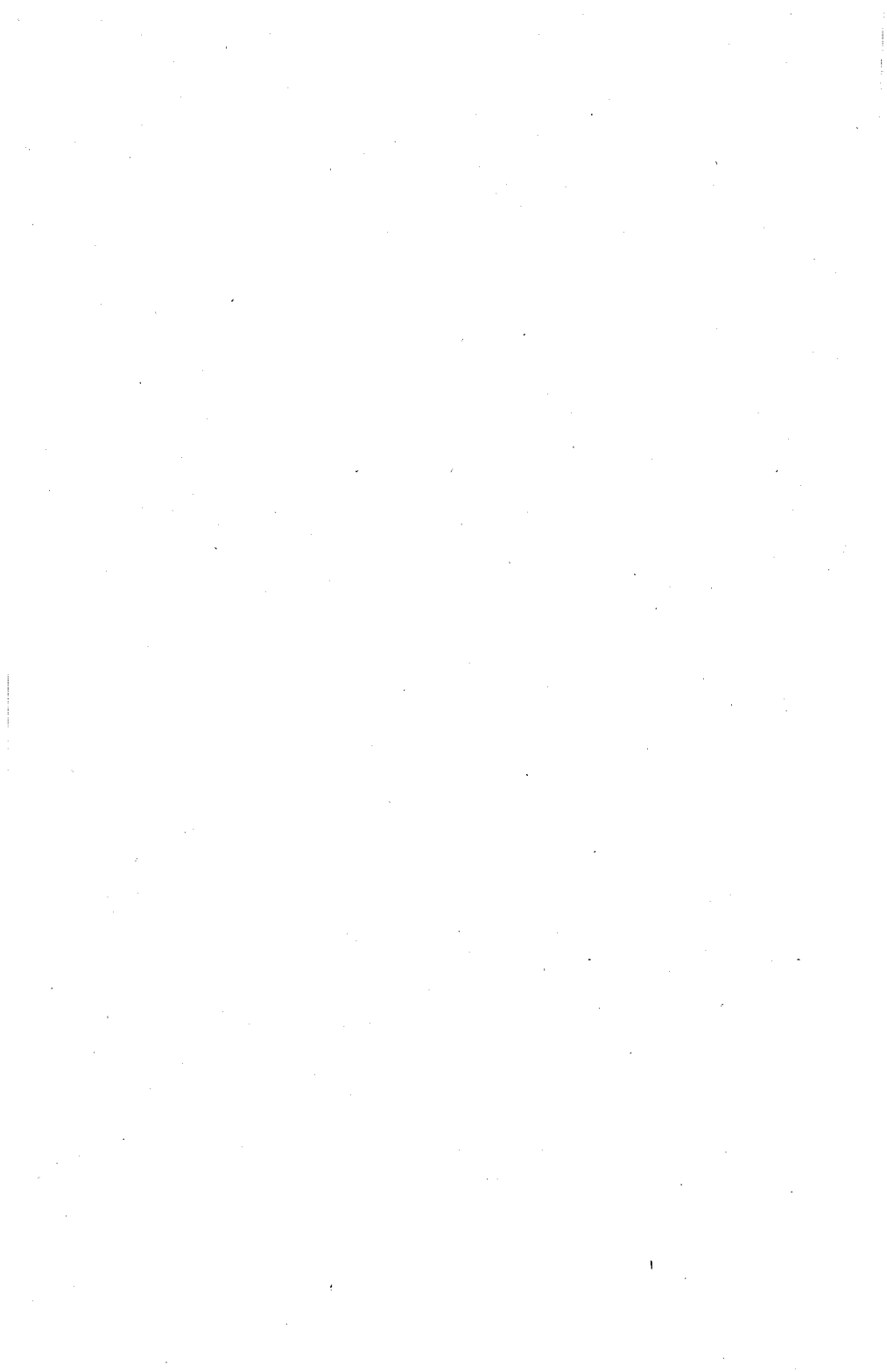
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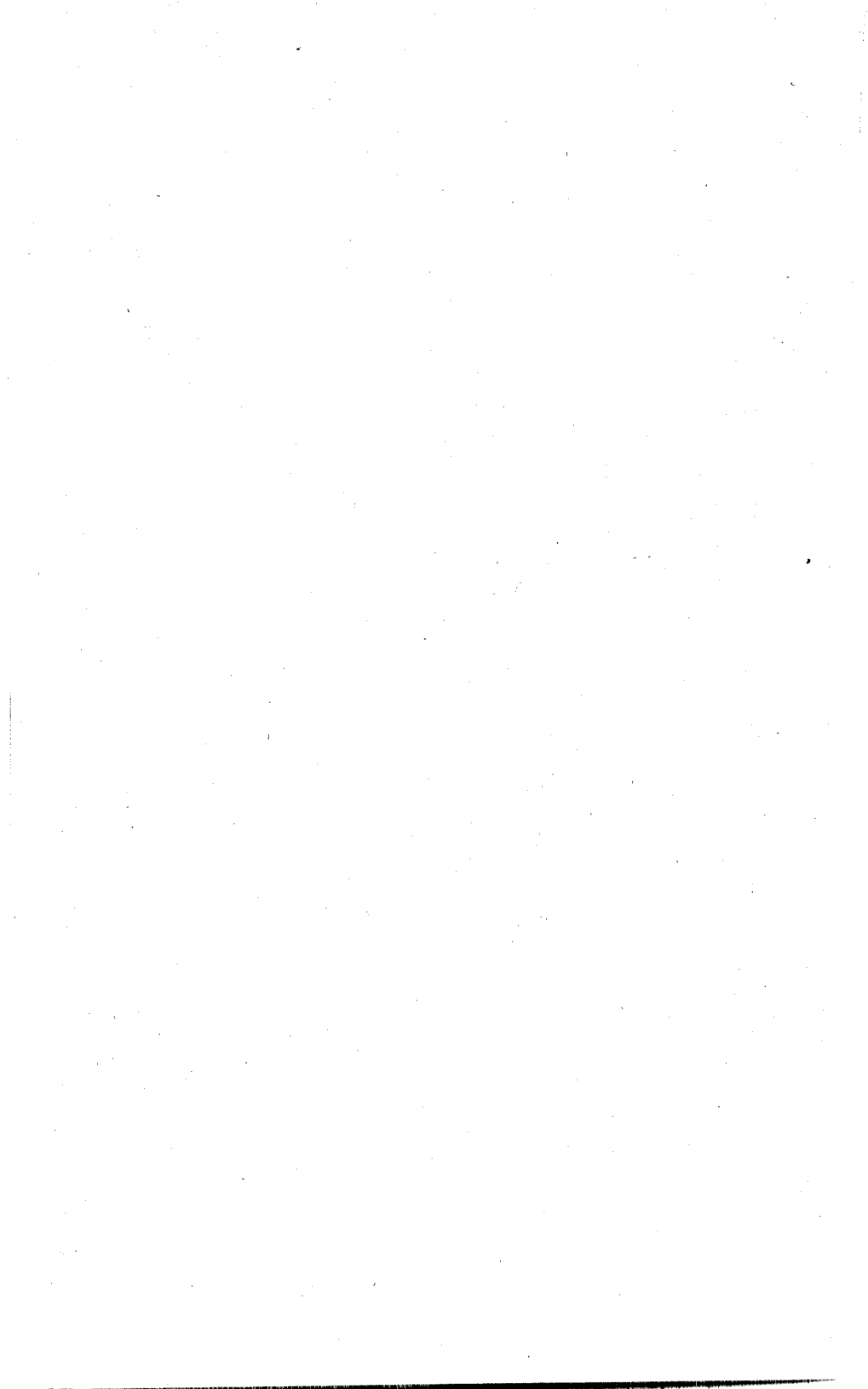


Chapter 16

The Electing God In Christ

We believe that, all the posterity of Adam being thus fallen into perdition and ruin by the sin of our first parents, God then did manifest Himself such as He is; that is to say, merciful and just: MERCIFUL, since He delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom He in His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness has elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works; JUST, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.

ARTICLE XVI



NO PROBLEM impinges itself so much upon man today as that of the meaninglessness of life. The lamentations of the poets but echo the voiceless crying of the multitudes. In haunting language Edna St. Vincent Millay expresses the modern mood:

*"The anguish of the world is on my tongue,
My bowl is filled to the brim with it; there
is more than I can eat."*

Yet man finds that he can no more live without meaning than without bread.

Some would seek this in the pursuit of passing pleasures. Others try to drown their sorrows in wealth or work. Not a few succumb to the spell of esoteric religious and philosophical theories, fooling themselves that within man's grasp lies the answer to life's riddles.

In this welter of voices the Christian church witnesses to her God and Savior. He as creator, ruler and redeemer alone can give true meaning to life. "In him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28) Jubilantly we confess with the psalmist, "For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light." (Ps. 36:9) The God and Father of our Lord Jesus is the ground of all meaning as well as being. From this vantage point we learn to rejoice in our election unto salvation.

Salvation of God alone

The present article attaches itself to what has been confessed before.

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Having outlined man's tragic fall into sin, the *Confession* now speaks more directly of the way of salvation. This has been opened by our most gracious God in Christ.

In contrast with all other religions Christianity confesses that salvation is the work of God alone. Here throbs the pulse-beat of our faith. Nowhere is this more eloquently set forth than in the Reformed creeds. We recognize, of course, that this follows consistently from the Biblical teaching of sin and its consequences. Since man is involved in death, he is both unable and unwilling to turn back to God. Yet we confess to election, not because it is a logical inference. We rejoice in its profound mystery, because it is so clearly affirmed by the Bible. To the race which had fallen into perdition God was pleased to manifest himself such as he is: that is to say, merciful and just.

From the outset the Scriptures make this plain. As soon as our first parents fell into sin, they became afraid of their Creator-Friend to whom they were responsible. "And they heard the voice of Jehovah God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Jehovah God amongst the trees of the garden." (Gen. 3:8) Now the glory of the Christian gospel comes into focus, for God approaches man and announces his plan of redemption and reconciliation.

Only two divine attributes are here mentioned: God's *mercy* and *justice*. Naturally these may not be divorced from his other perfections, since God and his attributes are one. But in proclaiming his saving purposes God himself repeatedly stresses these two.

Now we face a baffling problem. To this divine call there are two responses. Some listen and turn to God for salvation. Others, involved in the same distress and death, harden their hearts to stray still farther from God. Only Scripture can explain the mystery of this difference. It does so by stressing divine sovereignty without for a moment denying or obscuring the full moral and spiritual responsibility of the individual.

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Men never escape the claims of him who calls them, even when they "speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron." (I Tim. 4:2) Also those who know not Christ are without excuse, for "they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing them." (Rom. 2:15) Many factors, including the psychological, historical and environmental, play a significant role here. Yet none of these really illumines the mystery why one believes and the other disbelieves. The Bible, however, relates this spiritual division of mankind into believers and unbelievers, saved and unsaved, to divine election. Man left to himself is without power or inclination to turn unto God in repentance and faith. Only God can and does draw him out of sin and all its results. Thus the believer acknowledges humbly:

*"I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
It was not I that found, O Savior true,
No, I was found of Thee."*

This acknowledgment of God's sovereignty in salvation has been opposed by many within and outside of the churches.

In spite of life's exigencies man wants the final say about his destiny. No issue has been more heatedly debated than that of freedom and sovereignty. All must agree that there are many determining factors in their lives beyond human control. None asks to be born or chooses when and where. Even the strong are subject to pressures beyond their control. Now the alternatives to faith in the sovereign God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are too dark and dismal to contemplate seriously. Would we believe, then, in chance or luck? This robs life of all personal significance and purpose. If we turn to fate for a solution, we walk in despair. There is really no middle ground between the God of the Scriptures and chaos. Without God life is meaningless, a burned-out hope, a road that winds endlessly to nowhere. Those who drink the cup of unbelief experience, to use the words of John Masefield, that life is one long headache on a noisy street.

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Within the Christian church there also are many who reject the sovereignty of God. They bring up repeatedly the worn-out arguments against election. Little do they seem to realize that thereby they dishonor God. If he is not sovereign in his grace, then he has abdicated as God. They rob themselves and others of resting in the eternal love and power of God in Christ. They do not understand the plight of the race. To man they ascribe a power which he does not possess. Urging that moral responsibility is dependent on man's unrestricted freedom, they argue for a freedom which would separate man still more from God who is his true life. Because they cannot understand, so they say, how divine election and human responsibility can be correlated, they try to solve their problem by cutting the Gordian knot and denying the very essence of man's life of creaturely dependence upon God. Pointedly A. A. Hodge says about these who so adulterate the Biblical doctrine, "The new theology, asserting the narrowness of the old, is discarding the foreordination of Jehovah as a worn-out figment of the schools, discredited by the advanced culture of today. This is not the first time that the owls, mistaking the shadow of a passing edifice for their native light, have prematurely hooted at the eagles, convinced that what is invisible to them cannot possibly exist."¹

That there is a problem here for the thinking believer we would not deny. To believe in divine election demands a recognition of the mystery and majesty of God. But only then will our God not be too small for our needs. We need to remind ourselves repeatedly of what God says about himself, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith Jehovah. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isa. 55:8, 9) Not by the exercise of our unaided and unenlightened mind but by faith in God as God will we learn to rest in "the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will; to the end that we should be unto the praise of his glory." (Eph. 1:11, 12) When so we learn to rest the case with God, he makes his ways plain to us. Our freedom is realistically awakened and activated, when we think God's thoughts after him and submit our wills to his.

A Sober but Straightforward Confession

By now it should have become plain, that the reformation stressed the doctrine of election not because of speculative interests but prompted by deep religious concern.

God's word had long been darkened by the traditions and ceremonies which Rome forced upon the people. Under Luther, Calvin and others, this was once again proclaimed. Little can we appreciate how rich those believers felt, when they heard of the mercies of the sovereign God. No longer were they compelled to walk the long road to God through the Virgin and the saints. The gospel opened the way through Christ in whom they were elected unto salvation.

This does not mean that the gospel was equated with predestination. Often the Reformed churches have been accused of thus narrowing the good news. Against such a misconception Abraham Kuyper warned, "It is a mistake to discover the specific character of Calvinism in the doctrine of Predestination, or in the authority of Scripture. For Calvinism all these are logical consequences, not the point of departure—foliage bearing witness to the luxuriousness of its growth, but not the root from which it sprouted." What we seek to preach in season and out of season is the saving mercy of God in Christ Jesus. But this mercy is in no sense dependent upon or determined by man. Grace dwells in the heart of God everlastingly. We refuse to be shut up to a "one track theology." So rich and full is the teaching of Holy Writ, that it always spills over the categories of man's thought and language, also as this is expressed in the creeds. Thus at this point the *Confession* seeks to speak soberly and simply. But because God himself speaks of his electing grace, the church dare not keep silent.

Here we may learn much from Calvin. Often he has been accused of being cold, harsh, a man without a heart; one who foisted an iron-clad system on the church and thereby made God the author of sin. In this vein one of Calvin's first opponents, Jerome Bolsec, urged preachers to be discreetly silent about election and preach only the sweet promises. Even Bul-

linger warned that many people concluded from Calvin's writings that he made God responsible for sin. The consistory of Basle thought that if election had to be mentioned, this should be done in few words. The ministers of Berne were of the opinion that God's people ought to be fed only with milk.

In response to these reactions Calvin developed the doctrine of predestination more thoroughly. He insisted that all who rejected this teaching followed their own reason, which is tasteless and insensitive to God's truth. How arrogant are those who dare to suggest what the Holy Spirit ought or ought not to reveal. Because God has spoken on election, the church must echo his words. Yet Calvin does not hesitate to warn, "The discussion of predestination—a subject of itself rather intricate—is made very perplexed and therefore dangerous, by human curiosity, which no barriers can restrain from wandering into forbidden labyrinths, and soaring above its sphere, as if determined to leave none of the Divine secrets unscrutinized or unexplored."² To desire knowledge beyond what God has revealed "indicates as great folly, as a wish to walk through impassable roads, or to see in the dark." Therefore he encouraged his readers not to be ashamed of "a kind of learned ignorance."³

All these difficulties ought not dissuade believers, however, from meditating on this truth. "They who shut the gates to prevent any one from presuming to approach and taste this doctrine, do no less injury to man than to God; for nothing else will be sufficient to produce in us suitable humility, or to impress us with a due sense of our great obligations to God. Nor is there any other solid confidence, even according to the authority of Christ, who, to deliver us from all fear, and render us invincible among so many dangers, snares, and deadly conflicts, promises to preserve in safety all whom the Father has committed to his peculiar care. Whence we infer, that they who know not themselves to be God's peculiar people will be tortured with continual anxiety; and therefore, that the interest of all believers, as well as their own, is very badly consulted by those who, blind to the three advantages we have remarked, would wholly remove the foundation of our salvation."⁴

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Now we can understand why de Bres speaks so clearly yet carefully about election. With him our hearts rejoice in "the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God." (Rom. 11:35) With the redeemed we sing about God's wondrous ways. How lovely is the grace which he has manifested in Christ. Against the dark background, not of his unchangeable purposes but of our rebellion, we praise him "who giveth life to the dead, and calleth the things that are not, as though they were." (Rom. 4:17)

In the story of his conversion H. J. Hegger tells how the Reformed faith became his strength and song. His seeking was first prompted by intellectual difficulties with the Romish doctrines and an indefinable hungering after God. But as he progressed into the light, he experienced, "I had not yet entered into the secret treasuries of reformation Christendom. By listening to sermons I began gradually to sense something of the greatness of Jesus' mercy. At first I could hardly accept that Jesus was as merciful as Protestantism taught. But again and again they presented new texts, each clearer than the preceding. These texts occasioned within me an explosion of joy. That bombardment gradually broke down my resistance."⁵ In the face of Christ he saw the glory of God's eternal and sovereign grace. Thus he committed himself to the Calvinistic faith. And this same explosion of joy has thrilled evangelical believers in all ages. Sure and steadfast and sweet are the mercies of the Redeemer, because they rest in the unchangeable purposes of the living and loving God.

Election as the Ground of Salvation

Only when we are aware of God's electing grace will the story of salvation make sense. All believers must agree that no one deserves this mercy. With unquestionable justice God could have left all men in the perdition in which they were plunged.

This approach contradicts the common opinion which men cherish of themselves. Most people feel that man deserves something better at God's hand than condemnation. Sin is not

taken seriously. Such a low view of God regards him as owing something to his creatures who have rebelled against his will.

Now these objections are by no means new. In Paul's days the Jews were convinced that they deserved special treatment by God. The educated and elite among the Gentiles were enamored by a no less lofty conception of their worth. Some argued, trying to use Paul's words, that God's promises had failed, when men died in their sins. (Rom. 9:6) Others accused God of unrighteousness. (Rom. 9:14) Many insisted that if God "hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth," (Rom. 9:19) then God had no right to find fault with the unbelieving. Against all these Paul assented, "Nay but, O man, who are thou that repliest against God?" (Rom. 9:18, 19)

Similarly the *Confession* makes salvation depend on sovereign grace.

In a few well-chosen words it defines election unto life. Here there is no dark and devious mystery, the proclamation of which fills us with dread or despair. Rather, election is a signal manifestation of God's mercy, *since He delivers and preserves from this perdition all whom He in His eternal and unchangeable counsel of mere goodness has elected in Christ Jesus our Lord, without any respect to their works.*

Several aspects of this truth must be remembered.

(1) The church confesses election as a sovereign decree. No one and nothing outside of God has prompted this decision. Salvation is bestowed on believers "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, . . . having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." (Eph. 1:4, 5)

(2) It consists of the divine choice of a certain, specific and limited number of individuals. Not everyone is chosen. The race of the redeemed has been fixed by God. Thus there is no room according to the Bible for universal salvation. With this figment of their imagination some theologians and sects have led many astray.

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(3) This decree is eternal and unchangeable. God did not wait with making his choice, until after man had fallen into sin. Here is no desperate remedy on his part to save something out of the wreckage which man wrought. Nor does salvation depend on the faith and obedience of men but rather on the faithfulness of God to his purposes in Christ. The Bible does not countenance the Barthian notion that all men should regard themselves as both elect and reprobate in Christ, who as the elect man is also the rejected one for our sakes. This view is radically repudiated by Christ's own words, "All that which the Father giveth me shall come unto me, and him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." (John 6:37) Again we hear the Savior say, "He that is of God heareth the words of God: for this cause ye hear them not, because ye are not of God." (John 8:47)

(4) Moreover, election is an efficacious decree. Nothing can frustrate God's saving purpose in Christ. God has not merely opened the door to a hopeless humanity; according to Scripture he effectually draws men into saving fellowship with himself through Christ. He fully *delivers and preserves from perdition* those whom he has chosen.

(5) Nor is this choice conditioned by any work of man, not even the work of faith. Here the contrast between God's dealings with Esau and with Jacob is decisive. "For the children, being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto her, The elder shall serve the younger. Even as it is written, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom. 9:11-13)

To be sure, the Bible speaks in more than one sense of divine choosing.

In the Old Testament we read repeatedly of Israel's election as the special people of the Lord. (Deut. 4:37; 7:6-8; 10:15; Hos. 13:5) Mention is made of the election of certain individuals to various tasks and offices. (Deut. 18:5; I Sam. 10:24; Ps. 78:70) Such texts, however, ought never be used to obscure or deny

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the sovereign election of individuals unto grace in Christ. Rather, they serve to illumine God's eternal purposes. His plan embraces the totality of man's life. The intimate relation which the several aspects of election sustain to each other is beautifully expressed by our Lord to his disciples, "Ye did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that ye should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide." (John 15:16) Here God's chosen servants, in full awareness of their personal responsibility for the task to which they were appointed, are reminded that this was by divine choice. This alone guarantees both the fact and the fruitfulness of their discipleship unto obedience.

Election in Christ Jesus

All this has readied us to consider briefly the essential quality of divine election. We can and should speak thereof, because God has so plainly revealed this in his word.

Let us cheerfully admit that here we stand at the edge of mystery. Innumerable questions arise as we ponder what God has spoken about his eternal purposes. We refuse to make these the starting-point of our theological and spiritual reflections. Such would be putting the cart before the horse. Unless we have first learned to know God as he has made himself known to us in his gracious gospel, we will lose ourselves in a horrible labyrinth of misconceptions and misconstructions from which there is no escape. With all our heart we repudiate the notion of God's will as naked sovereignty. On such a basis the gospel proclamation is reduced to bare announcements hurled like thunderbolts upon a helpless and hapless humanity. This produces a complete indifference to God's word which is nothing short of fatalism. No room is left for the joyful news of God's seeking and saving love in Christ, which the *Confession* so exquisitely expresses.

We shall therefore consider this doctrine only in the full light of Holy Writ. Then it never casts a darkening shadow across the gracious gospel, for God has decreed to save his people *in Christ Jesus*. Only in confrontation with the Christ

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of the Scriptures do we have any adequate and reliable knowledge of God. To speak of God apart from him is to do violence to the written word.

Repeatedly the person and work of Christ are intimately related to God's eternal purposes. Christ himself is the object of the Father's special love. (I Pet. 1:20; 2:4) He who by "his precious blood" redeemed us unto God "was foreknown indeed before the foundation of the world, but was manifested at the end of the times for your sake." Paul takes the same approach, when announcing of God that "whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son." (Rom. 8:29) Believers have been chosen in Christ to become like their wonderful Savior and Head, in whom is all the Father's good pleasure. To bring them to life eternal Christ was sent of the Father into this world. Apart from him we know not the ways of God who says of himself, "In overflowing wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting lovingkindness will I have mercy on thee, saith Jehovah thy Redeemer." (Isa. 54:8)

Thus the doctrine of election touches the very depths of the Christian faith. It proclaims the personal, covenantal and responsible relation of men to God. Its deepest and determinative ground lies in God's counsel, which is always as good and holy and just as God is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Knowing God in this way we refuse to be trapped into a choice between determinism and indeterminism. Between these two poles the opinions of the wise men of this world have swung like a monotonous and deadly pendulum. This is the result of formulating the problems apart from God's truth. Our thought-patterns, let it be remembered, are not only limited by our creatureliness; they have also been radically altered and perverted by our sinfulness. Only God can state our problems correctly. This he does in his word, not as an intellectual exercise for us but in the context of his actual dealings with the sons of men. He reminds us of his overriding power, while at the same time stressing our personal obligations to him as Creator, Ruler and Redeemer. With this message he addresses the totality of our lives by impinging with his word upon our hearts.

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In such listening we learn much. Always he is the God who speaks in Christ Jesus.

Such sovereignty is a far cry from the exercise of naked, arbitrary, capricious power. God is light and love; in him is no darkness at all. He lets us know how he works. He calls us to himself. He promises us all we need to seek and find him. He never changes his mind, nor does he cast away those who cry to him for mercy.

Because God is God and demands to be recognized and revered as such, there are mysteries too high for us to comprehend. Precisely how he upholds our full responsibility while working within us both to will and to work according to his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13) cannot be ascertained. Therefore as soon as we hear his voice, we set our soul to attention in the mood of the psalmist, "Jehovah, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too wonderful for me. Surely, I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with his mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me." (Ps. 131:1, 2) We know that to contemplate divine election apart from God's word and Spirit leads into a dead-end alley.

But for the seeking soul there is a road which leads to light. It breaks like bright dawn upon the years of man's troubled existence on earth. Of this road which yields such profit and peace Calvin has much to say. "In the first place, if we seek the fatherly clemency and propitious heart of God, our eyes must be directed to Christ, in whom alone God is well pleased. If we seek salvation, life and immortality of the heavenly kingdom, recourse must be had to none other; for he alone is the Fountain of life, the Anchor of salvation, and the Heir of the heavenly kingdom. . . The persons, therefore, whom God has adopted as his children, he is said to have chosen, not in themselves, but in Christ; because it was impossible for him to love them, except in him; or to honour them with the inheritance of his kingdom, unless previously made partakers in him. But if we are chosen in him, we shall find no assurance of our election in ourselves; or even in God the Father considered

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alone, abstractly from the Son. Christ, therefore, is the mirror, in which it behooves us to contemplate our election; and here we may do it with safety."⁶

This Christ, who shed his blood for the sins of the world (I John 2:2) must be proclaimed to all men everywhere. Such preaching includes the command to repent and believe in him as well as the promise that all who so believe have eternal life. In this sense our election in Christ Jesus is the heart of all Christian preaching.

The Decree of Reprobation

But doesn't the doctrine of election cause us to shudder, as soon as we remember that not all are saved and that in some way this fact is bound up with the eternal purposes of God?

This introduces us to the doctrine of reprobation. Here the church confesses that God also reveals himself *as just, in leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves.*

Since the day of Augustine and Pelagius this subject has been heatedly debated. At the outset the church endorsed the convictions of the church father. Within a few decades, however, compromises with the Pelagian heresy were adopted. Not a few insisted on remaining silent about the mystery of reprobation, little realizing that this attitude would shortly compel their silence about election unto life. When Roman Catholics, Lutherans and others still mention reprobation, they interpret this as rooting only in God's foreknowledge and not in any foreordination. Even Calvin spoke of this in connection with Adam's fall and its results as a *decretum horribile* (awful decree). By this he signified not that the doctrine itself was awful but rather the fact that some men were passed by. Yet he urged that it was clearly taught in the Bible. Even Brunner admits that it follows logically and irresistibly from the doctrine of particular election. Yet not for this reason do we confess it. We speak of reprobation because God has done so.

Reprobation is the eternal decree of God, whereby he has determined to pass by certain men with his saving grace and

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to punish them for their sins with the penalty which they deserve. The first element, called "preterition," is mentioned by the *Confession*. Usually it has been combined with God's determination to punish with dishonor and wrath those who abide in their sins. What must be remembered is that God punishes always on the basis of strict justice. God has not predestined men unto sin.

Since so many go astray on this point, we should take our bearings in Scriptural light.

Always the Bible declares the sinfulness of the whole human race. No one escapes its impact. On this basis God could justly have left all men in their ruin. Yet it has pleased him to show mercy in Christ Jesus, in whom his people are elected unto life. This gospel must be published everywhere. Without exception those who hear must be commanded to repent and believe. Here the promise of forgiveness, adoption into God's family, and life everlasting is announced for all who respond. But then the question is bound to arise why some do not believe. This is admittedly a most vexing and intricate problem.

Speaking of the multitude which despised his gracious words, our Lord said some seemingly strange things. "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and understanding, and didst reveal them unto babes: yea, Father, for so it was well-pleasing in thy sight." (Matt. 9:25, 26) Thus there is both a revealing and concealing activity of the Father. This double action is specifically connected with his good pleasure. Paul goes so far as to say that the distinction was made between Esau and Jacob before they were born. (Rom. 9:13) To explain man's response according to some hidden worthiness or unworthiness on his part, or to some known works or lack of works which he might in time perform, is not permissible according to the Bible. In this same context we read of God's dealings with Pharaoh, "For this very purpose did I raise thee up, that I might show in thee my power, and that my name might be published abroad in all the earth. So then he hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth." (Rom. 9:17, 18) To those who protest such a sover-

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eign disposal on God's part, the apostle speaks of the right of the potter over the clay "from the same lump to make one part a vessel to honor, and another to dishonor." (Rom. 9:19-24) Of the Israelites who received salvation he declares that this was of grace, not of works, since "the election obtained it, and the rest were hardened." (Rom. 11:7)

In the same breath the Bible always upholds the full moral and spiritual responsibility of every man. Never may we argue here in the abstract. We must seek to do full justice to all the insights which God gives. In connection with hardening many psychological factors are operative. As men pursue their wicked and wanton course, they harden themselves. At the same time this hardening process is depicted in Scripture as a divine judgment. Thus we read both of God hardening men's hearts and men hardening their own hearts. Of this Jude reminds us forcibly, "For there are certain men crept in privily, even they who were of old written (or: appointed, *set forth*—KJV) beforehand unto this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of God into lasciviousness, and denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." (Jude 4) In a similar vein Peter writes, "For they stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed." (I Pet. 2:8) Something of this process is described by Paul. "And for this cause (because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved) God sendeth them a working of error, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." (I Thess. 2:11, 12) This is even connected with gospel preaching, for Isaiah was commanded, "Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn again, and be healed." (Isa. 8:10)

Here we must learn to walk with delicate spiritual balance. Man is completely at fault, when he refuses to repent and believe. His punishment is in proportion to his sins. In no sense may God be charged with these. Yet for his own glory God has been pleased to pass some by with his grace by which alone they could and would turn to him as the fountain of life.

Early in the seventeenth century the Dutch churches were rent by sharp controversy concerning the two aspects of predestination, election and reprobation. Although claiming to agree with the *Confession*, the Arminians patently rejected that God's counsel was unchangeable. They taught that God had chosen not certain persons but rather a certain, indeterminate class—namely those who would persevere in the true faith—to his salvation. Most of all they attacked the phrase which spoke of God as *leaving others in the fall and perdition wherein they have involved themselves*.

The synod of Dort (1618-19) replied to these contentions. Again God's counsel was declared to be eternal, unchangeable and unconditioned by anything in man. In somewhat greater detail it spelled out the doctrine of reprobation. Most guardedly and yet clearly it described this mystery as the decree of God "to leave in the common misery into which they have plunged themselves, and not to bestow upon them saving faith and the grace of conversion; but, permitting them in His just judgment to follow their own ways, at last, for the declaration of His justice, to condemn and punish them forever, not only on account of their unbelief, but also for all their other sins."⁷ Thus the church expressed her conviction that God had spoken clearly on this subject. Although not fully understanding the heights and depths of his sovereign good pleasure, she was constrained to acknowledge what she had heard in his word.

At the same time the synod warned against abusing this teaching.

Throughout the decisions breathes a profound pastoral solicitude. Those in whom "is not yet strongly felt" a living faith in Christ "ought not to be alarmed at the mention of reprobation nor rank themselves among the lost." Rather, they should persevere in using the means of grace "and with ardent desires devoutly and humbly wait for a season of richer grace." Nor should any be terrified, when faith is weak and life marred by the workings of sin, "since a merciful God has promised that He will not quench the smoking flax, nor break the bruised

reed." Yet "this doctrine is justly terrible" to all who refuse to turn unto God.⁸

Knowing how frequently this doctrine was perverted, the synod appended a *Conclusion* which throws invaluable light on these articles of faith. Vigorously it rejected the slanders leveled against the Reformed churches as if they taught such hideous errors "that, if the reprobate should even perform truly all the works of the saints, their obedience would not in the least contribute to their salvation; that God, by a mere arbitrary act of his will, without the least respect or view to any sin, had predestined the greatest part of the world to eternal damnation, and has created them for this very purpose; that in the same manner in which election is the fountain and cause of faith and good works, reprobation is the cause of unbelief and impiety; . . ." These are unfounded calumnies, and the synod warned that those who so accused the churches would suffer God's wrath against all who bear false witness.

At the same time the synod urged all pastors and teachers "to conduct themselves piously and religiously in handling this doctrine." Its consideration may never be a matter of abstract, logical discussion. The chief concern must always be the glory of God as well as the promotion of personal godliness and the consolation of afflicted souls. All are "to regulate, by the Scripture, according to the analogy of faith, not only their sentiments, but also their language." With all this believers are reminded that, "The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deut. 29:29) Only by faith in the great and good God of the Scriptures who reveals himself in Christ Jesus may we speak about these things.

The Benefit of Considering Our Election

God has revealed the great mystery of election not to stimulate our intellectual curiosity but to feed faith and trust in him as the God of our salvation. Its aim is to stir us to an ador-

ing contemplation of his works and ways with the sons of men. Thus its value for the believer is inestimable.

We should not concern ourselves over-much with critics who argue that election is a harsh, cruel and barren doctrine. With all their vaunted learning they know not the things of God. Here we remember the words of Paul, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He that taketh the wise in their craftiness: and again, the Lord knoweth the reasonings of the wise, that they are vain. Wherefore let no one glory in men." (I Cor. 3:19-21) As long as men insist on fully comprehending God's ways, their eyes remain fast shut and their souls unfed with the word of life. Only those who live by faith can speak truly on election, for they have learned first to listen to God. One must be on the inside, before he is competent to consider the electing grace of God in Christ. Therefore the Bible never exhorts us to begin with predestination. We are instead urged to repent and believe. Thereupon, for our consolation and increase in faith the Lord instructs us in the depths of his eternal love. Then we shall not waver or turn from him but rather increase in our confidence that for Christ's sake he will always remain faithful.

Calvin's testimony on the benefits of contemplating our election is both concise and complete. "In the first place, I would entreat my readers carefully to bear in mind the admonition which I offer; that this great subject is not, as many imagine, a mere thorny and noisy disputation, nor a speculation which wearies the minds of men without any profit; but a solid discussion, eminently adapted to the service of the godly, because it builds us up soundly in the faith, trains us to humility, and lifts us up into an admiration of the unbounded goodness of God towards us, while it elevates us to praise this goodness in our highest strains. For there is not a more effectual means of building up faith than giving our open ears to the election of God, which the Holy Spirit seals upon our heart while we hear, showing us that it stands in the eternal and immutable good will of God towards us, and that, therefore, it cannot be moved or altered by any storms of the world, by any assaults of Satan, by any changes, by any fluctuations or weaknesses of

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the flesh. For our salvation is then sure to us, when we find the cause of it in the breast of God.”⁹

To these words little can be added.

We may take continual refuge in God’s immutable mercies, even when struggling with the weaknesses of our faith and the imperfections of our life. Here we are assured that nothing “shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:39) As long as we seek strength or solidity in ourselves, we shall be shaken by doubts and terrified by the dangers to which a life of fellowship with God is always exposed in this world. Only because God saves are we safe. Nor can his plan of salvation be frustrated, since it is grounded in his unchanging benevolence towards us in Christ.

This makes the gospel such “good news” for a lost and hopeless world. So long as men think themselves independent of the Creator who is also Redeemer of the world, they will chafe at the mention of his purposes of peace. But when life’s trials overwhelm the soul and leave it stripped of all peace and power, this message of sovereign grace in Christ takes on new radiance. God has created man for himself, and none finds rest except in him. All true believers, faced with the impenetrable mystery of their sin and its consequences, learn to lean solely upon “the breast of God” in whom dwells eternally the fulness of all grace. Therefore they confess to the world,

*“’Tis not that I did choose Thee,
Dear Lord that could not be;
This heart would still refuse Thee,
Hadst Thou not chosen me.
Thou from the sin that stained me
Hast cleansed and set me free;
Of old Thou hast ordained me
That I should live to Thee.”*

This is the faith of the church of all ages, which never hesitates to ascribe its full salvation to God alone.

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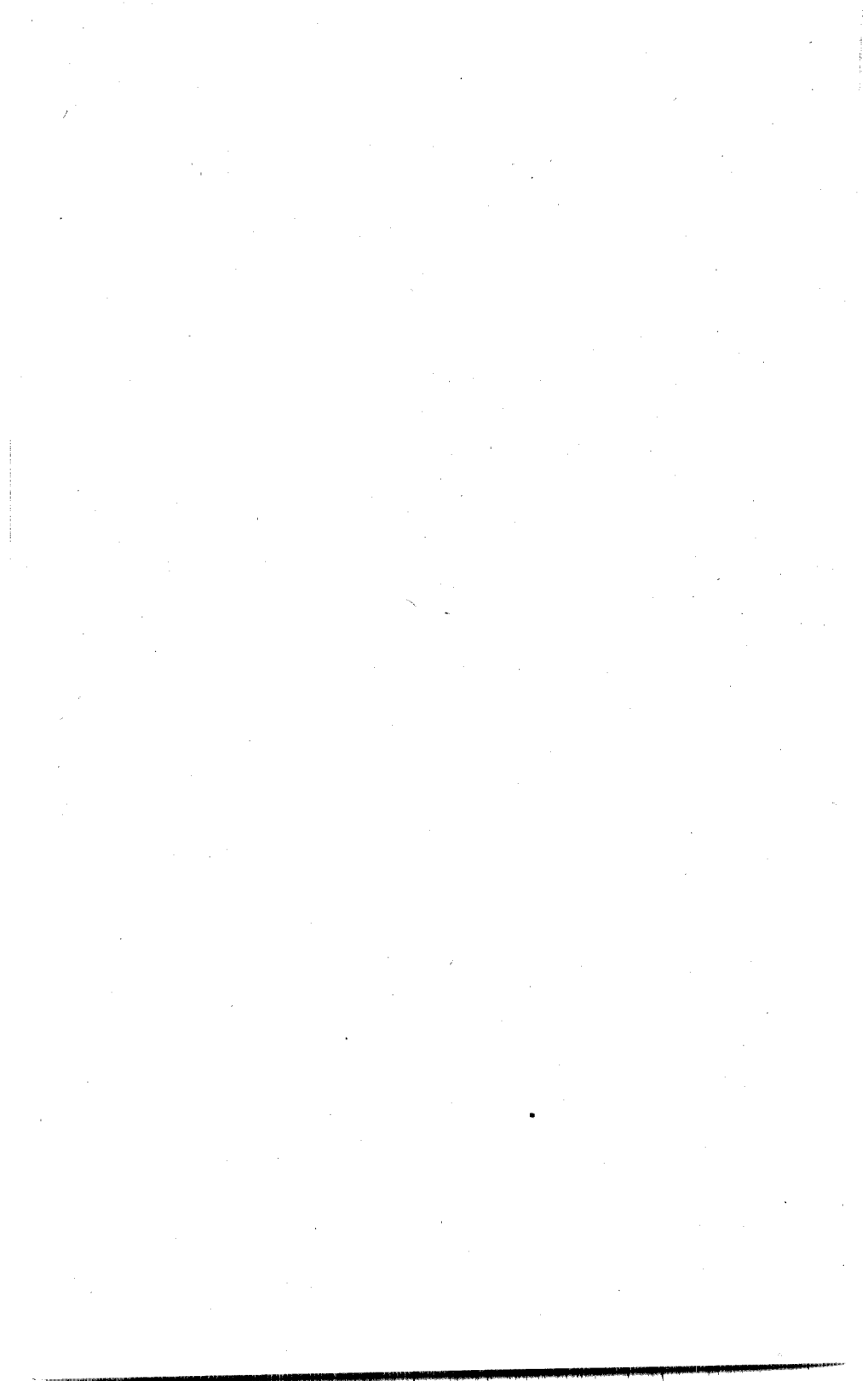
1. Prove that Scripture always presents salvation as God's work. Which theological systems fail to do justice to this truth? 2. How does God seek fallen man? 3. On what grounds do we reject the notion that salvation is an after-thought on God's part? 4. What is meant by predestination? 5. Show that Scripture never regards predestination and human responsibility as contradictory. 6. What is the difference between the Roman Catholic and Reformed views of predestination? 7. What do we confess about election? 8. In which sense is election a pivotal doctrine in the Christian faith? 9. What is the Arminian view of election? (cf. *Canons of Dort, I, Rej. of Errors*) 10. By regarding election a mystery, do we champion an irrational view of God, man and the world? Explain. 11. Prove that the Bible always connects election and Christian service. 12. What place does Christ occupy in God's counsel? Is he the ground or meritorious cause of our election? Explain. 13. How would you counsel people who worry about whether they are elect or not? 14. What is meant by reprobation? 15. What is Barth's view of election and reprobation? In which respects does it depart radically from Scripture? 16. What is meant by Infra-lapsarianism and Supra-lapsarianism? Were these controversies of any value? 17. Why is election such a comforting doctrine for God's people? 18. Do you think the Reformed churches today stress election too much or too little? Give your reasons.

Chapter 17

The Seeking and Saving God in Christ

We believe that our most gracious God, in His admirable wisdom and goodness, seeing that man had thus thrown himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself wholly miserable, was pleased to seek and comfort him, when he trembling fled from His presence, promising him that He would give His Son (who would be "born of a woman) to bruise the head of the serpent" and to make him blessed.

ARTICLE XVII



SINGING is a great and glorious act. It is used by God to his praise. At the same time it teaches the singers something of the wondrous ways of our Creator and Redeemer.

Frequently this is forgotten by those who study the church's creeds. They view these statements as little more than abstruse speculations which may feed the head but not the heart. Creeds, they claim, fetter the free movement of God's Spirit within the church. They fail to realize that the church cannot live without a creed. To be alive-in-faith means to speak meaningfully about God and his work. Because we speak here about matters so high and holy, our speaking becomes a singing with the soul. Nor does this commit us to the position of bishop Pike, who supposes that in singing we need not feel bound to believe the words. Ours is the calling of witnessing to the truth also in song.

In this spiritual exercise we simply follow the Scriptures. Paul, the theologian without a peer, has shown us the way. When writing to his spiritual son about "the mystery of godliness," his tongue sweetly sings about the Savior who was

*"Manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen of angels,
Preached among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory." (I Tim. 3:16)*

This is doctrine set to music. The church on earth joins the angelic hosts who ceaselessly delight in praising God. But when the church sings, she glories in things which even "angels desire to look into." (I Pet. 1:12) For the theme-song of the church is the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The God of All Grace

No truth is more precious, persuasive and powerful than that which announces the coming of God to man. Here, according to the *Confession*, we learn to know *our gracious God*.

Now there are few Biblical terms which so much delight the believing soul as the word grace. Repeatedly it is used in the Old and New Testaments. Unless we understand its significance and scope, however, we will unhappily remain strangers to the redemptive message of the Bible. This is the more necessary today, since much Christian terminology has been emptied of its meaning. Words change their impact with usage. This has, unfortunately, happened with the word grace. Often it seems to mean little more than human kindness or attractiveness, much like the Greeks of old used the term. So Wordsworth used it when writing,

*"A gracious spirit o'er this world presides
And o'er the heart of man—invisibly
It comes—to works of unreprieved delight
And tendency benign."*

Here grace is no longer the radical and reformatory coming of God into the life of sinful man. Those who so use the word set up a roadblock within themselves against the message of Scripture. In one of his dialogues Berkeley introduces a free-thinker who is frankly puzzled by the church's use of the term. Like Alciphron, multitudes today confess that they don't know what the word means.

Now this creates a problem for the witnessing church. We may not lightly dismiss the complaint of the masses that they cannot understand what the church says. The way out of the impasse, however, must not be taken by throwing overboard all Christian terms. We can no more do this and still speak meaningfully, than a mechanic can stop talking to his client about carburetors, fuel pumps and axle grease. Yet we must take time to explain in simplest language the meaning of the words which we use, illustrating from Scripture how God uses

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them for our growth "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (II Pet. 3:18)

We speak rightly of Christianity as the religion of grace.

This is the heart of matter. Man's saving relation to God is prompted and preserved and perfected entirely by God's goodness. Men owe all their boons and blessings to him who is as generous as he is great. "Jehovah is good to all; and his tender mercies are over all his works." (Ps. 145:9) Again we read, "The earth is full of the lovingkindness of Jehovah." (Ps. 33:5) In patient and pardoning love he comes to the sons of men. Because God is gracious, he opens and continually keeps open the way to his paternal heart. Far from being austere and aloof, he seeks and saves those who have sinned against him. This benevolence turns not upon anything that man is or does. It is freely bestowed by God for Christ's sake alone.

Such a message, and let us face this frankly, stirs the deepest antipathies within the human heart.

So long as grace is no more than attractiveness of form or character, men will reflect upon it. But this would leave us with a Jesus who is little more than a religious teacher, an inspiring moral example, or a leader in our human struggles. This still leaves room for man apart from God to decide whether he will seek such a grace or not. But when grace is presented in Biblical language as the coming of the sovereign God to a world hopelessly enmeshed in its own folly, the natural man wants nothing of it. He regards this as an outrage to his dignity. Yet such is the message of the Christian church. Grace is God in the act of giving himself to men, acting upon and within them to restore them to fellowship with himself.

Here there may be no room for compromise.

In our relation to God all is of grace. No place is accorded to man's merit. By his gospel God strips us of all our pretensions. Yet with a full recognition of our ineradicable responsibility he sweetly and surely brings us back to himself.

This solves the problem which seems to vex many. They wonder whether God is willing to receive them in grace, since

they fail to find perfect faith and obedience within themselves. They agree that he may be gracious to others. They doubt his love for them. Thomas Chalmers once received a letter from such a distressed soul. He replied, "The truth is that your great error lies in making your comfort depend on the question, Do I believe? when you should make it turn upon the question, Is God willing to receive me for Christ's sake?" This states the matter succinctly. We must look away from ourselves to God. No one may doubt his gracious character. No stronger assurance of grace can be provided than in the gospel preaching, wherein before our eyes "Jesus Christ was openly set forth crucified." (Gal. 3:1)

Thus the church's task in this world is circumscribed. We are called to make *our gracious God* known to the sons of men. Casting away all trust in ourselves, we enter the treasure-house of grace which he has opened in the Son of his love. All who so look upon the only-begotten and well-beloved Son of the eternal God find him "full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

The Seeking and Saving God

Even the most casual reading of this article indicates its intimate connection with what we confessed earlier. After reflecting on the creation and fall of the race, the *Confession* reminds us of the unshakeable foundations of our salvation. We find repose on the breast of God, whose works are done in everlasting wisdom and faithfulness. Only when we entrust ourselves to this gracious God, are we prepared rightly to consider his ways with the sons of men.

Here we read of God who comes to seek and save us. We acknowledge his gracious movement towards us and on our behalf.

With this acknowledgement many of the learned seem to have their problems. They begin to discuss deeply about the relation between time and eternity. If God is self-existent and all-sufficient, how can we think of him as concerned about the reactions of creatures bound by time and space? How is it

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possible for the Infinite One to enter the framework of the finite without compromising his infinity? How can a creaturely response ever be meaningful to an omnipotent and omniscient Creator? Various solutions have been suggested, none of which really solves the problem. Some drift into pantheism. Others with equal vigor champion some form of deism. While some speak of a finite God who is in process of emerging, others speculate about a self-limiting God.

Let us recognize that this problem has been foisted upon the church largely as the result of contact with Greek philosophy. The Bible knows nothing of this as a burning issue within the minds and hearts of believers. Possibly this sounds too naive to modern man. Yet we ought not look for problems, where God apparently posits none. The riddle of human life lies not in its creatureliness but in its sinfulness. The Bible indeed extols wisdom as "a strength to the wise man more than ten rulers are in a city." (Eccl. 7:19) But such wisdom must recognize its limits. Without this we become confused. "And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; it is a sore travail that God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised therewith." (Eccl. 1:13) This sore travail remains, until we learn first to listen to what God says.

From his word we learn that history is the unfolding and realization of his sovereign will. This does not cancel man's obligations or make his response meaningless. Rather, our life is significant precisely because God works in and through history for his own ends. We do not step down, when first we speak of his eternal counsel and then consider his work in this world. We are dealing with the same reality but from another aspect. Salvation which is grounded in his eternal purposes God declares in this world and for this world .

Thus the *Confession* regards the world as the theater wherein God displays his attributes, yet never in such a way that the creature remains a passive spectator. Everything proclaims God's praise, because he is made known in and through the works of his hands. And the focal-point of his revelation

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is found in the salvation of his people. Here we learn to know God's *mercy* and *justice*. Since he is always *our gracious God*, we behold in the manner of his coming something of his *admirable wisdom and goodness*. He is totally different than the unmoved mover of the Greek philosophers. He is not akin to the nameless and formless One of the Hindus. Nor may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ be identified with Allah of the Moslems, who refuses to be touched with a feeling of man's infirmities. Our God is always full of grace. And that grace he displays by seeking and saving a world which has gone astray.

The Plight of Sinful Man

God comes to man, for there is no other way by which man can again come to God.

Here the church takes seriously the facts of life.

Without the doctrine of man's creation and fall, the word of grace remains incomprehensible. God does not save cats and dogs, rocks and trees. He comes to save man who was created in and for covenantal fellowship with his Maker. To him God addresses the grace-notes of the gospel, for *man had thus thrown himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself wholly miserable*. Herein is grace revealed, that God *was pleased to seek and comfort him*.

Sin is again described as a "fall." The Christian approach to reality leaves no room for the evolutionary theory that man's origin lies in some animal-like existence out of which he slowly extricated himself. Rather are the beginnings of man's history bathed in the heavenly light of friendship with God. By transgressing against this good God, *man had thus thrown himself into . . . death*.

No definition is given here of the inscrutable mystery of death. Nor does the Bible ever define it, even while warning us to flee its awful terrors. We are reminded, to be sure, that it is not annihilation. Nor is it equated with nothingness, a state of non-being. Still less is it a something which can be measured

by our scientifically-precise instruments. In the separation of body and soul we behold something of its dread manifestation. But death, as our Lord warns us, has a deeper dimension than the physical. "And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matt. 10:28) Death is presented as a spiritual-moral relationship to God, which by unbelief and ungodliness places us outside of his favor. It is the state of alienation from God who is our very life.

The origin of sin lies in man's rebellion, by which he separated himself from God. This John affirms, "Everyone that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." (I John 3:4) Both the bond and boundary between God and the creature is the divine law. Where this is violated, man turns his life to destruction.

"For lo, they that are far from thee shall perish.
Thou hast destroyed all them that play the harlot,
departing from thee." (Ps. 73:27)

The *Confession* rightly says that man *has made himself miserable*. Faith perceives that the sufferings and sorrows to which man is heir spring not from his life-situation. Indeed, by man's sin creation itself has been deeply disturbed, so that much of its original harmony, beauty and glory have been dimmed. But this is an aspect of God's judgment upon man the sinner. The earth has been cursed for his sake. Not only his heart but also his home is no longer what it once was. Since the day of his fall man has continued to use all that is in the world in opposition to God's will for his life. "For the creature was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it." (Rom. 8:20) Thus everything seems to conspire against man who, already miserable, makes himself more miserable by his heedless flight from God.

This we see in the instinctive reaction of our first parents. As soon as man transgressed, *he trembling fled from His presence*. In simple language the Bible recounts this event, "And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were

naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of Jehovah God walking in the garden in the cool of the day; and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of Jehovah God amongst the trees of the garden." (Gen. 3:7, 8)

Here is the human dilemma in every age. Apart from God man experiences no joy and peace. Looking at himself even superficially, he is filled with fear and trembling in the recognition that he must deal with the inescapable God. Always he regards God as his adversary. Out of this reaction arise the arguments by which he would minimize or deny his guilt. The list of excuses which he has used through the centuries has grown long. At times he does not even hesitate to blame God for his predicament. Modern literature, when it still reflects with some sobriety on our plight, is burdened with these motivations. Meanwhile the man in the street proclaims that he will not believe in a God who does not give him his way. Little does he sense that he is getting exactly what he chooses. The very situations which cause the believer to cling more closely to his God—the loss of loved ones, the tragedy of wars which fall so heavily upon seemingly innocent victims, and the riddle of the prosperity of the wicked who flourish like the green bay tree—drive the unbeliever still farther from God who alone can open the door to hope and happiness. Always the story is the same. The sinner, insisting on his false freedom, will not face up to his responsibility to God who alone insures true freedom.

In this confused and contradictory babel God declares his purpose of grace. He comes to man with the message of mercy in Jesus Christ. Always he engages himself to seek and save those who have gone astray. In the words of Francis Thompson, God lays upon man the "shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly" and announces,

*"Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest me."*

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Is the Confession Contradictory?

Let us pause to look at the charge often levelled against the Reformed faith at this point.

Here we confess the coming of God to sinful man, which many regard as a contradiction of the truth confessed previously about predestination with its double aspect of election and reprobation. How is it possible, so the argument runs, that God seriously addresses all men in the gospel to repent and believe, while not all have been chosen by him unto eternal life in Christ?

Especially Arminians urge that if election is unconditional and particular, the gospel cannot be sincerely offered to all men. This seems to be a logical conclusion. Hence they try to minimize what God says about election. Similarly have the Lutherans carried on their debates with the Reformed. While teaching a divine election which "extends only over the godly, beloved children of God,"¹ they maintain that God's grace manifested in preaching is universal by divine intent. The school of Saumur, which taught a "hypothetical universalism" in the seventeenth century, tried to mediate between Calvinism and Arminianism. God, so it was held, established two decrees. In the first he decided to save all men indiscriminately upon the condition of faith. Because he foresaw that this decree would fail, since none would accept Christ, He decreed to bestow special grace on certain individuals by which they would be able to repent and believe. This position is plagued with the problems of both Calvinism and Arminianism.

Now the synod of Dort (1618-19) dealt with the matter of the well-meant offer of salvation, while teaching a predestination including both election and reprobation. Its position cannot be misunderstood. "Moreover the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel."² Here promise and command are joined inseparably, even as in the

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Scriptures. This gospel comes to men "without distinction," thus cutting the nerve of the objection that according to the Reformed faith the gospel must address men in their quality as either elect or reprobate. Plainly it comes to all men as sinners.

Nor is reprobation to be regarded as the cause of unbelief. "And whereas many who are called by the gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief, this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the cross but is wholly to be imputed to themselves."³ Indeed, the presence and power of sin remain a riddle. But the Reformed insist on leaving the riddle and the complete responsibility for its presence in man's life where it belongs, namely with man himself. Thus the churches add without apology, "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truly declared in His Word what is acceptable to Him, namely, that those who are called should come unto Him. He also seriously promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe."⁴

Strongly we stress the integrity of God's gospel proclamation to all who hear.

The Bible repeatedly emphasizes that the Lord delights in saving sinners. Even over the repentance of one there is joy among the angels. No sinner is so lost, that he cannot be found by Christ. Thus God declares by the mouth of Ezekiel, "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? saith the Lord Jehovah; and not rather that he should return from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23) In tender accents our Lord lifts up his voice, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matt. 23:37) It is our gracious God in Christ who "would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth." (I Tim. 2:4)

Here our mind may be burdened with a question to which there seems to be no clear-cut answer. Yet it should be said at once, that the Arminians with an election on the basis of "foreseen faith" run into the same difficulty. If God's know-

ledge is complete, we again wonder how then he can seriously proclaim grace to those of whom he knows full well that they will reject it. Once and for all we must break through the restrictions of our formulation of the problem, wherein so often God and man seem to be presented as foes, each striving to maintain their own brand of freedom. We must repudiate the notion which regards God's decrees as somehow hemming in the liberty and responsibility of man. Here we must keep our proper place. We are called to witness to the gracious God who comes seeking and saving a lost world. In his name we call men to repentance and faith. In obedience to his orders we magnify his sovereign power and mercy, while declaring the full responsibility of all who hear. In full confidence we leave the outcome to God himself. And ours is the blessed assurance, that such labor in the Lord is never in vain.

The Promise of Salvation

Amid the difficulties and dangers of life all men seek some kind of comfort. Many are the false consolations wherein the race has sought refuge. In contrast with these the Scriptures proclaim the one sure and solid hope. It is the comfort which God gives. This was announced by God, as soon as the race had fallen into sin. God came *promising that He would give His Son (who would be born of a woman) to bruise the head of the serpent and to make him (i.e. man) blessed.*

In this "mother promise" beats the heart of the Christian gospel.

Luther rightly praised these words, saying, "This text embraces and comprehends within itself everything noble and glorious that is to be found in the Scriptures." All other promises are but explications and adumbrations of what God said to Adam and Eve. Much of the manner in which salvation would be accomplished remained a mystery to them. Not until Christ was manifested in the flesh and wrought salvation by his sufferings, death and resurrection were the deep perspectives of this simple statement made clear by God. Yet the essence of his gracious coming was here proclaimed.

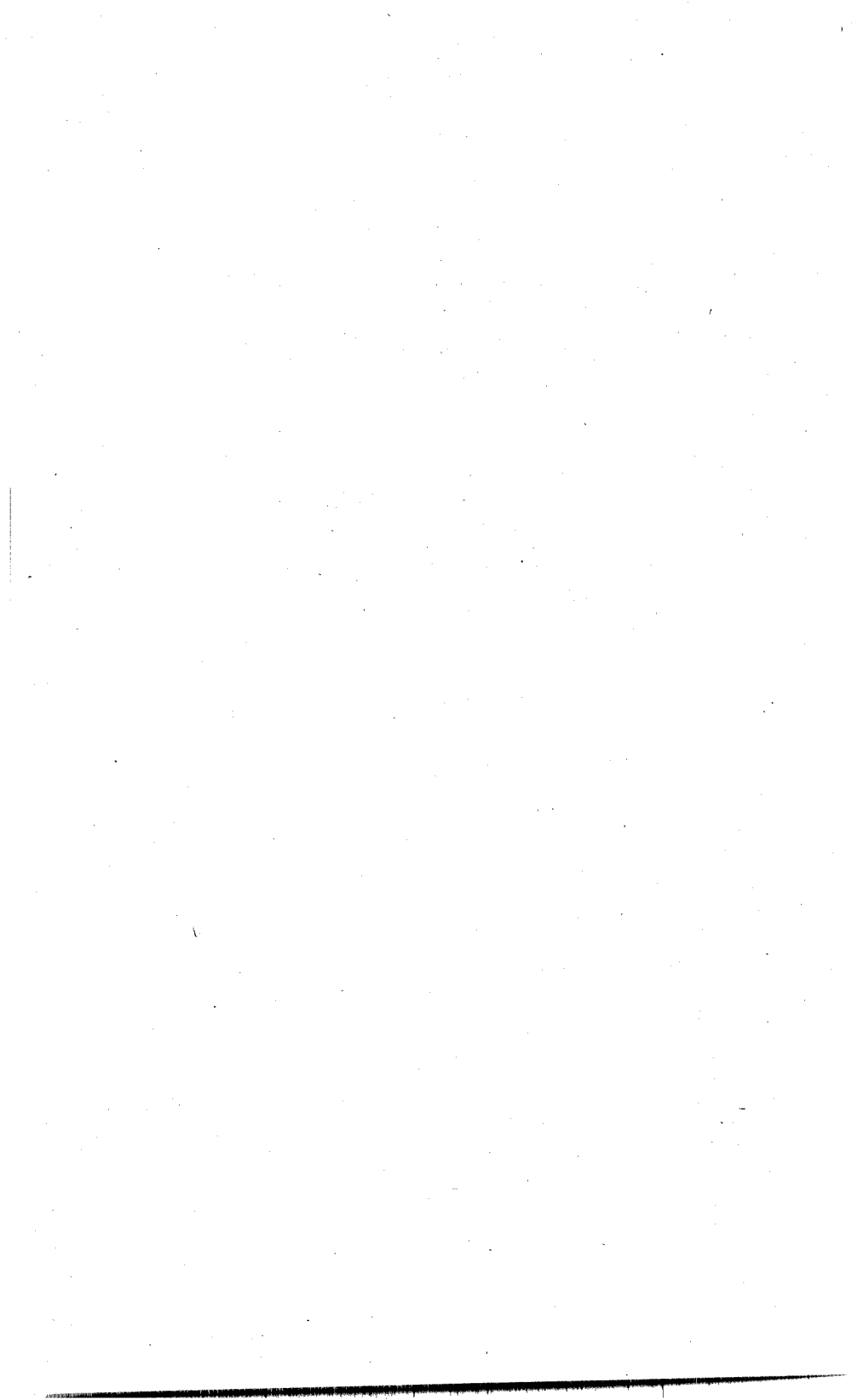
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Vigorously, therefore, we reject all attempts to twist the simple meaning of God's promise to man. Many earlier rationalists claimed that this story was a legend which explained why men feared snakes. But as Leupold points out, "Now enmity is a term not applicable to dumb beasts. Its scriptural use limits it, like its root verb, to enmity between persons or morally responsible agents."⁵ Here God enters the fray on man's behalf against the devil who would control the race and rob God of his glory. Thus God "puts enmity" between man and the devil. All future generations of mankind are involved. The culmination of the struggle is attained in Christ. He said of his coming victory, "When the strong man fully armed guardeth his own court, his goods are in peace; but when a stronger than he shall come upon him, and overcome him, he taketh from him his whole armor wherein he trusted and divideth his spoils." (Luke 11:21, 22) Therefore the apostle comforts the church with the assurance, "To this end was the Son of God manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." (I John 3:8)

In this promise alone may men find substantial comfort. It assures us of God's gracious coming to man. In Christ he has entered into this world and broken the devil's power forever. And by means of his word and Spirit he applies that salvation to human hearts and lives. All who receive this promised grace by faith experience salvation which is of God alone.

THE SEEKING AND SAVING GOD IN CHRIST

1. What is meant by the grace of God? How is it related to God's mercy, longsuffering and forbearance? 2. Why do you think unbelievers find it so hard to think of God as gracious? How do they usually think of God? 3. Why does the Confession link up God's grace with his wisdom? What is this wisdom? How is it displayed in his saving work? 4. Has the study of Greek (and modern) philosophy been a help or hindrance to Christ's church in developing her witness? Explain. 5. State briefly the nature and consequences of man's misery. What is the difference between sin and misery? 6. What is death? Should believers ever be afraid of death? 7. Show the several ways in which the average man always tries to run away from God. 8. What is meant by "the well-meant offer of salvation?" Can a Reformed church ever preach "whosoever will?" Prove your position. 9. Show how the Arminian finds himself in even more intellectual and spiritual difficulties with his views than the Calvinist. 10. What is meant by the covenant of grace? 11. Which aspects of the covenant are found in Genesis 3:15? 12. On which grounds do we insist that Genesis 3 (the story of the fall) relates actual history? 13. Into what difficulties are the neo-orthodox involved by denying its historicity? What do they mean by "myth?" 14. Prove from Scripture that the devil tempted Adam and Eve.



Chapter 18

The Coming of the Promised Christ

We confess, therefore, that God has fulfilled the promise which He made to the fathers by the mouth of His holy prophets, when He sent into the world, at the time appointed by Him, His own only-begotten and eternal Son, who "took upon Him the form of a servant" and "became like unto man," really assuming the true human nature with all its infirmities, sin excepted; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary

by the power of the Holy Spirit without the means of man; and did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, that He might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should take both upon Him, to save both.

Therefore we confess (in opposition to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother) that Christ "partook of the flesh and blood of the children"; that He is a "fruit of the loins of David after the flesh"; "born of the seed of David according to the flesh"; "a fruit of the womb of Mary"; "born of a woman"; "a branch of David"; "a shoot of the root of Jesse"; "sprung from the tribe of Judah"; descended from the Jews according to the flesh; of the seed of Abraham, since (A.V.) "he took on him the seed of Abraham," and "was made like unto his brethren in all things, sin excepted"; so that in truth He is our IMMANUEL, that is to say, "God with us."

ARTICLE XVIII

CHRISTMAS IS the most popular Christian festival.

Amid carols and chimes people in all lands prepare for the holiday. In schools where the Savior's name is studiously avoided throughout the year hymns are enthusiastically sung in his honor. Even pagan lands have accommodated themselves to the externals of Christmas.

Such celebrations often result from tragic misunderstanding.

Many suppose that Christmas is inherently lovely. They do not realize that its message repels the human heart. The story of Bethlehem's babe is not what artists have made of it. Though angels sang their praises and wise men brought their gifts, this story cannot be told without mention of man's sin. Christmas is understood only by those who confess their need of salvation. This John Milton expressed in his song,

*"This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven's eternal King,
Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace."*

God accomplished his salvation in the person and work of Christ. This work, which demanded the painful and shameful death of the cross, casts its somber shadow on the manger wherein he was laid. No man, therefore, can truly glory in the Savior's coming without knowing why he came to earth.

God Keeps His Promised Word

The gospel, announced to Adam and Eve, was the first in a long series of promises wherewith God comforted the fallen

race. These *He made to the fathers by the mouth of his holy prophets.*

Often the content and circumstances of the earliest prophetic words seem shrouded in mystery. Yet that God so spoke is plainly taught in Scripture. This speaking did not cease with the mother-promise. Enoch spoke of the Lord's coming, warning men to forsake the road to ruin. (Jude 14, 15) Lamech of the lineage of Seth demonstrated his faith in God's promise by naming his son Noah. (Gen. 5:29)

More clearly and fully did God speak in the days of the patriarchs. Abraham, the father of all believers, received the assurance, "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing . . . and in thee shall all the families of the earth blessed." (Gen. 12:2, 3) On his deathbed Jacob spoke of the coming Christ. "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be." (Gen. 49:10) Moses testified to the coming one as the great prophet. "Jehovah will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me, unto him shall ye hearken." (Deut. 18.15)

Israel was never without a witness to the mighty deeds of salvation which God was already working and would fulfill in the days of Messiah. In their songs both David and Solomon sang of him. The book of Proverbs introduced him as the highest wisdom. Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, each in his own way and to his own day, described the certainty and triumph of his appearance. Many of the minor prophets added their words to comfort Israel with this blessed hope. Even the very place of his birth was revealed. (Mic. 5:2) Not until Malachi's time had passed was this voice of predictive prophecy hushed for a season. To the Jews of his day our Lord could rightly say, "Ye search the Scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me." (John 5:39)

No page of the Old Testament fails to proclaim, directly or indirectly, God's promises in Christ. All the prophets, priests

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and kings of Israel pointed forward to his person and work. Specifically David and Solomon were types of the great king who would rule over his people in righteousness, truth and peace forever. Every ceremony prescribed for his worshipping people in tabernacle and temple prefigured Christ's work of redemption and reconciliation and renewal. Even details surrounding his coming, such as his ancestry and virgin birth and sojourn into Egypt and baptism with the Holy Spirit and death and resurrection, were mentioned.

In all these glowed the promises of God. The intimate relation between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment furnished the father of John the Baptist with a theme, when once his tongue was again loosed.

*"Blessed be the God of Israel,
The Lord who visited His own;
Who by His gracious providence
Redemption unto us made known.
Within His servant David's tent
Has He to us, His people, sent
A horn of full salvation;
E'en as He spoke by holy men of old,
Who unto Israel foretold
How He to them His mercy would unfold."*

Now the indissoluble unity of prophecy and fulfilment becomes clear. The *Confession* urges us to remember this, as it speaks of several details. The Savior is confessed as *the fruit of the loins of David* and *a shoot of the root of Jesse*. We know him as *descended from the Jews according to the flesh, of the seed of Abraham, and sprung from the tribe of Judah*.

These illustrations, which guarantee the reality of Christ's manhood, have been chosen with care. They serve a unique purpose in the church's witness to the world.

We should remember that evangelical Protestants, both Lutherans and Reformed, were at that time engaged in a serious struggle with the Anabaptists who obscured the reality of our Savior's manhood. To this struggle reference will be made

again. Today that issue no longer burns so brightly in the Christian church, although its smoldering ashes at times provide heat for discussions on the relation between Old and New Testaments, the nature and scope of God's covenant with man, and the legitimacy of infant baptism.

Still more, this article speaks relevantly against a new and formidable enemy of the faith. During the last century predictive prophecy has often been called into question. Many have attacked the Old Testament as a Jewish book which has outlived its usefulness for the church. Even otherwise orthodox Christians, notably in the Anabaptist tradition, have at times neglected the Old Testament and thus done violence to the unity of God's revelation in Christ. For some generations predictive prophecy was severely slashed by the critics' knives. For some of them there remained no promise concerning Christ in the Old Testament. In these writings they found little more than Jewish legends, customs and aspirations. Thus they mutilated these records beyond recognition. Many books were redated; others were hopelessly divided among known and unknown authors. Little remained which such critics regarded as historically accurate.

The religious climate within Christendom has, indeed, changed markedly since the first World War. There seems to be a new appreciation of the Old Testament. Guided by Barth many neo-orthodox or dialectical theologians speak of a theology and ministry of the "Word of God." Much use is again made of traditional theological terms, which had long been laughed out of court. But in several respects the new theology is fully as radical as the old. While the latter was rationalistic in its approach, the former is largely anti-intellectual. In glowing language it speaks of God confronting man in Christ Jesus with his word. This demands total commitment on man's part. The unique significance of the Bible in this confrontation is stressed. Hence many rejoiced when they learned that Barth accepted the virgin birth, which Brunner and others rejected. Yet every apparent orthodox thrust, and these have been many, is linked with a defense of radical Biblical criticism. To these

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men the Bible is a purely human report of God's word to man. Thus God's coming with his saving message in Christ Jesus may never, according to them, be identified with the written word.

In this way man is again thrown back upon himself. He alone decides what is for him divine revelation at any given moment. This accounts for the sharp differences among these theologians on specific questions. Lines among the neo-orthodox are becoming sharper. Rudolf Bultman, a name with which many now conjure, tries to discover in the Bible the "hard core" in the mythological language with which the church wrapped its witness to Christ. Thus incarnation, virgin birth and resurrection, which are exalted as indisputable facts by Barth, are viewed by Bultmann as unhistorical. In this controversy, however, Bultmann operates with quite the same conception of the word as Barth.

The underlying issues which here concern the church may be stated simply. Has God actually spoken to man from the beginning concerning Christ's coming? Has this revelation been in such a form that man was able to hear, remember and write down the message? Do we have in Scripture an authoritative and reliable record of his continual coming to man? To these questions the neo-orthodox refuse to reply affirmatively. Highly valuable as many of their contributions to Biblical and theological studies have been, these are vitiated by their view of the Christian faith which makes it quite different than that which the church has always proclaimed. Biblical facts become facts only if and when God encounters us with them in his momentary coming to us. Here the activities of man's reason are suspended. Faith no longer has the competency to consider or analyze or evaluate the word and works of the living God in submission to Biblical authority. Its knowledge-aspect is swallowed up in the moment of surrender and trust.

Against this radical individualism, experientialism and irrationalism the believing church must protest clearly. It robs us of God's word fully as much as did the older liberalism. Therefore article 18 of the *Confession*, with its insistence on historical details, speaks to our times as much as to its own day.

This makes our confession of the Old Testament promises and their New Testament fulfilment totally different than that of the neo-orthodox, including even Barth who champions the virgin birth.

In an excellent chapter on "Promise and Fulfilment" Berkouwer deals with many aspects of this relation between Old and New Testaments. He points out how anti-semitism even contributed to a low opinion of these ancient writings. He also deals with the proper interpretation of God's revelation, warning us against the extreme of both allegorical and purely historical-critical exegesis. He urges us to deal seriously with the Old in its relation to the New Testament as revelation of the eternal, triune God in Christ.¹ The former enables us to understand the depths of the latter, even as the latter teaches us the meaning of the former more clearly and fully. In all the promises we must see the contours of Christ's person and work. Thus in every age the Old Testament speaks clearly and comfortingly to the believing church.

In the Fulness of Time

Again the *Confession* echoes God's word, when it reminds us that Christ came into the world *at the time appointed by God*.

God has his own time schedule.

Long did he seem to test the faith of the Old Testament saints. For centuries they were reminded that Messiah would come "for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth." (Isa. 49:6) Thus they were to live in hope, until "the fulness of the time came." (Gal. 4:4) When Christ was born, a new day dawned. This event was the turning-point, the crisis of the ages.

In a very real sense Christianity is an historical religion. This does not simply mean that it has a long history. That can also be said of Buddhism. Too many thinkers seem to regard God as dwelling in a placid eternity, totally unconcerned with what takes place here. They look for a solution to life's problems beyond the range of time and space. Now the Bible stresses

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that although God is high and lifted up and by no means conditioned by his creation, he nevertheless manifests himself in his dynamic relationship to all things. This Creator-creature relationship is everywhere apparent also in man's redemption. This revelation is given in a series of significant divine-deeds, which he at the same time interprets for us. This time-framework is inseparable from the salvation "which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal, but hath now been manifested by the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, whereunto I was appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher." (II Tim. 1:9-11) We do not disgrace God by speaking of his being involved in and with time. He who is above and beyond all time guides the destinies of all to his own glory.

This alone makes the phrase "in the fulness of time" meaningful for us.

Now many have tried to explain why the precise season of our Lord's coming was so appropriate and unique. The Jews who "were intrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2) were looking for him. During the inter-testamentary period they had been so often disappointed in their political, cultural and religious aspirations.

Also, so we are told, God prepared the other nations. The Jews had been widely scattered throughout the world. In many places they erected synagogues. Their moral and spiritual earnestness appealed to the Graeco-Roman world and thus opened the way for Christian preaching. Even the political and cultural situation was favorable. The old religions had lost their grip on the minds and hearts of the masses. New philosophies, propounded with monotonous regularity, failed to give hope. Morals were at a low ebb. In this spiritual vacuum Christianity could fill a big place. This was assisted by the stability and order which Roman law provided. Also by this time Greek was almost universally understood.

Strangely enough, the Bible makes little reference to these matters. That it indicates the universality of the Christian gos-

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pel is plain. Already the Old Testament announced this. Our Lord spoke of it, when he said, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto myself." (John 12:31, 32) But when the Bible speaks of "the fulness of time," it does not emphasize the readiness of man to receive the message but rather the sovereign good pleasure of God. He sends out his Son at the time which he deems appropriate. It is "the day appointed of the father." (Gal. 4:2) Calvin correctly interprets this, "That season is the most fit, and that mode of acting is the most proper, which the providence of God directs. At what time it was most expedient that the Son of God should be revealed to the world, it belonged to God alone to judge and determine. This consideration ought to restrain all curiosity. Let no man presume to be dissatisfied with the secret purpose of God, and raise a dispute why Christ did not appear sooner."² By faith we accept God's time as alone appropriate. He does not err in working his salvation when and where it pleases him.

The Glory of the Incarnation

All this challenges us to face the question, Who is the babe of Bethlehem, whom we hail as the Savior of the world?

Here the church speaks in unequivocal language. Of such signal importance is this, that a straightforward answer is demanded. Only when we know who Christ is can we properly explain what is Christianity. Our Lord asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" and again, "But who say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:13, 15) To this Peter replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:16) Upon this rock Christ promised to build his church.

Now there lies at the heart of this confession a profound mystery. This is plain, as soon as we say that he is both God and man.

We begin our testimony with the true and complete deity of our Lord. God sent into the world *His own only-begotten and eternal Son*. To this John bears ample witness. "In the beginning

was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 14) Nothing less than a full recognition of Christ's godhead does justice to the Scriptures.

We also confess, however, that the eternal Son of God *took upon him the form of a servant and became like unto man.* The entire passage in which these phrases appear deserves attention. "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:5-8) Many questions arise in connection with these words. Some of them will be considered in our review of the next article. Here we note that the Reformed churches generally recognized two elements in our Lord's humiliation. There was first of all his "self-emptying" wherein he laid aside divine majesty as Lord of the universe to become a servant. In addition, there was his "self-humiliation" whereby he subjected himself to all the demands and the curse of the law. Thus Paul elsewhere speaks of Christ as "born under the law, that he might redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." (Gal. 4:4, 5)

This plunges us into the question whether God's Son would have assumed our flesh and blood, had sin not entered the world. Since the Middle Ages this problem has been posed again and again. Some insist that even then the incarnation would have taken place, in order that God might fully reveal himself to man. This view was championed by Rupert of Deutz, Alexander of Hales and Duns Scotus. Thomas Aquinas, the noted scholastic, argued that the reason for the incarnation must be sought in God's purpose to save men from sin. Without exception the reformers took this position. Later some Lutheran and Reformed theologians departed from the historic view, since Christ's

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work is apparently not strictly limited to the atonement and its saving results. Yet when the Bible speaks of the incarnation, it is always represented as God's answer to the desperate plight of man as sinner. (Luke 19:10; John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; I John 3: 8; Phil. 2:5-11)

Never can our minds fully comprehend this event. Here we are called to worship and adore. Only God can reveal something of its glory. He has been pleased to do so, in so far as our finite capacities are by the Spirit's illumination able to take hold of this truth. But lest the incarnation be misinterpreted in such a way that the reality and integrity of our Lord's human nature is minimized, the Confession warns against the teachings of Apollinarius and heresies similar to his. *Christ did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, that he might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary for him to assume both to save both.* This is not a rationalistic conclusion drawn from our need. It springs instead from the church's desire to repeat what God has plainly taught about Christ our Savior in his word.

The Virgin Birth of Our Lord

Few doctrines have been more often defended and debunked than that of the virgin birth. Our *Confession* acknowledges its truth plainly. It affirms that he was *conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit without the means of man.*

For more than fifteen hundred years this was universally believed in the Christian church. Even the Arians and Socinians (Unitarians in the days of the reformers) did not question its truth. Late in the eighteenth century Thomas Paine, Voltaire and others tried to reduce the Christian gospel to a natural religion. For them there could be no such miracle. Schleiermacher, the father of nineteenth century liberalism, argued that Joseph was Jesus' natural father. Yet he regarded the birth of the Savior as unique in that it involved a special creative act of God. Now the doors were thrown open to speculation.

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These debates were usually heard only in the halls of theological learning. In 1892, however, the German pastor, Schrempf, refused to express agreement with the *Apostles' Creed* so long as the phrase "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary" was retained. In this crisis many students appealed to the famous professor Harnack of Berlin, asking whether they should urge the church authorities to eliminate this phrase which was no longer believed by many. Harnack replied that there would be advantages to eliminating references to Christ's conception and birth as well as to his descent into hell, to the communion of the saints and to the resurrection of the body. Yet he deemed it wise to retain the creed in its original form because of its age and religious value for the church.

Both in Europe and America the virgin birth was heatedly debated.

Several objections were raised against this truth. Many argued that it rests on unreliable tradition. The accounts of Matthew 1 and Luke 1 are regarded as later and untrustworthy additions. When in 1892 an ancient manuscript was found in St. Catherine's monastery on the Sinai peninsula which affirmed that "Joseph begat Jesus," the critics were jubilant. Others insisted that this doctrine is not essential to the Christian faith. Mark seems to know nothing about it. Even Christ's family did not seem to think of him as supernaturally born, since they accused him of a form of insanity. (Mark 3:21) Paul never mentioned it in his preaching or writings. And John, who held a lofty view of the Savior's person and work, fails to record this event. It was argued that only when the church taught the doctrine of original sin did it become necessary to teach the virgin birth to safeguard Christ's sinlessness. This argument is used by Brunner. Others maintained that the birth accounts were borrowed from pagan myths.

For all these arguments the church has her answer.

To reject a basic doctrine on the basis of one manuscript reading hardly seems consistent with sound scholarship. Nor has anyone proved that Matthew 1 and Luke 1 are later addi-

tions to the gospels. That the virgin birth is mentioned but twice carries little weight with anyone who takes seriously the unity and integrity of the Bible. Nor need we be surprised that Mary did not tell everybody about the angel's message to her. Her children, relatives and neighbors would hardly have believed her. Not until after Christ's death and resurrection did the Holy Spirit make clear to the believing church the uniqueness of Christ's person and work. Within that framework belongs also his witness to the virgin birth. In all the arguments against this doctrine we note the hostility of the natural man to salvation by God alone. Prejudice against the miraculous has prompted many to accept the most far-fetched theories in opposition to the church's testimony throughout the ages.

Here we speak with restraint. No attempt is made to analyze or comprehend this profound mystery. Faith will not exceed the limits of God's word. Therefore it rests content in God's infallible record.

Often the question is raised, whether those who deny the virgin birth can be saved. In his scholarly defense of this Biblical doctrine, which has never been satisfactorily answered by the liberals, J. Gresham Machen points out that such problems should never be posited as incidental and isolated matters. As to the liberal approach he writes, "Many have been the efforts to explain him (i.e. Christ) in terms of what is common to mankind, to explain him as a product of forces elsewhere operative in the world. These explanations may satisfy the man who treats the evidence in pedantic fashion, bit by bit, but they will never satisfy the man who can view the whole."³

To view the whole Biblical message of redemption and reconciliation is the desire and duty of every believer. He recognizes that God's self-revelation is of one piece. Thus at no point have we the right to doubt what God has said.

From this vantage-point Machen urges all to look upon the miraculous birth of our Lord. "View Jesus in the light of God and against the dark background of sin, view Him as the satisfaction of man's deepest need, as the One who alone can

lead into all glory and all truth, and you will come, despite all, to the stupendous conviction that the New Testament is true, that God walked here upon earth, that the eternal Son, because He loved us, came into this world to die for our sins upon the cross. And when you have arrived at that conviction, you will turn with very different eyes to the story of the virgin and her child. Wonders will no longer repel you. Rather will you say, 'So and so only did it behoove this One, as distinguished from all others, to be born'."4

The Reality of Christ's Manhood Defended

Often evangelicals have been accused of neglecting the real manhood of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a favorite song sung by the liberals.

Indeed, the churches of the reformation stressed the deity of our Lord. In this respect they repeated what the church of all ages taught in opposition to those heretics who made Christ something less and different than God. At the same time they zealously defended his manhood. Nowhere is there a trace of Docetism, which reduced his human nature to a mere phantom. This is especially evident in the resistance of the reformers to certain Anabaptistic notions.

To us it seems strange and sad that the evangelical faith so quickly lost external unity. With the exception of the mystics and rationalists all who left Rome claimed to bow to the teachings of the Bible. Yet this common allegiance failed to produce a desired unity of insight and conviction. From these divisions the Romanists gathered some of their sharpest and strongest weapons in attacking the evangelical faith. The most acute division was that which separated the Anabaptists from the Lutherans, Calvinists and Anglicans. It also involved divergent views on the humanity of our Lord.

Both groups championed the virgin birth. Yet they were sharply divided on the heart of the matter.

Strong language was used on both sides. Menno Simons, spokesman for the Anabaptists, ridiculed and rejected the view

held by the historic church that Christ assumed his flesh and blood from the virgin Mary.⁵ This idea he denounced as an "antichristian doctrine." Those who championed it were "wolves in Christ's sheepfold and locusts of Apollyon." When Martin Micron called him "a plump cuckoo who always sings the same song," he retorted that he would "lift up the glorious beautiful dress of the adulterous Babylonish woman with the Scriptures, which Micron and the preachers (while they were living from her table and income) would gladly cover up and hide with their reasoned explanations, improper commentaries and perverted writings." Such strong language serves notice that both parties knew they were not disputing about mere words.

Simply stated, the issue was whether Christ in his human nature was truly the seed of Adam and Abraham and David; whether he had assumed flesh and blood from the virgin Mary. All the churches, Romanist as well as evangelical, responded in the affirmative. Menno and most of the Anabaptists answered with a resounding negative.

Their line of reasoning is interesting. Generally they argued that Christ could and would not assume a nature derived from Adam, since all that which descends from him is accursed. What comes from him must be unclean, sinful and accursed. Christ as the second Adam, so Menno insisted all unprejudiced readers will agree, makes his people free from this curse. "How, then, could such a glorious fruit be plucked from such a stinking elder-tree and such a stinking thorn-bush?" Even more, how was it possible for Christ to derive his human nature from Mary, since "a woman has no seed within her!" Menno insisted that his birth took place in connection with Mary, but only in the sense that the eternal Word became flesh *within* her womb. Jesus was in Mary, but not of her. On this matter he refused to yield an inch.

This dispute sets in bold relief many of the issues which separated the Anabaptists from the rest of evangelical Christendom. Their antagonism to the historic position of the Christian church lays bare some of the deepest motifs and patterns

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of that movement. Here we discover anew their radical divorce of nature and grace. This dominated all their thinking. God's grace is not merely of an altogether different origin and order than natural life; it is radically divorced from it. Grace never restores and reforms nature. It radically replaces and supercedes the created order. Those who are in Christ are "new creatures," not merely changed but belonging to another and higher order of being.

Now we begin to understand why this movement created such deep disturbances in western Europe of those days, something which is not recognized at one glance. Infant baptism was rejected, not so much because of the supposed silence of the New Testament but because children were conceived and born in sin and thus belonged to the sinful order until they could demonstrate personally the presence of God's grace. Strict Anabaptists were expected to eschew fellowship with unconverted relatives and neighbors. The ban was applied by them with a zeal and vigor never paralleled in church history. All believers were forbidden to take oaths and assume political office. War, even in self-defense, was categorically condemned. Some even absolved themselves from submission to the civil authorities, since they belonged to a kingdom not of this world. The more moderate obeyed the laws and paid taxes but argued that this was a necessary concession to a situation in which not all were Christians. Even the communistic experiments in which some engaged were defended by this same type of reasoning.

The reformers, Luther as well as Calvin, sensed the underlying ideas which drove the Anabaptists increasingly away from historic Christian positions. At bottom here was a struggle between two radically different and contradictory life-and-world views. Only when we see this, can we understand why the debate between Menno and de Bres was so sharp. Much more was at stake than a few doctrinal positions. The view of the Anabaptists denied all vital connection between Christ and the human race which he had come to save.

Therefore the *Confession* speaks of the *heresy of the Anabaptists*. In their refutation the Reformed appealed to Scripture.

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They protested against the allegorical method by which Menno tried to escape the meaning of Genesis 3:15, arguing that here we must think of a natural woman and a natural seed born of her. Thus also they appealed to Isaiah 7:14, Luke 1:31, Matthew 1:18 and Galatians 4:4. Frequent reference was made to the genealogies of our Lord. Most of all, the gospel promises of the Old Testament were quoted.

The Reformed were convinced that only if the real and complete manhood of the Savior was affirmed, could the believing church rejoice in an all-sufficient Savior. With the *Confession* we still testify today that Jesus Christ is *in truth . . . our IMMANUEL, that is to say, God with us.*

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1. How can we best keep Christmas according to God's intent? 2. Mention a promise given by God to Abraham, to Jacob, to Moses, concerning the coming Christ. 3. Discuss the details of the temple-service and furniture as foreshadowing Christ. 4. In what sense is Christ the "desire" of the nations? Did they consciously desire him? Explain. 5. What objections are often raised against predictive prophecy? Does the church today try to read too much into those prophecies? 6. Do you think anti-semitism is a problem in the United States and Canada today? How must the church oppose such tendencies? 7. Why do we call the time of Christ's coming "the fulness of time?" 8. In what way was Israel socially, politically and spiritually bankrupt in Christ's day? 9. What does the word incarnation mean? 10. How was Christ's human nature kept from the stain of original sin? 11. Is the Virgin Birth doctrine essential to salvation? Explain. 12. What theory was propounded by the Anabaptists on this score? Why was this considered so dangerous to sound doctrine? What effects did it have on such subjects as Christ's human nature, the essence of salvation, the nature of the Christian life, the kingdom of God? 13. Mention and discuss false views of Christ and the incarnation held by various sects today—Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science. 14. Why is it essential to stress the reality of Christ's manhood?

Chapter 19

Christ Both God and Man

We believe that by this conception the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature; so that there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties. As, then, the divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth, so also has the human nature not lost its properties but remained a creature, having beginning of

days, being a finite nature, and retaining all the properties of a real body. And though He has by His resurrection given immortality to the same, nevertheless He has not changed the reality of His human nature; forasmuch as our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body.

But these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not separated even by His death. Therefore that which He, when dying, commended into the hands of His Father, was a real human spirit, departing from His body. But in the meantime the divine nature always remained united with the human, even when He lay in the grave; and the Godhead did not cease to be in Him, any more than it did when He was an infant, though it did not so clearly manifest itself for a while. Wherefore we confess that he is VERY GOD and VERY MAN: very God by His power to conquer death; and very man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.

ARTICLE XIX

FROM THE BEGINNING Christianity has been called "the way."

This does not imply that the first disciples regarded the gospel as outlining rule upon rule as the way to God. True Christianity has always opposed a mere moralism. It is "the way," because it proclaims the person and work of Jesus Christ. He said of himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (John 14:6) By him alone are we redeemed and reconciled to God. Now we learn what it means to draw near to God in him "by the way which he dedicated for us, a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh." (Hebr. 10:20)

Robert Browning has the aged John say in *The Death in the Desert*,

*". . . the acknowledgment of God in Christ,
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee
All questions in the earth and out of it,
And has so far advanced thee to be wise."*

Such reason lives by and leans upon a childlike faith. In the light of God's word it understands what Pascal meant, when he wrote, "Not only do we know God by Jesus Christ alone, but we know ourselves by Jesus Christ. We know life and death only by Jesus Christ . . . Thus without the Holy Scriptures, which has Christ alone for its object, we know nothing and see only darkness and confusion in the nature of God and in our own nature." Truly he is the light of the world. Therefore the church loves to reflect on Christ. He is our "good news." He is for us the sure and safe way through life unto God.

The Mystery of the All-Sufficient Savior

Once again the *Confession* is constrained to testify to this Savior. In him alone God reveals his justice and mercy, his ad-

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mirable wisdom and goodness. God is not the unknown and unknowable one, for in Christ Jesus he has drawn nigh unto us and shown to us his reconciled heart. When the disciples puzzled about seeing God, Christ said to Philip, "Have I been so long a time with you, and dost thou not know me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; how sayest thou, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me; the words that I say unto you I speak not from myself; but the Father abiding in me doeth the works." (John 14:9, 10)

This makes Christmas so meaningful. Now in Christ God himself has come to earth to dwell among us. We meditate on the mysterious message given to the shepherds. To them was announced the birth of "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The answer to their longing hearts was declared in the sign which God gave—"a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, and lying in the manger." (Luke 2:12)

Here we are again confronted with the two poles which make up the mystery of our Redeemer. He is Lord and Savior of the world, yet as a babe he lies in helplessness and humiliation in a cattle shed.

Now we shall never be able to solve the mystery. Yet the church is constrained to say much about this matter. Heresy would rob us of the all-sufficient Savior and thereby dishonor God's own word.

We acknowledge Christ Jesus as *our Immanuel, God with us.*

Let us not hesitate to begin with his deity. He is God's own, only begotten and eternal Son. No one less than God would suffice for our salvation. Proof for Christ as God is abundant in the Bible. Old Testament prophecies speak clearly of the coming Messiah as divine. So the writer of *Hebrews* praises Christ in the words of the psalmist, "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of thy kingdom." (Heb. 1:8) Paul magnifies the Savior as born of the Jews according to the flesh and yet adored by believers as him "who is over all, God blessed for ever." (Rom. 9:6)

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Here we must warn against those who proclaim the divinity of our Lord but refuse to designate him as the second person of the Trinity. In *Christianity and Liberalism*, the classic exposition of the irreconcilable differences between the historic faith and modernism, J. Gresham Machen calls this to our attention. "The liberal preacher, it is said, is often ready to speak of the 'deity' of Christ; he is often ready to say that 'Jesus is God.' The plain man is much impressed. The preacher he says, believes in the deity of our Lord; obviously then his unorthodoxy must concern only details; and those who object to his presence in the Church are narrow and uncharitable heresy-hunters. But unfortunately language is valuable only as the expression of thought. The English word 'God' has no particular virtue in itself; it is not more beautiful than other words. Its importance depends altogether on the meaning which is attached to it. When, therefore, the liberal preacher says that 'Jesus is God,' the significance of the utterance depends altogether upon what is meant by 'God.' . . . The modern liberals . . . say that Jesus is God not because they think high of Jesus, but because they think desperately low of God."¹

Yet with their high view of God and of Jesus Christ, the evangelicals refuse to becloud the true humanity of their Lord. He is the "second Adam." We confess him as the one "touched with a feeling of our infirmities." (Hebr. 4:15) He was "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."

Only as the God-man could he suffer and die as our perfect substitute, delivering us from the wrath of God and imparting to us new life. The Savior, to speak in the language of Augustine, remained what he had always been, namely God, and yet also became what he had not been, namely man. In this mystery of God-in-the-flesh is the triumphant love of God for a lost world unveiled.

The Reality of the Two Natures

Now the *Confession* tries to explain this. Every word and phrase has been carefully selected. This doctrine of Christ has passed through the crucible of centuries of doctrinal discussion

and development. To review this history, much marred by some of the worst bickering and battling which the church has ever known, seems like a weariness to the mind. Yet it provides instruction which the church today can ill afford to neglect.

Three basic truths are delineated.

First of all, we confess that *the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature*. Here the limitations of human language stand in bold relief. We face the problem of what is meant by "nature" and by "person." Even learned volumes on this subject have failed to secure full agreement. Yet by "nature" is usually designated "the sum-total of all the essential qualities of a thing," here of man. This includes both body and soul, together with all qualities which distinguishes man from every other creature. By "person" is meant the independent subsistence or individuality which distinguishes each human being from all others. In his incarnation our Lord assumed a human nature which was not "personalized" such as ours. It could and did not for a moment exist apart from the person of God the Son. Thus it was not "impersonal," since this nature of our Lord was always united from the moment of its conception with the eternal Son of God.

Secondly, we affirm that *the two natures are united in one single person*. Here the church seeks to safeguard the unipersonality of our Lord. There are not two Sons of God, one human and the other divine. Neither are there two persons in Christ, as Nestorius and some of his followers seemed to affirm. Nor may we speak of Christ's human nature as in any sense imperfect or incomplete, although he was not a human person in the same sense as we. At the same time every essential quality belonging to human nature was his, contrary to the notions of Apollinarius who held that Christ had a human body and soul but not a human spirit.

Thirdly, the church insists that *each nature retains its own distinct properties*. This is also of utmost significance. Eutychus and his followers (called Monophysites) held that at the incarnation the two natures fused into one. This does injustice

to both the divine and the human. Others modified this to the extent that they taught the presence of only one will in Christ; hence receiving the name Monothelites. The older Lutherans seemed to move in somewhat this direction by their doctrine of "communication of attributes." They taught that at Christ's ascension certain qualities of the divine nature were bestowed upon the human. Hence Christ's human nature needed not to be localized in heaven. Much as the Reformed felt a kinship with the Lutherans, they rejected this idea as unsound and unscriptural. They feared it might tend towards a pantheistic identification of God and man. Without mentioning the Lutherans by name, the *Confession* does warn against this idea championed by some of their theologians. We believe that *the human nature has not lost its properties* but remained a creature and, more specifically, that *though He has by His resurrection given immortality to the same* (i.e. his real body), *nevertheless He has not changed the reality of His human nature, forasmuch as our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body.*

All this was in full harmony with the teachings of the ancient church. Many of these phrases derive from the decision of the council of Chalcedon (451), which fixed the boundaries within which discussions concerning the person and natures of the Savior should move. These two natures are to be confessed as existing in Christ "*inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*, the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, the Only-begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ."²

These heavily-charged words and phrases seem so far removed from the life of the believing and worshipping church in this world. Many of the terms were even borrowed from Greek thought. Thus Chalcedon has been attacked as scholastic, abstractly speculative and mystifying.

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Yet nothing is really farther from the truth. Here were Christians who tried to give expression in the terms of their day that the Savior was both truly human and truly divine. Lest this glorious message be muted or perverted, the church felt constrained to say something. Possibly one reason why churches today fail to gain a large hearing is found in the undeniable fact that they have so little seemingly worthwhile to say. They speak much about man, but little about God. They analyze problems but appropriate little of the peace that passeth all understanding in Christ Jesus our divine-human Lord.

Our *Confession* is not ashamed of announcing the deep truths of God. For believers in the sixteenth century it outlined a competent witness to the world. Salvation is of God in Christ, who is both God and man. And so indissoluble is the union of these two natures in one person, *that they were not separated even by his death*. On the cross Christ commended a real human spirit, departing from his body into the Father's hands. At the same time *the divine nature always remained united with the human*. Perplexing as we may find the language of Chalcedon, any responsible speaking about Christ must take into account these decisions. Failure to do is an irresponsible neglect of the work of the Holy Spirit within the church. Even now the problems of today can best be approached and evaluated in the light of the struggles of the past.

The Search for the Real Jesus

To know the Lord Jesus Christ is the way unto life eternal. It does not surprise us, therefore, that men have always wondered who he is.

The Savior is not merely the founder of a new religion, like Mohammed. Much less may he be regarded simply as a teacher with superior religious and moral capacities, like Confucius or Buddha. Much farther from the truth are those who regard him only as a noble soul willing to die for his convictions.

The uniqueness of our Lord is stressed throughout the New Testament. It is not limited to his work; it embraces first and

foremost his person. Coming into the parts of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, "But who say ye that I am?" Peter replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:15, 16) This confession is reaffirmed repeatedly in apostolic preaching and writing. On Pentecost Peter proclaimed "Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God unto you by mighty works and wonders and signs." (Acts 2:22) In addition he declared "that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified." (Acts 2:37) Therefore he urged his hearers to repent and "be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins." (Acts 2:38) In connection with Christ's person and work John outlines the radical antithesis between faith and unbelief. "Who is a liar, but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is anti-christ, even he that denieth the Father and the Son." (I John 2:22)

Far more is involved that the mere use of these two names. By joining these two names believers committed themselves to and confessed the heart of the Christian gospel. Here is summarized the uniqueness of Jesus' person and work.

Now each age, in a sense, must wrestle anew with who Jesus really is. Only then will the gospel be truly meaningful and produce the transformation of personal and social life according to God's will for us in Christ.

For many decades the modern church struggled with this question. This activity arose, when men found it impossible to express adherence to the ancient creeds. For about a century men engaged themselves in a search for what they called the historical Jesus. This produced a liberal reconstruction of the gospel, so that in the end little remained of the uniqueness of the Christian faith. At times all religions were proclaimed as so many different roads leading to the same God. D. M. Baillie supposes that as a result of this movement "the full humanity of our Lord" was taken "more seriously than has ever been done before by Christian theologians."³ This we believe to be undeserved praise. Both the ancient and reformatory church insisted on the Savior's real humanity. Yet this was always taught in connection with a corresponding emphasis on his true

deity. This latter has proved to be the real stone of stumbling and rock of offense. By refusing the presence of mystery here, liberal theologians preached another Jesus than the apostles knew. This quest for the historical Jesus, as Albert Schweitzer pointed out more than fifty years ago, was self-defeating.

Meanwhile the pendulum has swung. Critics seem no longer inclined to explain Jesus in the light of his historical, spiritual and religious background. Now they speculate about the Christ of faith. They freely recognize that the apostles acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God. They seek for some clue to explain this faith. But even here there is no evidence. Some even seem to realize the hopelessness of this search. R. H. Lightfoot, himself a radical critic with an appreciable following, has admitted, "It seems, then, that the form of the earthly no less than of the heavenly Christ is for the most part hidden from us . . . And the more we ponder the matter, the more clearly shall we understand the reason for it, and therefore shall not wish it otherwise. For probably we are as little prepared for the one as for the other."⁴

Karl Barth has reacted strongly against the Jesus-of-history movement. At times he seems to take no interest in the historical Jesus. For him it is enough to know that Christ is the word of God. Brunner openly avows that "the Jesus of history is not the same as the Christ of faith."⁵ Form-criticism, a school long influential in Europe and now making its impact here, is not even interested in what Jesus said of himself. This cannot be reliably known anyway, according to its champions. It busies itself rather with the question what the early church meant by Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Whether these were historical facts or not is regarded as an irrelevant question. Thus many wonderful things are said about Christ in preaching apart from any commitment whether Jesus actually lived and died and rose again as the Bible says.

Many today insist that the church can well live without a Christology, a doctrine of the person and work of our Lord. Even many fundamentalists seem disinterested in developing a soundly Scriptural doctrine of Christ. This makes not a few

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of them, strangely enough, bed-fellows with the liberals. Even Baillie, who does not represent the Reformed faith, holds that we need answers to who God is and what is history. Without this our witness to the coming of the eternal God in Jesus Christ will be little more than empty words.

Many of the ancient heresies are with us today, sometimes in a form more refined and dangerous than ever before. Many pulpits seem to proclaim a Christ who is less than God. In other quarters the true and integral humanity seems to go in hiding behind his everlasting deity. The old liberalism with its historical Jesus as little more than mere man is far from dead. The existential theologians, while talking about both his deity and humanity, call the facts into question. Reality (being) is for them swallowed up in meaning. Hence the church has much work to do in our day. By faith she must see Jesus Christ clearly and preach him consistently.

The Unparalleled Uniqueness of Christ

Once again we face the question, What think ye of the Christ? On our answer will depend much of the reality, vitality and fruitfulness of our faith in the Savior of the world.

Pointedly Loraine Boettner has written, "The importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation in the Christian system can hardly be over-estimated, for the integrity of Christianity as the redemptive religion divinely set forth stands or falls with this doctrine. Nowhere is this more clearly affirmed than in the first epistle of John, which written late in the life of the Apostle and at the time when many had begun to apostatize and deny the faith, was designed primarily to establish the faith of believers in the midst of widespread errors. Chief of these errors was the denial, in one form or another, of the incarnation of the Son of God. John not only insists strenuously on the acknowledgement that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, but makes this the fundamental doctrine of the Gospel."⁶

Jesus made a stupendous claim, when affirming himself to be the Christ of God.

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In him we have the final, complete and perfected revelation of the triune God. This is in Christ's person, so that all men and nations will be judged in their relationship to him. He is the inescapable Christ, through whom we come face to face with the inescapable God.

Therefore the church must proclaim the true and full Christ of the Scriptures. Now we begin to understand why Melito of Sardis spoke as he did amid the agitation of the Christological controversies of his day. As W. C. Robinson points out, this church father was not interested in mere theological formulation. He insisted on a clear understanding of the essential Christian gospel. He spoke of Jesus who "showed His godhead concealed in the flesh" and "assured us of His true essence." The Son of man bore witness "to His heavenly origin, His supermundane glory, and His everlasting reign" but no less certainly to "His human passion, His brotherly kindness, and His gracious intercession." With Melito every age should say, "Thou, O Christ, art the Lord to Whom we pray! And Thy pains and Thy prayers open to us the bounties of the Father's Throne of Grace."⁷

Calvin wrestled with the same profound mystery of Christ. Yet he suggested a way which is helpful in seeing the Savior's glory more clearly. In considering who Christ is, "man himself appears to furnish the most apposite similitude. In ourselves we know that there is both body and soul, each of which retains its distinct nature and qualities and yet is united in an indefinable and indissoluble harmony. Therefore we speak of ourselves as we do, sometimes speaking of the properties applicable to the soul, sometimes of those applicable to the body, and yet also sometimes of those which cannot be applied properly to either body or soul alone but the being who is constituted in and through this union. In such a manner the Bible also speaks of Christ. The Scriptures attribute to him, sometimes those things which are applicable merely to his humanity; sometimes those things which belong peculiarly to his divinity; and not infrequently those things which comprehend both his natures, but are incompatible with either of them alone."⁸

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These distinctions can be most helpful for the believer who seeks to know his Lord.

Of all three modes of speaking this competent theologian, who was also preacher and pastor, gives examples. When Christ affirms, "Before Abraham was, I am," (John 8:58) and Paul says that "he is before all things, and in him all things consist," (Col. 1:17) these statements refer to his deity. But we also read that Christ "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man," (Luke 2:52) that he knows not the last day, and that he seeks not his own glory. These emphasize his humanity. The apostles declare that he purchased the church with his own blood (Acts 20:28) and was crucified by sinful men as the Lord of glory (I Cor. 2:8). Especially many things written by John are "not with exclusive reference to the deity or to the humanity, but respecting the complex person composed of both." Thus he received power to forgive sins, to raise the dead, to bestow salvation. In like manner our Lord spoke of himself as the light of the world, the good shepherd, the only door, and the true vine. All heretics, Calvin contended, have embroiled themselves in their errors by failing to do justice to what Scripture says. "They lay hold of the properties of his humanity, to destroy his divinity; on the other hand, they catch at the attributes of his divinity, to destroy his humanity; and by what is spoken of both natures united, but is applicable separably to neither, they attempt to destroy both. Now what is this but to contend that Christ is not man, because he is God; that he is not God, because he is man; and that he is neither God nor man, because he is at once both man and God?"⁹

Let us remember that theology, rightly conceived, is the handmaiden of faith. Sometimes she seems to raise her voice clamorously. In attempting to cleanse her house of what is contrary to sound faith, she may raise disturbances which sound deafening. Yet by these efforts she tries to make the church see more clearly the boundary between truth and error, between life and death. Yet such a true servant in God's house will know how to keep her place. She will try to speak only what God has taught.

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In this vein theology has much to say about Christ for the instruction, warning and consolation of believers. She begins and ends with the revealed mystery of God who in Christ Jesus was reconciling the world unto himself. (II Cor. 5:19) The real Jesus is the one before whom we bow in adoring wonder. Of him we can never say less than Thomas who cried out, "My Lord and my God." (John 20:28)

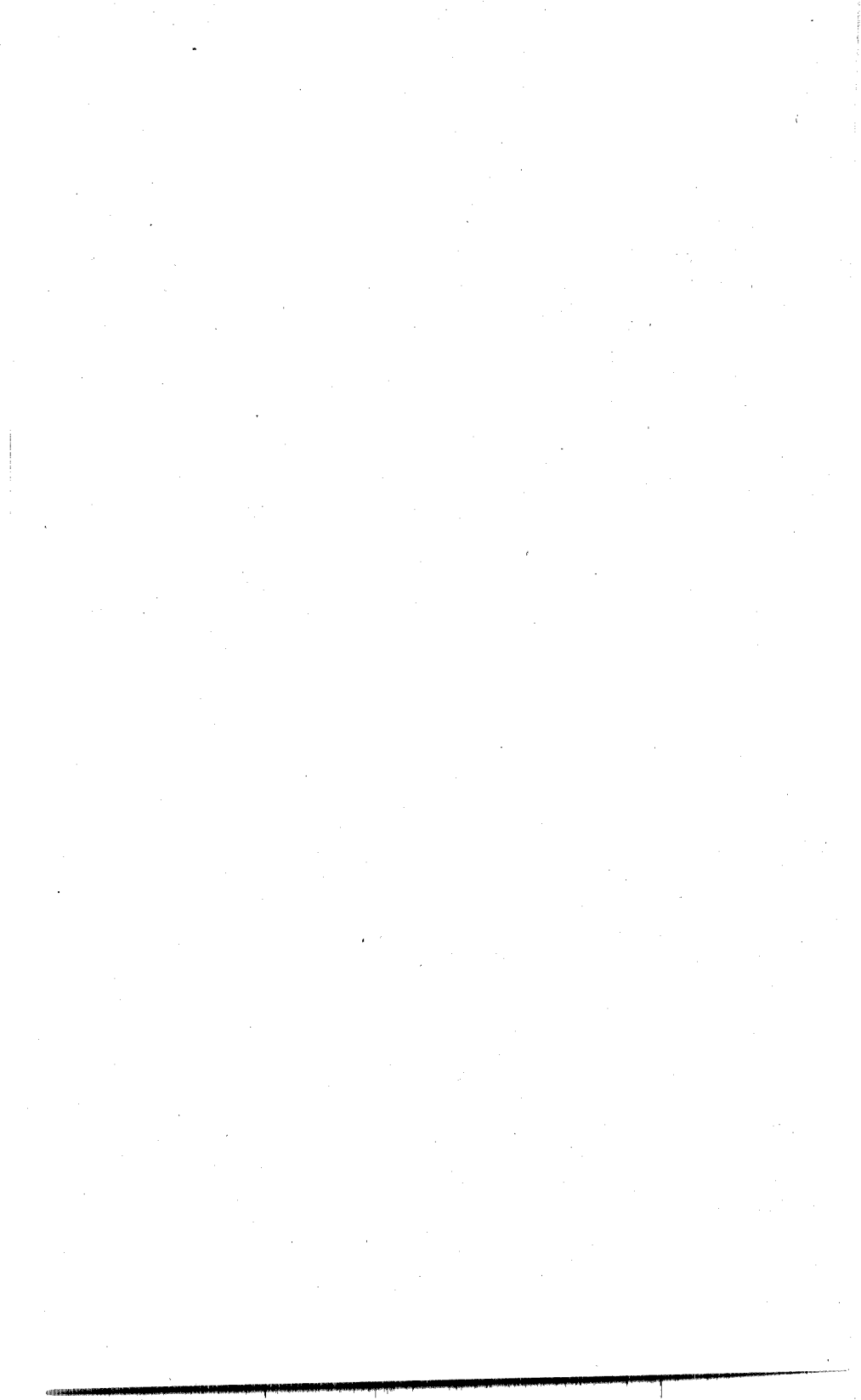
1. What is meant by Christianity as "the way?" How is this often wrongly presented? 2. Who according to Scripture is Jesus Christ? 3. Which proofs does the Bible offer of his deity? 4. Show the close relation between a sound conception of God and a sound conception of Christ. 5. How has God often used heresies to develop the church's faith-life? Give illustrations. 6. What is meant by nature and by person? How would you try to explain this to children? 7. What is meant by the Jesus-of-history and the Christ-of-faith? How do the modernists use this distinction? 8. What is wrong with approaching the gospels as giving us a biography of our Lord? 9. What was the error of the Nestorians? Why did the church so strongly condemn this? 10. What is the Lutheran position on "communication of attributes?" Why did the Reformed so strongly oppose this? 11. Did Jesus always know he was the son of God? Explain. 12. In which sense does our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body? 13. Why did our Savior have to be God? 14. Why did our Savior have to be real and righteous man?

Chapter 20

The Revealing God in Christ

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed, to make satisfaction in the same, and to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death. God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquities upon Him, and poured forth His mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation, out of mere and perfect love, giving His Son unto death for us, and raising Him for our justification, that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.

ARTICLE XX



KIERKEGAARD TELLS the story of an absent-minded man. So abstracted was he from his own life, that he hardly knew he was alive. One fine morning he woke up to find himself dead.

This describes many people today. In spite of the advances made on all frontiers during the past century, man has lost himself. He doesn't know who he is or why he exists. The ties which bind him to others and the created order are twisted. Everywhere anxiety and alarm are rampant, since man has stepped into the atomic age. It is a rare soul who searches for the roots of his life; a still rarer one who finds these in God.

Man has lost his grip on God, because he has refused to come to grips with himself as a dependent creature. Many echo the words of Sara Teasdale,

*"I would not have a god come in
To shield me suddenly from sin,
And set my house of life to rights.
Rather be lost than let my soul
Slip vaguely from my own control."*

That the poet misses the point of the Christian faith is plain. Little does she realize that, when God steps into our life, nothing slips vaguely from our control. Instead, those who by faith lose their life in God find it a thousandfold. God saves us from our false selves. He restores us to our true selves. This he does in Christ Jesus, whom he has sent into this world that we "may have life, and may have it abundantly." (John 10:10) This is our salvation, which enables us to face life with all its fears and frustrations by facing God. In such a knowledge of God lies our peace.

The Saving Knowledge of God

Again and again the theme-song of the *Confession* returns to comfort our hearts. God has come to seek and to save sinners.

This needs emphasis in our day.

As never before the human race has lost touch with life's realities. In every area of experience we are confronted with the meaninglessness of life. All the idols before which men have prostrated themselves—gold and goods and gaiety—betray their feet of clay. The rising standard of living has failed to still the anguish of the soul. Increased leisure has but stimulated a deeper dissatisfaction. Many of the arts no longer attempt to interpret reality significantly. Nothing seems to make sense. Man has been thrown back upon his own resources, only to discover that he has none to see him through this life. A century ago Tennyson already confessed,

*"Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
At last—far off—at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring."*

Now even the hope of spring has died out of the human heart. In *The Free Man's Worship* Bertrand Russell comments, "The life of man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invincible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long."

In sharp contrast to this prevalent mood of pessimism the Christian gospel speaks. Its analysis is simple, too simple seemingly for the sophisticated and self-centered of our day. Yet unwearyingly and unhesitatingly it proclaims that man needs the saving knowledge of God. Without God there is no goodness and no goal. And since the true God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we learn to know him only in *His Son* whom he has *sent* into this world so filled with sin and death. Without Christ we are confronted with chaos in which we are incompetent to create any abiding order.

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The basic problem of the race stems not from its creaturehood, modern theologians and philosophers to the contrary. It springs from a creaturehood which has wilfully gone astray. Dissatisfied with its proper place in creation under God, it seeks to be as God. It has hearkened to the siren song of the devil, "Ye shall not surely die . . . ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil." (Gen. 3: 4, 5)

This has produced our darkness. Like the five blind men of India, who sought to know an elephant by what they could feel, we foolishly try to understand life by the flickering light of our short and small experience. Because we do not know this in the light of the whole, we wander still farther afield. Men's folly is that "they refused to have God in their knowledge." (Rom. 1:28)

On this account the *Confession* repeatedly reminds us that we must attain to the saving knowledge of God. Conviction and conduct are determined by our view of God. In a sense this holds also for unbelievers, since their erroneous views of even the most trivial matters in daily life stem from their refusal to come to the knowledge of the truth. In obedience to the Scriptures we confess that man has no true and saving knowledge of God apart from his self-revelation. He alone can tell us truly who he is. This he has done in Christ Jesus, in the light of whose person and work we know him *who is perfectly merciful and just*. His purpose in sending his Son was to reconcile the world to himself. To this end man needed a redemption from sin and all the power of the devil.

The Mercy and Justice of God

Two divine qualities or attributes stand out in God's self-manifestation. They are his mercy and his justice.

Often these have been regarded as mutually exclusive, even contradictory. Many have harbored the notion that God in Christ cannot be both. Divine justice, righteousness and holiness have been discussed irreverently, on the assumption that a reconciliation which demanded satisfaction for sin was a denial of love.

This has produced strange results. Among those who seem to be in the orthodox camp a schizophrenic dread of God is coupled with a sentimental affection for Jesus. Far to the left are those who speak eloquently of the God of love whom Jesus preached, while pouring out their vials of contempt on Jehovah of the Old Testament as "a dirty bully." Between these extremes are several shades of opinion, all joined in their common belief that God is only and always love.

In all this there is really nothing new under the sun. The Roman Catholic Church had so preached God to the people, that they were full of fear. The person and work of Christ were made quite inaccessible, since men were told to walk the long road of daily penance and approach him through the saints and the blessed Virgin. All this was swept away in reformatory preaching, which proclaimed that the wrath of God was stilled forever by divine love in Christ Jesus. Also here there was no agreement. Seizing upon the idea of the God of love, Laelius Socinus argued that the substitutionary atonement was both unnecessary and blasphemous. According to him, Christ came to change man's view of God. He was not to be regarded as a strict judge. Rather as the loving Father he gave the Son, whose death was the highest manifestation of love, that and no more. In Christ God was not reconciled to man; rather, man was reconciled to God.

Against this position, which corrupted the heart of Christian preaching, Calvin protested. Full well he realized the problem which an equal insistence on divine justice and divine love poses for our thinking. Thus he wrote, "Before we proceed any further, let us examine, by the way, how it could be consistent, that God, who prevents (i.e. approaches) us with his mercy, should be our enemy, till he was reconciled to us by Christ. For how could he have given us a special pledge of his love in his only begotten Son, if he had not previously embraced us in his gratuitous favor? As there is some appearance of contradiction, therefore, I shall solve the difficulty."¹

He called attention to the fact that "such modes of expression are accommodated to our capacity, that we may better un-

derstand how miserable and calamitous our condition is, out of Christ." Only then can we rightly "estimate the blessing of deliverance."² Calvin refused, however, to reduce this Scriptural way of speaking about divine mercy and justice merely to a manner of speaking. Thus he explained that "though this is expressed according to the weakness of our capacity, yet it is strictly true." The love of God certainly precedes our reconciliation, but "we have not a complete and solid union with God, before we are united to him by Christ."³ Though loving us before the foundation of the world, he remained our enemy until redemption was accomplished in Christ. He strongly argued for an objective atonement which terminates upon God himself; not merely a subjective atonement which would move us towards him but not him towards us. Here he found supreme mystery. "Wherefore in a wonderful and Divine manner, he both hated and loved us at the same time. He hated us as being different from what he had made us; but as our iniquity had not utterly destroyed his work in us, he could at the same time in every one of us hate what we had done, and love what proceeded from himself."⁴

At no time, however, did Calvin think of God's justice and mercy in a state of unresolved tension within his being. This would be a denial of the perfection and simplicity of God. Conditioned by Scripture, he reminded his readers that God so loved the world, that he gave his Son. (John 3:16) Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the world, by which means alone God opened the way to his loved ones with whose sins he was angry. In this connection Calvin spoke of the transfer of guilt. "For the Father destroyed the power of sin, when the curse of it was transferred to the body of Christ. This expression, therefore, indicates that Christ at his death was offered to the Father as an expiatory sacrifice, in order that, a complete atonement being made by his oblation, we may no longer dread the Divine wrath."⁵

Thus is the central truth of the Christian faith to be declared.

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We know God in the face of Jesus Christ. In him divine justice and mercy are perfectly united. Much better than many a modern theologian did the Old Testament saints understand the compatibility of these two divine qualities, when they confessed,

*"Surely his salvation is nigh them that fear him,
That glory may dwell in our land.
Mercy and truth are met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
Truth springeth out of the earth;
And righteousness looked down from heaven."
(Ps. 85:9-11)*

God's excellencies are not separate parts of his being. Never does he show some and suppress others in the grand work of reconciling mankind unto himself. We cannot think rightly of him as merciful without at the same time recognizing his righteousness. Always he is both *perfectly*, especially in sending Christ into this world for sinners.

Salvation Through Satisfaction

This view of God implicitly commits us to the conviction that our Lord made *satisfaction* for our sins. He came especially to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death.

Only by making this affirmation can we do justice to the Bible. Here we face the unique manner in which these writings speak of our Lord. To the unsuspecting reader it may seem strange that so much attention is devoted to the sufferings and death of Christ. Large sections of all the gospels are devoted to the last day of his life. All the aspects of his condemnation and crucifixion are related. Although the apostles proclaimed his resurrection as their pivotal teaching, this was always intimately bound up with his death on the cross. It was "for us" that Christ "bare our sins in his body upon the tree." (I Pet. 2:24) This suffering of "the righteous for the unrighteous" was accomplished "that he might bring us to God." (I Pet. 3:18)

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But this is not the whole story. "The redemption that is in Christ Jesus" is also "a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness." (Rom. 3:24, 25) By the gospel men are called to be reconciled to God through Christ. "Him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in him." (II Cor. 5:21)

In unequivocal language the gospel declares that no man can save himself. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Not all our prayers and sighs and tears can appease the wrath of God against sin and reconcile us to him.

Deep within man's consciousness this stubborn fact has been recognized. Even apart from God's saving revelation to Israel men sensed something of the need of sacrifice. This may often have been corrupted and perverted but never wholly eradicated. The heathen bring offerings to their gods, usually in the hope of averting some grievous calamity or insuring an attitude of divine benevolence towards them. Men have sensed that some atonement or satisfaction must be made. And since man himself was not acceptable, he hoped that by substituting a gift the gods might be propitious towards him.

What was so imperfectly sensed by men, God revealed and regulated in his special revelation. The Scriptures, indeed, do not discuss the origin of sacrifices. Yet from the dawn of human history they have played a significant role in religion. Their atoning character is stressed in connection with the sacrifices brought by Noah (Gen. 8:21) and Job (Job 1:5).

The sacrifices which God prescribed for Israel at mount Sinai stressed propitiation through the shedding of blood. (Lev. 1:4; 4:29, 31, 35; 5:10; 16:7; 17:11) This was clearly indicated in the practice of the laying on of hands, which symbolized the transfer of guilt from the offerer to the offering. (Lev. 1:4; 16:21, 22) The sprinkling of blood upon the altar and mercy-seat stressed the idea of a covering for sin. (Lev. 16:27) All these sacrifices were not merely ceremonial and symbolical. Above all, they were enriched by God with a spiritual and typical significance. They pointed forward to the substitutionary sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is called "the Lamb of

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God which taketh away the sins of the world." (John 1:29) Especially the book of Hebrews teaches Christ as the perfect fulfilment of all Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies, climaxing in the testimony, "But he, when he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God." (Hebr. 10:12)

Repeatedly objections have been raised against this appraisal of Christ's passion and death as a *satisfaction* for sins rendered to the justice, holiness and truth of God. Usually it is affirmed that this is unworthy of God, whom we adore as eternal and immutable love. If such satisfaction or payment is demanded, then forgiveness is no longer freely given.

Now no theory of the atonement does full justice to all that the Bible teaches. Yet against those who deny that Christ's death was a payment for sin, we maintain that these do violence to Scripture and rob the blessed passion and death of our Lord of its profoundest implications. Paul plainly teaches, "For ye were bought with a price." (I Cor. 6:20) Again he affirms, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us: for it is written, "Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree." (Gal. 3:13) Even more fully is this declared to us, when he writes, "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God." (Rom. 3:24, 25) From these and many other passages we may rightly conclude that the Bible teaches salvation by satisfaction for sin.

Tell Me the Old, Old Story

This article of the *Confession* is crucial in our witness to the world. Without recognizing its central thrust, we go astray in our contemplation of the wondrous work of salvation.

To be sure, it is stated simply and briefly. Not everything that can be said about that which is ours in Christ's death is affirmed. But to say anything less or anything else is to reject

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what the Bible says. Here we acknowledge that God was so moved with infinite love for man the sinner that he gave Christ in the bitter and shameful death of the cross. When we could not make satisfaction for our sins, he showed us that this was both unnecessary and impertinent as well as impossible. He took our sins upon himself. Ours is a salvation by divine substitution.

This is the sacred and solemn story which we must proclaim to all peoples. God did for us, what we could never do for ourselves. In the simple words of the hymn we acknowledge, "There was no other good enough to pay the price for sin."

Salvation is the story of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

How God accomplished this is now outlined. The merciful and just God has *sent His Son to assume that nature in which the disobedience was committed*. Here Christ's death is connected with his birth; atonement with incarnation. God is not other than Christ, nor Christ other than God. The divinely-appointed Savior is God himself assuming our flesh and blood, so that by him we might have life eternal. The purpose of his coming into the world was *to make satisfaction in the same, and to bear the punishment of sin by His most bitter passion and death*.

This remains as much a stumbling block today as in previous generations. Men are not convinced of the seriousness of man's sin against God and his law. Because of their low conception of God and his perfections and their lofty regard for themselves, too many refuse to count sin an infinitely heinous crime against God. This emasculates the message of the cross. In the wake of the teachings of such men as MacLeod Campbell, Horace Bushnell and James Denney men hear little more of Christ's death than that "moral influence" proceeds from it and "sacrificial love" is displayed therein.

We are grateful that a new note is being sounded. Under the influence of Barth and Brunner the shallowness of much past preaching is exposed. Again we hear about God's wrath

against sin. Brunner castigates the notion that "at the cross man becomes aware of his error; here the idea that God is love conquers the idea of His anger." And without subscribing to Barth's approach to the mystery of our Lord's death, we may rejoice in what he says at this point. "God's judgment is executed, God's law takes its course, but in such a way that what man had to suffer is suffered by this One, who as God's Son stands for all others In Him God makes Himself liable, at the point at which we are accursed and guilty and lost."⁶ Here satisfaction by a substitute is again proclaimed.

How this was accomplished the *Confession* elaborates. *God therefore manifested His justice against His Son, when He laid our iniquities upon Him, and poured forth His mercy and goodness on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation, out of mere love.*

It is fruitless to pursue our inquiries further as if we could plumb the depths of our Savior's substitution. Not for a moment does the church teach that God's wrath was changed into love, since God loved his people before the foundation of the world in Christ. Still less is it proper for us to speculate at length, whether God was angry with the Son in whom dwelt all his good pleasure. This was not withdrawn for a moment from him "in whom the Father was well-pleased." So wholly other is God's indignation against sin than our petty anger, that we dare not speak of him as being angry with the Son. Yet in a very real sense Christ, laden with the guilt of our sins, "tasted death for every man." (Hebr. 2:9) In this sense he was no stranger to the consequences of man's sin but suffered them all for our sake.

Thus we are assured in him of *immortality* and *life eternal*.

All the blessings of the "eternal redemption" (Hebr. 9:12) are consequent upon the perfect, sacrificial and substitutionary death of our Lord. This is the gospel in which we glory.

By his obedience, rendered in faultless faithfulness to the Father's will, he became the author of our salvation. In union and communion with Christ we receive his righteousness, as if

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we in our own persons had satisfied for all our sins and fulfilled all righteousness. Thus the church declares with Paul, "But far be it from me to glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world hath been crucified unto me, and I unto the world." (Gal. 6:14)

In Christ we rejoice in our reconciliation to God as righteous judge and gracious Father.

He has satisfied the justice of God, so that divine love could be fully displayed in a manner consonant with divine righteousness and truth.

He has atoned for our sins, so that no one can lay anything to the charge of God's elect. (Rom. 8:32)

He has redeemed us from the power of sin and the law.

He has opened "the way which he dedicated for us, a new and living way, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh." (Hebr. 10:20) At all times we may come to God in the full assurance of his grace. Christ is all our peace, all our pardon and all our power. That old, old story is ever new to those who know God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

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1. Give reasons why general revelation of God is insufficient for man's needs? 2. How important is the true knowledge of God? 3. Of what personal and practical significance is the view that all true knowledge of God comes to us through Christ alone? 4. Why do you suppose so many people regard God's justice and mercy as contradictory? How would you counter this notion? 5. Does a detailed consideration of God's attributes tend to make the Christian faith abstract, impersonal and scholastic? Explain your position. 6. Should gospel preaching be theo-centric (God-centered) or Christo-centric (Christ-centered)? Prove your view. 7. Evaluate Calvin's statement that God both loved and hated us at the same time. Doesn't this sound like nonsense? 8. What is meant by Christ's death as a satisfaction? 9. What do you know about the origin of sacrifices? Did God reveal this need, or did man first sense it? 10. In what sense was it necessary that God's justice, righteousness and truth should be satisfied? Could God have saved man in any other way? Is it right to ask this question? 11. What did the sacrifices prescribed by God for Israel emphasize? How was this symbolized? 12. On the grounds of which Biblical teachings do we insist that salvation by a substitute is morally defensible? 13. Which objections are usually raised against the idea that Christ's death was a satisfaction for sin? 14. In what sense is Christ's flesh "the veil?" (Hebr. 10:20)

Chapter 21

Salvation in the Crucified Christ

We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High Priest, after the order of Melchizedek; and that He has presented Himself in our behalf before the Father, to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction, by offering Himself on the tree of the cross, and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold. For it is written: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace

was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and numbered with the transgressors;" and condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor, though he had first declared Him innocent. Therefore, He "restored that which he took not away," and "suffered, the righteous for the unrighteous," as well in His body as in His soul, feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited; insomuch that "his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." He called out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and has suffered all this for the remission of our sins.

Wherefore we justly say with the apostle Paul that we know nothing "save Jesus Christ, and him crucified"; we "count all things but loss and refuse for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord," in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation. Neither is it necessary to seek or invent any other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which "he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified." This is also the reason why He was called by the angel of God, JESUS, that is to say, SAVIOR, because He would "save his people from their sins."

ARTICLE XXI

IN THIS ARTICLE we testify to the place of the cross in the Christian faith. To survey this instrument of torture whereon the Prince of glory died is to become either a sceptic or a saint. No third alternative is possible. Nor can any man who hears the word escape its impact. To its magnetic power our Lord himself testified, when he said, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself." (John 12:31, 32)

Dostoevsky in his story, *The Idiot*, sketches men's reactions to the cross.

A prince and his friend walked one day through an art gallery wherein hung Holbein's masterpiece of the crucifixion. Noticing that his friend gazed intently, the prince asked, "What, looking at that picture? Don't you know that a man might lose his faith just by looking at it?"

The other replied, "That is just what is happening to me."

Unless we see the cross as central in the grand sweep of God's redemptive work for a lost world, we shall lose our faith. Nothing seems more senseless to the natural man than the shameful death of our Lord. Here, in the words of G. K. Chesterton, "priests of a pure monotheism and soldiers of an international civilization" conspired to kill one whose life was a manifestation of perfect purity and righteousness." Richard Jeffries in his *Bevis; the Story of a Boy* has the lad say, "The crucifixion hurt his feeling very much; . . . If God had been there, he would not have let them do it." Yet the Bible tells us that God was very much there. In fact, the cross is above all the work of the eternal God. This makes the cross the guarantee of our salvation. On it God gave himself in the death of his Son, that

through this death we might receive life. Only in the light of God's purposes in the person and work of Christ does the cross make any sense at all.

Christ, Our Eternal High-Priest

This article deals with the sacrifice of the Savior, even as the preceding. Yet it is not a repetition of what was confessed earlier. The approach has been deliberately shifted. First we were reminded that salvation is the work of the triune God, who in Christ reveals his mercy and justice. Now we are called to reflect upon that saving work in its several stages.

A unique emphasis is found here. Man's salvation is intimately bound up with Christ's work as priest. The deformations in Romish theory and practice in reformation times made a discussion of this subject both necessary and relevant.

The official character of the work of Christ is the point of departure for considering what was accomplished by his life and death. He came not as a private party, an individual next to all others who constitute the human race. By divine appointment he performed his work as God's gift to man and therefore as man's perfect representative before God. At no time may his work be divorced from a recognition of his unique person and position. Although this had never been entirely forgotten by the church, it remained for the reformers and especially Calvin to preach this clearly. In pronouncing the name of Christ unto salvation there is no magic. Against this Calvin warned strenuously when outlining Christ's offices. "Therefore, that faith may find in Christ a solid ground of salvation, and so may rely on him, it is proper for us to establish this principle, that the office which was assigned to him by the Father consists of three parts. For he was given as a Prophet, a King, and a Priest, though we should derive but little benefit from an acquaintance with these names, unaccompanied with a knowledge of their end and use. For they are likewise pronounced among the Papists, but in a frigid and unprofitable manner, while they are ignorant of what is included in each of these titles."¹

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No longer do the churches speak clearly about Christ's offices. This terminology has fallen into disrepute, yet to the detriment of true faith. It has left many with little more than a liberal Jesus-of-history, in whom human precept and practice have crowded out the gracious activity of God on our behalf. Others proclaim Christ as the Savior from sin but can give no clear account of the necessity, nature and scope of his work.

So important does the *Confession* regard the acknowledgment of Christ's priestly office, that it lays upon the lips of believers the testimony, *We believe that Jesus Christ is ordained with an oath to be an everlasting High-Priest.*

This may sound old-fashioned; it is nonetheless thoroughly Biblical. Christ was chosen by God to be our Mediator and Surety. In him God gave himself to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Here the love of God for lost sinners is proclaimed. (John 3:16) Christ spoke of the self-authenticating character of his ministry to his foes, "But the witness which I have is greater than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me." (John 5:36) Thus the writer to the Hebrews introduces Christ as the "Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things." (Hebr. 1:2) Nor did he assume that work by his own initiative. "No man taketh the honor unto himself, but when he is called of God, even as was Aaron. So Christ also glorified not himself." (Hebr. 5:4, 5) This sets the highpriesthood of Christ in its proper perspective.

To this position Christ was *ordained with an oath*. God solemnly pledged the Son as a propitiation for the sins of the world. This eternal background of the work of redemption has usually been called in the Reformed churches "the covenant of redemption." Salvation through the cross was no afterthought on God's part, no stop-gap made necessary by an unforeseen entrance of sin into the world. The Bible teaches that salvation is "according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Eph. 3:11) Promises were made him before he came into the world. "I appoint unto you a kingdom," said Jesus to his disciples, "even as my Father ap-

pointed unto me." (Luke 22:29) This was, according to the language of both Old and New Testament, a contractual obligation ratified by the solemn swearing of an oath on God's part. "And inasmuch as it is not without the taking of an oath (for they indeed have been made priests without an oath; but he with an oath by him that saith of him, The Lord sware and will not repent himself; Thou are a priest forever; by so much more hath Jesus become the surety of a better covenant." (Heb. 7:21, 22) By this we are assured that the foundations of salvation are eternal and immovable.

Now we begin to understand why he is called *an everlasting High-Priest*.

Too many obscure or deny the reality of our Savior's priesthood. Rome's heresy, while paying lip-service to the teaching, effectively obliterates from the mind and heart of the worshippers their personal need of Christ. Attention is focussed upon the thousands of priests who continually make sacrifices upon the church's altars. Even more drastic were the perversions under rationalistic influences in the eighteenth and romantic and ethical tendencies in the nineteenth centuries. In so far as Christ was still called a priest, this was merely by way of accommodation to traditional terminology.

Now Christ's priesthood may not be restricted to his death on the cross, nor even to his active and passive obedience offered up to God during his humiliation. This would contradict what the Bible teaches. Included in the priestly task was approaching the divine majesty with an accomplished sacrifice, making intercession for the people, and bestowing the assurance of full reconciliation. Christ, indeed, does not sacrifice himself eternally. Although we may speak in a sense of "eternal atonement in the heart of God," this must be carefully circumscribed. The sacrifice of Calvary is never repeated. But upon the basis of this finished work he continues in the presence of God on our behalf. Thus Christ is the inexhaustible source of new life for his people.²

This everlasting priesthood is even more clearly and concisely expressed by Scripture as an ordination *after the order*

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of *Melchizedek*, the last representative of man's original priesthood in Paradise. Calvin mentions five points of comparison between this strange figure and Christ which help us in our understanding of this phrase. (1) Both received the title "king of righteousness," although our Savior alone reigns in perfection. (2) The official position of both was bound up with "peace," although only Christ by his finished work on the cross gives perfect peace for time and eternity. (3) Both are "without beginning and end of days," but only to the eternal Son do these words apply exhaustively. (4) Both received tithes from Abraham and in him from his descendants. (5) Both "blessed" Abraham and in him his seed, although the Savior alone is able to give eternal blessings.³

When Christ performed his work on the cross, the priesthood of Aaron and his sons came to an end. It was only prophetic and typical, though by no means without intrinsic value by God's appointment for the believers of the Old Testament. When the reality appeared in Christ, however, the types and shadows passed away. Therefore there is no room any longer for an earthly priest. None can mediate between us and God but the all-sufficient Savior. In the fulness of his person and work Christ remains our eternal high-priest, through whom we have access to the Father at all times.

The High-Priestly Work of Christ

Now the manner in which this work was accomplished must be confessed.

Like a bright thread of scarlet it runs through the Scriptures. Its fullest explanation we find in the epistle to the Hebrews. This writing is, as it were, a commentary on Leviticus, demonstrating how Jesus Christ fulfilled all the ceremonies and sacrifices of the old covenant. It is God's answer to man's anguished query, "Of a truth I know that it is so: but how can a man be just with God? If he be pleased to contend with him, he cannot answer him one of a thousand." (Job 9:2, 3)

For reconciliation with God man needs both a prophet and a priest. The prophet brings the message which announces

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in the name of God the only way of redemption. The priest is the appointed representative who walks this way to bring the needed sacrifices and assure the people of divine favor. Yet no priest of man's choosing or laden with man's gifts can avert God's wrath and guarantee reconciliation. God himself must provide the perfect priest; in Christ Jesus he is the priest who brings the acceptable sacrifice of atonement.

Several aspects of this high-priestly work of the Savior are outlined in Hebrews. He was taken from among the people to be their perfect representative before God. (Hebr. 5:1) This was not by man's choice but God's. (Heb. 5:4) He is active "in things pertaining to God." To discharge this office he engages himself to "offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins." (Hebr. 5:1) Upon this basis he intercedes with God for the people. (Hebr. 7:25) Having the assurance that his sacrifice is eternally acceptable to God, he pours out the blessings of a reconciled God upon those who have drawn near through the sacrifice. (Hebr. 10:14-18)

All this is summarized in the acknowledgment that *He has presented Himself in our behalf before the Father, to appease His wrath by His full satisfaction, by offering Himself on the tree of the cross, and pouring out His precious blood to purge away our sins.*

In a few short phrases the church expresses what the atonement means to her. Yet these simple statements have profound implications. They are rooted in a view of God and man, of sin and salvation which sounds strange to the natural man.

Christ, according to this confession, is all our salvation. He has presented to God not merely his works or some aspect thereof; he has presented himself. In him all the demands of God were met. By his passive obedience he endured the wrath of God against the sins of the world, doing what "the blood of goats and bulls, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling them that were defiled" (Hebr. 9:13) could not accomplish. By his active obedience he fulfilled all righteousness, so that he "is the end of the law unto righteousness to every one that believeth." (Rom. 10:4) Thus Christ could say of himself, "I am the way,

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and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) Always between us and God stands the self-presenting Christ as the perfect substitute. Yet he is, in the deepest sense, never other than either God or man. As himself both God and man he is the perfect bridge across the yawning abyss of rebellion and ruin by which God comes in love to us, so that we may always dwell with God.

By this presentation of himself to the Father he has satisfied for sins and appeased God's wrath.

The protests against this testimony are loud and long. Man refuses to accept the Biblical testimony that God is so displeased with man that, rather than to leave sin unpunished, he has punished it in his beloved Son with the bitter and shameful death of the cross. This remains, however, the heart of Christian faith. It proclaims that "now apart from the law a righteousness of God hath been manifested . . . through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, . . . for the showing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus." (Rom. 3:21, 24, 25, 26)

The chief benefit thereby procured is the forgiveness of sins. All divine blessings, including righteousness, life eternal and glory, proceed from this central gift. The gospel cannot be "good news" without the removal of our burden and the bestowal of peace with God. In Christ we are encouraged to "draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need." (Hebr. 4:16)

Steps in the Savior's Self-Sacrifice

What we confess about salvation in Christ is not a series of abstract propositions, drawn either from God's nature or our need. Such speculation would contradict the essence of the church's witness to the world. We speak about him who is our life, about the events wherein he secured salvation for us.

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This challenges us to think about the two states of Christ, his humiliation and exaltation. This construction of our Savior's official position and relation to God's law has had a long history in the churches. Since the days of Schleiermacher it has been attacked as artificial, scholastic and without Biblical foundation. This rejection left man with a Christ who was little more than teacher, example and leader in life's struggles. Even the changes in theology during the past decades have failed to eliminate from America's pulpits the residue of such a superficial estimate of the Savior. Only a clear recognition of the official character of our Lord's person and work will dislodge this unrealistic, sentimental and moralistic evaluation of the gospels.

Christ came into this world to suffer and die. This was the road of self-emptying and self-humiliation, which was climaxed according to Paul by "becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:8) Here the apostle was not preaching a different message. He merely recapitulated what the gospels taught. So also did our Lord interpret the events of his life and death on the road to Emmaus, "And he said unto them, O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Behooved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:25-27)

This sheds a wondrous light on the uniqueness and unity of the gospel.

In those records we find no biography of our Lord. Rather, the writers carefully selected their materials to illumine the redemptive significance of Christ's life and death. For those who want a story about the man Jesus there are "empty pages" which no imagination or scientific investigation can fill. The gospels are not just a story; they are good news of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ.

In this article of the *Confession* our attention is especially directed to the cross. Yet it is not an isolated phenomenon in the gospels, looming up unexpectedly at the end of our Savior's life. It is the magnet towards which the believing heart is drawn

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from the very beginning. All the days of his life on earth Christ suffered *as well in His body as in His soul*. Both were to feel the wrath of God against sin and by the perfect obedience of our Lord to be delivered from sin and its results. Repeatedly he reminded his disciples of the rejection and death which awaited him. (Matt. 16:21; 17:22, 23; 20:20-28; John 2:19-22; 3:13, 14; 6:51, 64) In all this he was no passive victim but the priest who actively laid down his life, that he might take it again. (John 10:11, 18)

To this is added that Christ was *condemned by Pontius Pilate as a malefactor*.

It sounds strange that the church speaks always about an obscure Roman representative in Jewry. Yet our Lord was to be numbered officially with the transgressors. Here the bankruptcy of the state, which was ordained by God to serve the ends of justice in his name, is signalized. But even more, in Pilate God pronounced judgment upon his Son. Although himself sinless, he was laden with our guilt which makes us obnoxious and worthy of death in God's sight. In Christ's condemnation under Pontius Pilate we are assured that God will no longer enter into judgment with his people. The Savior *restored what he took not away*, our righteousness and justification before the God of all the earth.

He was condemned to be crucified.

As an instrument for inflicting the death penalty the cross was detested by Romans and Jews alike. Thus Paul could write, "Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree." (Gal. 3:3; cf. Deut. 21:23) An earlier form consisted of impalation, by which the body was transfixed with sharp stakes. Its Roman form was borrowed from the Carthaginians and might not be inflicted upon a citizen. The suffering which it produced was intense. Severe inflammation resulted in fever, which was aggravated by the body's position, swelling wounds and acute thirst. Often the mind became confused and filled with dread. Such agony might continue for hours, even for some days. The crucified literally died a thousand deaths.

To this was our blessed Lord condemned. In his shameful, painful and accursed death we are vividly reminded of the just penalty which our sins incur. But these physical agonies, acute and awful though they were, constituted only a small part of our Lord's passion. Above all he suffered in soul, especially when he cried out, *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?* (Matt: 27:46) All the billows of affliction rolled over him for our sake. (Ps. 88:7) Calvin explains at this point, "Hence it was necessary for him to contend with the powers of hell and the horror of eternal death." This does not force us to the position that God was angry with the Son or hostile, for then he could not have delighted in him and accepted his sacrifice on our behalf. Rather, Christ gave expression to the anguish which perplexed his soul.

Our Lord's death remains a profound mystery. To speak, then, of our Gethsemanes and Golgothas as if they might bear even the remotest resemblance to his agonies is little short of blasphemy. Always there remain heights and depths in this vicarious suffering of the sinless One for sinners which our minds cannot comprehend and our hearts cannot discern. John Murray speaks cautiously about this death. "We almost hesitate to say so. But it must be said. It is God in our nature forsaken of God. The cry from the accursed tree evinces nothing less than the abandonment that is the wages of sin. And it was abandonment endured vicariously, because he bore our sins in his own body on the tree."⁴ Somewhat more explicit is Louis Berkhof, when warning us against supposing that in this death the divine nature separated itself from the human, or that the divine nature was forsaken by the Father, or that the Father's good pleasure was even for a moment withdrawn from the person of the Mediator. Rather, the suffering of eternal death "revealed itself in the human consciousness of the Mediator as a feeling of Godforsakenness. This implies that the human nature for a moment missed the consciousness which it might derive from the union with the divine Logos, and the sense of the divine love, and was painfully conscious of the fulness of the divine wrath which was bearing down upon it. Yet there was

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no despair, for even in the darkest hour, while He exclaims that He is forsaken, He directs His prayer to God."*

More than this we cannot and dare not say. Nor is this necessary, since we are fully assured that by his death our Lord has sealed to us the love of God which is beyond all measure.

Forgiveness as a Present-Day Problem

In a brief phrase the *Confession* mentions the central blessing which God bestows upon his people. It is that Christ *has suffered all this for the remission of our sins*. In those days no elaboration seemed necessary, since everybody knew what was meant. Today the message of divine forgiveness puzzles the average man who has been too long estranged from the Christian gospel.

For many years modern man seemed little concerned about his relation to God. People were so busy trying to get ahead in economic and social position, that the things of the spirit were stifled. Man was regarded as moving ever onward and upward towards God anyway. Many quoted with approval the words of Fichte, "I have no time for penitence." Without fear of being contradicted Reinhold Niebuhr could say on the eve of the second World War that modern man suffered from "a complacent conscience."

Since then a new generation has arisen. The wholesale disintegration of society has robbed men and women of their sense of security. It is nothing short of alarming, that our post-war prosperity demands more facilities for nervous and deranged persons. No problem seems to loom quite so large in western society today. None seems so successfully to defy man's attempts to find a solution. Year after year announces an increasingly staggering toll of broken lives, caused by what D. M. Baillie calls our "moral-failure complex." People have no way of dealing with their moral failures. Because they are serious, they cannot be shaken off. Men find it impossible to forgive themselves, because they do not know divine forgiveness. They have tried to live by their own lights only to find that these lead

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into a deeper darkness. The experience of humanity echoes the word of God, "There is no peace, saith Jehovah, to the wicked." (Isa. 48:22)

Man's wickedness is not to be measured merely by outward deeds. It is properly assessed only when the veil is lifted and something of the seething torment and torture within is exposed. The race has tried to run away from God, hoping to escape the impact of his law. Yet the very running is a testimony to the law's power. In the end it always catches up with man, who only lives with himself and others in this world because there is divine law. All of modern psychology and psychiatry, in spite of great discoveries and counsels, fails to heal the wounds which fester deep within the human heart. Man finds it impossible to make peace with himself, when his life passes in review before his eyes. His is "the sorrow of the world" which "worketh death." (II Cor. 7:10)

But there is another sorrow. Such "godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret." (II Cor. 7:10) It calls men to return to God and lay the burden of sin at his mercy-seat. The Christian alone really takes the doctrine of sin seriously, so seriously that he readily confesses that with man there is no remedy. Thus his is no cheap way unto a wholesome and restored life. His failures never turn into morbid frustration, for he believes that there is forgiveness with God that he may be feared. (Ps. 130:4) How penetrating is the insight of the apostle, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (I John 1:8, 9)

This forgiveness is not cheaply obtained. No less than three Hebrew and four Greek words are employed in Scripture to demonstrate something of its scope. By a divine act our transgressions are covered and atoned; they are blotted out of the record of God. (Ps. 32:1, 5) We are released from our debt (Luke 6:37), not merely in the sense that sins are disregarded and passed over for a time (Rom. 3:25) but completely and unreservedly put away. (Acts 14:16; 17:30) God graciously par-

dons all our iniquities apart from any worth or merit within us. (II Cor. 2:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 2:13; 3:13) And for this a solid and substantial ground is found in God himself whose love has provided us with the work of our Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. This secret of the Christian life was revealed to Paul in the season of his conversion. All his life he had been trying to save himself without succeeding. Not until he saw God in the face of Jesus Christ were the prickings of his conscience hushed. For him that forgiving mercy flowed from the crucified One, in whom alone he gloried from that day forward. (Gal. 6:14)

To experience such forgiveness a man must be big enough to see and confess how small and sinful he is. Then instead of trying to save himself by prayers and promises, sighs and sacrifices, he will seek peace at the foot of Christ's cross, in whom God was "reconciling the world unto himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses." (II Cor. 5:19) To proclaim this gospel of full and free grace to men who have become insoluble problems to themselves demands that the church speak clearly and consistently about the atonement of our Lord.

Preaching the Word of Reconciliation

The church is called by God to make known the mystery of his saving grace. This must be done by preaching. Both the commission and content are clearly circumscribed in the written word. Yet this can never be done in a vacuum. We are to preach meaningfully to people of all conditions and in all circumstances. Out of this arises the problem of communication, for the Christian message must address itself to the hearts and needs of men.

This task is not easy. In the natural man we find no effective point of contact for the divine message. Our dependence will therefore be upon the Spirit of Christ alone, who can and does illumine the human mind and renew the human heart. Ours is the calling to remain true to the word. But here we find ourselves faced with an almost insurmountable problem. Although the Christian gospel is simple enough to appeal to the unlearn-

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ed and immature, it is so complex and profound that it cannot be fathomed by the most learned. The Bible approaches the doctrine of the cross from many sides, each of which illustrates something of the ruin in which the race has encompassed itself and something of the unfailing remedy which God in Christ has provided.

It need not surprise us, therefore, that throughout the centuries the church has been confronted with many theories concerning the atonement. These arose out of her reflection upon God's truth. Yet not all of them faithfully reproduced the teachings of the word. In some instances the theologians wandered far afield. In others they imported notions not consonant with what Christ and his apostles taught. Yet from these attempts to clarify the meaning of the cross the church may learn much.

Without going into detail we would mention some of the views which have influenced the church's thinking and preaching through the centuries. Very early Irenaeus advocated what has come to be known as the *Recapitulation* theory. Here Christ was represented as having reproduced within himself, as it were, all stages of man's existence and experience to become a new leaven within the lump of humanity and restore it to God. Somewhat later Origen suggested that Christ's death was a ransom to Satan, an ingenious payment offered to the devil which he could never claim and yet by means of which man could escape his power. Much more Scripturally informed was the *Satisfaction* theory propounded first by Anselm of Canterbury. He regarded sin as an affront to the honor of God which demanded either punishment or satisfaction. In his life and death Christ offered to God a gift of infinite value which, because as the sinless one he needed it not, he now bestows on man. One of Anselm's immediate opponents was Abelard, who proposed an ethical and subjective atonement in his *Moral Influence* theory. Here God's love in the crucified Christ is said to awaken a responsive love within the sinner. This promotes true repentance and opens the way to forgiveness. In various forms this view has been revived by liberal theologians of the last century who repudiate any conception of Christ making

satisfaction to God for our sins. During the reformation days the Socinians set forth the *Example* theory, which regards Christ's death as little more than an example of patient suffering which we are urged to emulate. Somewhat later Grotius, the father of modern jurisprudence, attempted to mediate between the position of the reformers and the Socinians. God's purpose in having Christ crucified was not to satisfy his justice, holiness and truth but rather to deter men from sin and uphold himself as the moral ruler of the universe. Many of the modern views, such as those outlined by Horace Bushnell, Vincent Taylor, C. Ryder Smith, Gustaf Aulen, and others, are but variants on one or more of the theories mentioned above.

The Reformed churches, although never adopting a specific theory as alone legitimate, have clearly expressed themselves on the significance of the cross. This is evident from the language of the *Confession*. It speaks of Christ presenting himself *in our behalf*. This he is said to have done *before the Father*. Its effect was to *appease his wrath by his full satisfaction*. In addition, such words are used as *merits* and *remission of sins, reconciled to God and only sacrifice*. In large measure these were taken over from Anselm and the scholastics. Yet the reformers realized that this theory did not reproduce the full Scriptural position but had to be supplemented with additional Biblical insights. With this in mind they declared in their preaching what they considered to be the nature, extent and efficacy of Christ's work.

As far as the purpose of the atonement is concerned, the Reformed churches were largely agreed that this was three-fold. By means of the highpriestly sacrifice of our Lord God was reconciled to us. Furthermore, the atonement secured for Christ the life-giving Spirit whom he imparts to his people as the source of every spiritual blessing. Finally, the atonement not only made reconciliation possible for sinful men; it actually and effectively obtained this benefit for sinful men. Here we oppose the ideas of the Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Arminians, who teach that while Christ made salvation possible, it is actually imparted only on conditions of repentance and

faith which man must meet. Thus in a sense, salvation becomes partly the work of God and partly the work of man.

With respect to the extent of the atonement the Reformed churches soon found themselves in disagreement with others. The question was not whether Christ's work was inherently sufficient for all men; on this there was no difference. Nor was it a question whether the gospel should be proclaimed as glad tidings to all men; this is plainly commanded by God. Rather, the question concerned the underlying purpose or design of God. Did the Father send Christ in the world with the purpose and intent of saving all men or only the elect? The Reformed taught that the latter is true, thus championing the doctrine of limited atonement.

On the efficacy or virtue (power) of the atonement the Reformed present by far the most glorious and comforting doctrine. We believe that Christ came not merely to make salvation possible. He not only merited our redemption, reconciliation and renewal; he actually bestows these gifts upon his own. This in no wise undercuts the Scriptural demand that all men must repent and believe. But such repentance and faith are also gifts of God wrought in us by the Spirit of Christ.

Let us for a moment note how violently recent theologians have reacted against the reformatory teaching on Christ's cross and its significance. The Reformation is said to have parroted what Rome taught. Nowhere in the Bible we do find such terms as satisfaction and merit. These are regarded as legal terms imported into theology at a careless moment by Tertullian and the Latin fathers. Both Luther and Calvin were supposed to be so bound by Anselm's theory, that they failed to do justice to the love of God. Especially C. Ryder Smith has insisted that they read too much into the Old Testament sacrifices and consequently misinterpreted them. Here he fails to find any idea of substitution; only that of solidarity on Christ's part as priest with the people. Nor according to Vincent Taylor does Isaiah 53, long a classic proof-text for the reformers and reformation theology, speak of Christ's death in terms of sacrifice, substitution and transfer of guilt. All the critics hold that there

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has been too much emphasis on divine judgment to the obscuring of his love. God did not need to be reconciled; he was always a reconciled and a reconciling God.

Most of these objections, if not entirely groundless since preachers and people have not always expressed themselves clearly and fully in Scriptural light, are unbalanced. Although Calvin and Luther did employ many terms current in the Romish theology, they found them admirably suited to express New Testament teaching. Nor did the church err in interpreting the Old Testament conception of sacrifice. The explanations given earlier demonstrate this conclusively. Only by neglecting or refashioning the teachings of Leviticus, Isaiah and Hebrews could the critics make their point. The cross is indeed an expression of divine love but also of much more than love. Both reformers and Rome rightly refused to swallow up the righteousness of God in his grace. Every attack on the vicarious atonement is inherently futile. Scripture is so full of this teaching, that all who ignore or deny it reject the plain word of God. We glory in the Christ of the cross for therein, to use the couplet of John Donne,

*"God clothed himself in vile man's flesh, that so
He might be weak enough to suffer woe."*

And that woe he suffered for the sake of our salvation.

The Christian Response to the Atonement

What, then, will the bitter passion and death of Christ on our behalf mean to the Christian in his daily life?

That faithful meditation on this Biblical doctrine produces blessed spiritual results in our lives is affirmed by the *Confession*. It is sincerely interested in promoting not only sound doctrine but above all a genuine piety. At least the following results are indicated here.

There will result, first of all, a Christ-confessing life. *Wherefore we justly say with the apostle Paul that we know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified.* This is the only

ground and foundation of our salvation. He alone is our strength and song. In him we are restored to God and have the hope of life eternal.

To this should be added, that the true believer seeks to lead a Christ-centered life. He will *count all things but loss and refuse for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord*. Worldly pomp, pleasure and learning will no longer charm his heart. Although often neglecting his Savior, he cannot forget him who is his life. And as he reflects on the price paid for his redemption, he comes confessing his sins and receives the assurance of pardon. Such a faith produces spiritual stalwarts who do not shrink from loyalty to the Savior even when confronted with a martyr's death.

This is the fruit of a Christ-comforted life. The believer needs no ease and prosperity to live in security, peace and hope. He puts his trust alone in the perfect work of the Redeemer *in whose wounds we find all manner of consolation*. We rejoice in the knowledge of a reconciled God. We are assured that all we need for this life will be freely supplied us for Christ's sake. We experience that through Christ who strengtheneth us we are able to bear all the burdens of life. Nothing can separate us any longer from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. With Bernard of Clairvaux we sing,

*"What language shall I borrow,
To thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end?
O make me thine forever;
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never,
Outlive my love to Thee."*

Such believers, strengthened in their faith by a life of faithful fellowship with the Savior, realize how pernicious was Rome's dogma which drove men *to seek or invent . . . other means of being reconciled to God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which he perfected forever them that are sanctified*.

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Not our faith or works or penance, but solely the work our Savior finished on the cross makes us perfect in God's sight. "For such a high priest became us, holy, guileless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needed not daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people: for this he did once, when he offered up himself." (Hebr. 7:26, 28) Therefore we rejoice in the name of Jesus, for he came to *save his people from their sins.*

1. How would you explain that man can become a sceptic by regarding the crucified Christ? What does Paul say about this? (I Cor. 1:18-23) 2. What does it mean that God ordained Jesus Christ? 3. Of what value is the oath in this connection? 4. Discuss the five comparisons between the priesthood of Melchizedek and of Christ which Calvin made. 5. In which sense is forgiveness of sins always the basic benefit we enjoy? 6. What do you understand by Christ being forsaken of God? 7. Mention and explain briefly the outstanding theories of the atonement. 8. Do you think there is any danger in speaking so much of Christ's blood, of appeasing God's wrath and of merits in this connection? Why does the church use these phrases? 9. What is meant by "limited atonement?" Which Biblical passages seem to argue against it? 10. In what sense is the Reformed view of the atonement the most God-glorifying and soul-satisfying? 11. Can you harmonize "limited atonement" and "the well-meant offer of salvation?" Explain. 12. What is the three-fold purpose of Christ's atonement? 13. Which blessed results are produced by believing meditation upon Christ's death? 14. In which several ways has the Roman Catholic church deformed the doctrine of Christ's high-priestly work? 15. What is included in the shedding of Christ's blood? 16. How is Christ become for us priest and altar and sacrifice? What are the implications of this for Christian worship?



Chapter 22

Salvation by Faith in Christ

We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith, which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ

is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.

Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we "are justified by faith" alone, or "by faith apart from works." However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

ARTICLE XXII

WHEN CHRISTIAN missions in India were still in their infancy, Macaulay raised what he thought was a pertinent question. "What is the use," he asked, "to discuss close communion with a man who has been in the habit of worshipping a cow?"

In much the same sense people today wonder whether it makes any sense to discuss the details of Christian doctrine. Our generation has at best a vague and ill-defined notion of God. Many have no more than what Dennis Saurat called "the sensation of God." The historic faith leaves such people untouched and unmoved. Yet this ought not discourage us. Much the same situation prevailed, when Paul was commissioned to preach. He learned in metropolitan Corinth that Christ crucified was a stumblingblock and foolishness to the natural man.

As soon as men face up to their spiritual emptiness, basic issues cannot be evaded. Those who realize the reality of God ask, And how can I appear before him? To this question the reformers gave a crystal-clear reply. Auguste Lecerf describes their task glowingly and graphically, "Broadly speaking, the task which confronted the Reformers of the sixteenth century was twofold. They had, first, to resist the invasion of the Christian church by the pagan spirit; and, secondly, to restore to the believer the joy of salvation by Christ. Their watchwords were, on the one hand, *solī Deo gloria*; and, on the other, *sola fide*, the justification of the sinner by means of faith alone."¹

Here the lines between catholic and evangelical Christianity were sharply drawn. The two approaches to the gospel were laid bare in their deepest motifs. The inescapable yearning of the convicted sinner for true assurance and security became a chief concern of the witnessing church. In this way the doctrine of justification by faith came to be known as the article with which the church stands or falls.

Faith Which Knows Christ

In its present revised form this article was adopted by the synod of Dort (1618-19) This opens the door to a moot point, heatedly debated for centuries. Here the church affirms, *We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith.*

All believers realize instinctively that acquaintance with the facts about Christ is insufficient to salvation. There must be a personal appropriation of the glad tidings. Only then will man come into possession of the full enjoyment of Christ and all his benefits.

This *great mystery* concerns God's reconciliation with the world in Christ. This must become *true knowledge*, an unshakable conviction or certainty that this was for us. Here we stake our hope in life and in death. This is the problematics of faith.

Many questions now come tumbling in upon us. How may we be sure that what we accept is true? What is the nature of this act by which we enjoy true knowledge? Which comes first in the life of God's child: to know or to trust? Is there any vital connection between faith and knowledge? More specifically, how must faith be defined? What is its value? Is this so purely personal, that there is no ground for conviction and certainty outside of ourselves? How may we bring the message, so that others come to share in this faith and knowledge?

Now the reformatory creeds do not deal with these problems in detailed fashion. There were, indeed, fully aware of them. Many lay at the root of the profound differences which separated Protestants from the Romish faith. But in some simple words they were content to affirm that faith produces this knowledge of God's redeeming love in Christ. Men who do not believe stand on the outside and cannot judge of this matter. Here God's gracious works for and within the believer are extolled. *Sola fide* (by faith only) and *sola Deo gloria* (to God alone the glory) were indissolubly connected. "For by grace have ye been saved

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through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory." (Eph. 2:8, 9)

As we reflect on this presentation of Christian trust and testimony, we realize that more will have to be said to men today.

In speaking of God's work for us in Christ the Biblical testimony moves around two foci.

The first has often been called, for want of a better term, the "objective" aspect. This is what God has done in Christ apart from ourselves. In him God has revealed mercy and justice, admirable wisdom and goodness, through the propitiation by Christ's blood. It makes our reconciliation forever secure. To it nothing need be added; from it nothing may be taken away.

But salvation is also God's work within us. His rich grace in Christ is poured out in our lives. Usually this is called the "subjective" or experiential aspect of our salvation. We are exhorted to believe that this is for us and in us. Central to all the activities in which the soul responds to God in Christ is faith by which we are justified. We learn to know that Christ is ours. This is that *true knowledge* which is eternal life. (John 17:3)

Now the church has often been tempted to stress one aspect at the expense of the other.

In some quarters the "objective" has completely overshadowed the subjective. This is especially true where either ritual or doctrine is narrowly conceived. By following certain ceremonies man is supposed to receive standing before God, or by acquiescence to sound words he regards himself as sustaining the right relation to God. Here salvation as covenant-communication with God too often is obscured behind dark and ominous clouds. The threat of formalism is far from imaginary, despite the fact that within such ritualistic and doctrinal churches many have evidenced exemplary piety.

Into the other extreme have fallen those who speak so much about Christian experience and its urgency, that the riches of

God's grace in Christ have been forgotten. The persistent practice of seeking after God has led not a few to doubt whether they were good enough and sincere enough to find him. In stressing the marks of a true Christian some have prescribed these as a "new law" which has robbed the weak in faith of Christian liberty and joy. Others have narrowed the Spirit's operations within man so much, by stressing a few miraculous gifts, that many under such preaching moved in dread all their days or dismissed the Christian life as unattainable nonsense. In all these instances the door to heaven is redefined in an un-biblical manner.

A study of the church's history with this issue might produce the unpleasant and unwarranted conclusion, that this tension between the "objective" and the "subjective" cannot be resolved. Then Christ-for-us and Christ-in-us are played out against each other. The awful end may be either knowledge without godliness (II Tim. 3:5) or zeal without knowledge (Rom. 10:2), against both of which Paul warned the churches.

Out of this impasse Emil Brunner has tried to help us. In his *The Divine-Human Encounter* he describes the dilemma of the objective-subjective aspects of the Christian faith. He contends that here we are never dealing with an either-or. Nor must the church try to look for some safe middle road. "Obedience-in-trust is the personal answer of self-giving to the Word of God. In this response of self-giving the divine self-communication first reaches its goal, and actual fellowship between God and man originates. In this two-sided yet unequivocal relation God is completely and wholly the Giver, the first, and man is completely and wholly the receiver, the second."² But at the same time he forbids us to ask, What must be believed? "If we ask what sort of truth man possesses in faith, what sort of truth he discerns in faith in God's self-revelation through His Word, it is as if with this question we had moved first of all into an entirely foreign context."³ All we can ever have is the "personal fellowship." God no longer really speaks. He merely acts. Though reacting against an unwholesome subjectivism, Brunner makes faith no more than "empty" trust. In their effort to safeguard

the *solī Deo gloria*, the neo-orthodox have crippled the reality of *sola fide*.

Other approaches have been suggested to describe the way by which men attain to *true*, that is, saving, *knowledge* of God in Christ. Some argued that Christian truths are reasonable and capable of demonstration. For decades this rationalism has been a curse within the church. Reactions set in to emphasize devout or religious feelings as the way of assurance that God is ours. Many of the Anabaptists and Quakers insisted on an "inner light." Schleiermacher insisted that true religion was a "feeling of dependence." Others, following Kant and Ritschl, looked for the answer in man's moral consciousness as the point of contact between God and man. Against all these views Barth, Brunner and their disciples have set their faces like flint. Yet their answer fails to do justice to the Bible as well.

In dealing with this problem G. C. Berkouwer speaks of "correlation," the combining of the two aspects.⁴ He warns us against thinking of them as two opposite poles in Arminian fashion, who thought of the one as God's work and the other as man's work. The correlation is of a unique kind, in that God who provides redemption in Christ creates within the sinner's heart the receptivity to embrace this work without in any way doing violence to the full spiritual and moral responsibility of man. Salvation in Christ is of one piece. It is a purchased possession. What God provides, he actually also bestows. The revelation of his grace evokes the response of faith. In this manner the Bible speaks of faith by which we attain to saving knowledge of Christ Jesus. "For I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12) In this Biblical language there is no tension between God's work for us and his work in us. They are of one piece. And by faith we know that this is so on the basis of his immutable promises in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Well-Spring of Saving Faith

All men in a sense live by faith. Also those who know not Christ respond to reality on the basis of belief. In all things

God reveals himself. As man was originally constituted he could respond properly to this revelation. Something of this has remained after the fall.

That faith of the natural man, however, cannot produce *true knowledge* of God and his world. Succinctly the confession of La Rochelle states this, "We believe that man, having been created pure and perfect, and in conformity with the image of God, by his own fault fell from the grace which he had received . . . so that his nature became totally corrupt. Being blinded in his mind and depraved in heart, he lost all integrity, so that even the light which he possesses transforms itself into darkness when he seeks for God, and this in such a fashion that man can in no wise approach God by his reason and intelligence."⁵ The instrument by which men might rightly know has been perverted, filling his life with unbelief, ignorance and untruth.

Even the preaching of the gospel, according to the Reformed, is not in itself sufficient to turn men unto God and produce within them a true knowledge of salvation. Any apologetic for the Christian faith which rests upon intellectual arguments and demonstrations is doomed to failure. Nothing short of a gracious miracle within man enables him to believe. Thus our reception of Jesus Christ and all his benefits is by grace only.

Whence, then, comes such true faith?

For the Christian religion this is a pivotal question. It arises not from a theoretical desire to safeguard the gracious character of our reconciliation to God. It is sharply defined in the practical situation, wherein the church witnesses to her Lord.

By Scripture we are thrown back upon the mystery of God's rich provisions for his people. With all evangelicals the Reformed testify that faith is God's work. It is not something natural or normal for man. No appeal to reason, feeling, experience or moral consciousness will dissuade him from rejecting the gospel. The great stumblingblock, so the *Canons of Dort* affirm, lies not with the gospel or Christ or God who calls men. The fault lies entirely with man. "Now the natural man receiv-

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eth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them, for they are spiritually judged." (I Cor. 2:14) This inability is at the same time unwillingness, so that all are without excuse. "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil." (John 3:19) Many in the churches suppose that the gospel must be proclaimed as proportionate to man's powers either to accept or to reject. But this is belied by the facts. Man is not in a state of normalcy. He has lost his integrity, also of heart and mind by which he judges concerning God, the world and himself. This must first be restored, before he can experience the blessedness of knowing God and his way of salvation.

The Bible clearly indicates this, when it teaches faith as God's gift. (Eph. 2:8, 9) He works this within us by the marvelous and mysterious operation of his Holy Spirit. "And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." (I John 5:20)

Radically different is this Biblical view from that championed in many fundamentalistic groups. Here, with greater or lesser insistence, we are told that men can believe, if only they want to. God is said to provide redemption on conditions of faith and repentance which man can meet. Whether presented in Arminian, Semi-Pelagian or Pelagian form, the doctrine remains quite the same. From divine grace the emphasis is shifted to man's response. Salvation becomes a kind of joint-enterprise, wherein God takes the initiative but finds himself unable to bring it to fulfillment apart from man's cooperation. Against this compromise with the gospel of grace the *Confession* protests by teaching that the Holy Spirit creates faith within us.

In this connection several illuminating words are used.

Here an aspect of the Spirit's work, often ignored by the churches, is described. He *kindles* this faith. It is a light from above for those who wander in the mazes of ignorance, unbelief and rebellion. Those who believe are appropriately called "sons

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of light and sons of the day" in contrast with the children of disobedience and darkness. (I Thess. 5:5) In them is fulfilled our Lord's promise, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life." (John 8:12) Where the Spirit so works, there is no divorce between Christ and faith.

Such faith is kindled *within our hearts*. Its seat is not the mind. Much more is involved than an intellectual appreciation and appropriation of salvation. Of course, included in such illumination is a sound knowledge of what God reveals. Christianity repudiates anti-intellectualism and refuses to consort with irrational and mystical tendencies which have often been substituted for true religion. But faith is above all a matter of the heart out of which are the issues of life. Although confessing that this "renewal, new creation, resurrection from the dead" which God works within us cannot be comprehended, the *Canons of Dort* do not hesitate to say something about it. God "not only causes the gospel to be externally preached to them, and powerfully illuminates their minds by His Holy Spirit, that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God; but by the efficacy of the same regenerating Spirit He pervades the inmost recesses of man; He opens the closed and softens the hardened heart, and circumcises that which was uncircumcised; infuses new qualities in the will, which, though heretofore dead, He quickens; from being evil, disobedient and refractory, He renders it good, obedient and pliable; actuates and strengthens it, that like a good tree, it may bring forth the fruits of good actions."⁶ Although this includes more than the mere implanting of faith within us, it sharply defines the application of God's grace as his work.

Now we begin to understand why the *Confession* speaks of an *upright*, that is true or saving, faith. It is to be sharply contrasted with all other manifestations which are self-deceiving. Man cannot believe without sharing in the Spirit's ministry. Historical, temporary and miraculous faith are all weighed and found wanting. What God works is a faith which is genuine and acceptable to him.

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The Activities of Saving Faith

But how shall we know that our faith is true? Here the Bible calls us to earnest self-examination. "Try your own selves, whether ye are in the faith; prove your own selves." (II Cor. 13:5)

This was stressed by de Bres because of the religious situation of his day. For centuries believers had been kept in spiritual bondage by the Romish church. Rule upon rule had been laid down to bind their lives to churchly ordinances. This was wedded to a palpable ignorance of the truths of Christianity. The gospel of Jesus Christ was lost in a welter of superstitious ceremonies which drew men away from the Savior of the world. Confession in all its details was rigorously prescribed, forcing men to look with growing despair on their own sinfulness and compelling them to arduous penances in the vain hope for peace. Rome maintained that no man could ever be fully assured of his salvation.

Much of this error must be traced to a confusion which still reigns in that church on the relation between justification and sanctification. Even Augustine did not clearly distinguish between the legal, forensic act by which all sins were declared forgiven by God and the spiritual renewal wrought within man by the Spirit. The door was thrown open to misunderstandings, which produced a flood of spiritual distress and despair in the hearts of those who were seeking peace with God.

With one accord the reformers cut the Gordian knot. So intricate had Romish doctrine on this score become, that it could no longer be untangled by patient debate and discussion. Those who heard the gospel were now exhorted to look to Christ alone, in whom God had fully satisfied for sins and opened the way to reconciliation. The walking of this way, in all its simplicity, was the reformatory description of faith.

Its activities are described briefly. It *embraces Jesus Christ and all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him*. This is one activity, not three. Each simply explicates its partners.

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The believer is said to take hold of Christ who is preached to him. This must be understood against the dark background of his desperate plight. He is said to be sinking in the stormy sea of his own sins which are heavily shadowed with the clouds of God's wrath. Prompted by the Spirit he throws himself into the outstretched arms of the Savior who alone can and does deliver him. Although speaking in terms of merit, emphasizing his bankruptcy, the believer does not regard what Christ has done for him merely as a kind of financial payment. Rather, because of his substitutionary sacrifice the Savior has received from God the right to take sinners into his arms and clasp them to his loving bosom. Therefore the believer seeks nothing besides this Jesus.

How plain it is from these words that *to embrace Jesus Christ* is a complete and indivisible work of the whole person. Our mind, enlightened by the Spirit, sees him as the remedy and embraces his promises. On these it can rest its case for time and eternity. Likewise, the will is radically active. Instead of ignoring or questioning or rejecting the Savior, turning to its own wishes and works, it yields itself to God's way. That enables the believer to rejoice in the God of his salvation. "If any man willeth to do his will," said Jesus, "he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak of myself." (John 7:17) Although formerly dead in sin and indifferent to God and spiritual things, he is inwardly renewed to turn his life to Christ. Such justifying faith, embracing only Christ, always produces the fruit of sanctification. Thus the dominant note of reformatory preaching was the rich Christ for the poor sinner.

Controversy With Rome

Precisely on this score Rome demonstrated its intransigent opposition to the Reformation and reformatory preaching.

This may sound strange to us, who are aware that within that church are scholars and saints who speak in glowing terms of God's grace in Christ. Let us remember that Rome repudiates many teachings which some evangelicals have unwisely and unjustly imputed to her. It is wrong to accuse that church of teach-

ing that we are saved by works. Nor may we condemn her as holding that the merits of the saints and the blessed Virgin bring us to heaven. Here half-truths are dangerous and deadly weapons which turn on those who use them. Much anti-catholicism, especially in fundamentalistic circles in Canada and the United States, is so emotionally conditioned, that it is deficient in both humility and honesty. Luther and especially Calvin, excoriating that church for having defamed the blessed gospel, recognized that the distinctions between evangelical and Romish faith could not be reduced to the issues of justification by faith or by works. Officially that church has always taught that apart from Christ there is no salvation. One might almost be tempted to say that the difference is largely one of emphasis and terms. Yet this would betray a lamentable ignorance of those issues which irrevocably destroyed the external unity of the church in our western world.

What was really at stake is stated simply in the *Confession*. It was not salvation with or without Christ; it was rather salvation by Christ *alone* or by Christ and *something else besides*. Let us listen to what is here affirmed. *For it must needs follow, either that all things which are requisite for our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.*

Against this position the church of Rome raged. In unmistakable language the Council of Trent (1545-1563) anathematized all who held that man is entirely justified by faith apart from works. Basically this position is taken today. The three Dutch fathers, whose *Handbook of the Catholic Faith* has won wide acclaim and was molded by an acquaintance with the Reformed position, do not hesitate to proclaim the doctrine of Trent. In telling fashion they do not devote a distinct section to the doctrine of soteriology, the application of God's work in Christ to his people. This material is woven into the rest of

their presentation of the church's faith. They speak of grace as "totally undeserved." But it does not consist in a changed relationship to God. It is an "infused grace." Openly the Lutheran and Reformed views are repudiated. The whole matter of justification is bypassed in a few statements. Salvation is regarded as lifting our lives to the supernatural level of living with and for God. It is defined as "a supernatural gift of God, freely bestowed upon us for our sanctification and salvation."⁷ Although not found in man by nature, it "enables our soul and its faculties to be in such state that it can orientate itself towards God and our salvation."⁸ Even more explicitly, "This grace helps and supports us when, having responded to the divine invitation, we endeavour to lead a Christian life and to fulfill our daily duties."⁹ On this foundation rests the whole structure of Catholic doctrine and piety. It is a construction which indeed preaches Jesus but in such a way that it becomes Jesus and man, now changed by grace, who together seek and strive for man's salvation. Thus there can be added, "Good works are . . . the reason for which God gives the reward of eternal life."¹⁰

Against this the reformers protested with their whole soul. To them it was sheer blasphemy to add anything to the merits of our Lord. Christ alone saves and saves to the uttermost. This should be remembered also in considering the deviations of Arminianism. In that teaching the fathers saw a threat to the gospel similar to that presented by Rome. Once again man was to add something to Christ's work.

Now we understand also why the *Confession* speaks of faith as *only an instrument*. There may be no admixture of faith and works, no intermingling of our justification and our sanctification. Neither may we suppose *that faith itself justifies us*. This was the Arminian heresy. Nothing in man, not even in the believing man, makes him acceptable to God. The ground of our justification before God lies alone in Christ. Faith simply responds to God's grace. And this response is created by the Holy Spirit. Thus it is but an instrument, an appropriating organ, fashioned by God himself so that we may enter upon the joyful experience of salvation. Now we understand why the re-

formers and their followers were hesitant to speak of faith as a "condition." The majority rather studiously avoided this term, since it might be easily misunderstood. Calvin insists that high priority is given to faith as the instrumental cause of salvation. Yet our righteousness, he adds immediately, is our unmerited acceptance by God. Faith has no power to justify, except in the sense that it makes us one with the Savior through the Spirit's work. It is God alone who justifies. "Thus simply we explain justification to be an acceptance, by which God receives us into his favour, and esteems us as righteous persons; and we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ."¹¹ This approach enables him at once to speak of God's tribunal. This Osiander forgot by seeking a justification on the basis of a change wrought in man. Calvin also objected to the scholastics of the middle ages. Although sound on justification in its beginning stages, they added to this our sanctification or moral change as part of our standing before God.

Protestants strongly object that Rome's view destroys the stability of faith. With specious arguments, all of which undermine what the Bible teaches about the joy of salvation, that church holds that it is rash presumption for a believer to arrogate to himself an assurance of God's will concerning personal salvation. In so far as this is assumed apart from Scriptural teaching and promises, true Protestants agree. They also cease not to warn against self-deception. But believers have both the right and duty to take God's promises at face value. Without these there is no child-like faith which the Bible commands.

The Blessedness of Believing in Christ

In conclusion this article directs us to the spiritual treasures which are unlocked for God's child in his justification.

These are ours by faith apart from any works. Briefly at this point de Bres introduces *imputation*, which receives greater attention in the next article. Here a unique phrase is employed, however, which ought not be overlooked. There is imputed not only *all His merits* but also *so many holy works which he has*

done for us and in our stead. These words have been heatedly discussed by the Reformed. The original reading of de Bres was modified from time to time, until the synod of Dort (1618-19) adopted the present reading over the protests of some of its members.

A significant emphasis is at stake. The Reformed churches wanted to make clear that believers receive *all* the benefits of our Lord's work. In those years the distinction between Christ's active and passive obedience had not yet been sharply defined. Both Luther and Calvin taught that Christ not only suffered for sins but also fulfilled all righteousness. Thus benefits accrued from his life as well as his death on the cross. Christ was confessed as Mediator and Savior in every aspect of his humiliation. Beza even went so far as to speak of a threefold righteousness of Christ: that which was manifested in his sufferings and death, that which was demonstrated in his complete obedience to the Father, and that which was rooted in the perfected holiness of his nature. This was linked up with our justification, our sanctification and our glorification. Now the Lutherans, and also Piscator of Herborn, were inclined to limit the imputed righteousness to the merits of Christ's passion and death. Some of the Reformed, interested in not widening the difference between the Lutherans and themselves, did not want to define this matter in detail. Others in the interest of the completeness of the Savior's work felt constrained to insist on the present reading of this article. Here was no desire for scholastic speculation but an effort to set forth all the glories of the Savior's work.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* in this connection speaks of the "profit" of such a true faith. This it links up with God and his promises in Christ. Objections have been raised against this terminology, although it is fully recognized that the *Catechism* rejects any notion that we are acceptable to God "on account of the worthiness of our faith." Nowhere in the early reformatory creeds is any loophole left for the Arminian heresy, which a few decades later claimed it was truly evangelical. We are here again confronted with the correlation between grace and faith. Yet this is never presented as man's work; much less as

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a meritorious response. Nothing may be added to Christ's work, even when faith is proclaimed as God's command and presented as a "condition" of salvation.

All this sheds light on why reformatory Christendom spoke so warmly about the value of faith. It is God's instrument *that keeps us in communion with Christ in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.*

In such faith-fellowship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, the believer sings,

*"Thou, O Christ, art all I want;
More than all in Thee I find.*

*.
Just and holy is Thy name,
I am all unrighteousness;
False and full of sin I am,
Thou art full of truth and grace."*

He prays that Paul's prayer for him and all believers may be abundantly answered, "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth all knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God." (Eph. 3:16-19) With this work of apprehending, into which the Spirit leads, the faithful Christian is never finished.

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1. What does the Bible mean by "mystery?" Can man ever have knowledge of this? Explain. 2. Of which two aspects of the work of salvation must we speak? 3. Which dangers inhere in stressing the "objective" to the neglect of the "subjective?" 4. In which Christian groups is the "subjective" usually stressed at the expense of the "objective?" 5. Do you think Brunner's approach can be of any help to us? How does Berkouwer deal with this matter? 6. What is true faith? Why is it necessary? 7. What is the usual fundamentalistic teaching on faith's origin? How would you refute this? 8. What is the Biblical teaching on the importance of the "heart?" What is meant by "heart" here? 9. Wherein does Romanism differ from the Reformed faith in its conception of the nature and necessity of justifying faith? 10. Cite and discuss Scripture passages which show that faith is wrought by God's Spirit. 11. What objections do Reformed Christians usually raise against the altar-call? Evaluate them. Should we press for decision? 12. What is meant by embracing Jesus Christ as an act of the whole person? Is our view of faith too intellectualistic? Prove your point. 13. What is the difference between the Reformed and the Lutheran, Roman-Catholic, Arminian and Pelagian views of man's ability to accept the gospel? 14. What is meant by faith as the "instrumental cause" of our justification? Are we saved by faith or by Christ? Is this a fair question? 15. What is the communion with Christ which believers have? How must this be cultivated?

Chapter 23

The Justifying God in Christ

We believe that our salvation consists in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake, and that therein our righteousness before God is implied; as David and Paul teach us, declaring this to be the blessedness of man that "God imputes righteousness to him apart from works." And the same apostle says that we are "justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

And therefore we always hold fast this foundation, ascribing all the glory to God, humbling ourselves before Him, and

acknowledging ourselves to be such as we really are, without presuming to trust in any thing in ourselves, or in any merit of ours, relying and resting upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone, which becomes ours when we believe in Him. This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities, and to give us confidence in approaching to God; freeing the conscience of fear, terror, and dread, without following the example of our first father, Adam, who, trembling, attempted to cover himself with fig-leaves. And, verily, if we should appear before God, relying on ourselves or on any other creature, though ever so little, we should, alas! be consumed. And therefore every one must pray with David: "O Jehovah, enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight no man living is righteous."

ARTICLE XXIII

WHEN G. C. BERKOUWER began a series of doctrinal studies for our age, he launched out with *Faith and Justification*. This was a surprising move. Invariably Reformed theology took its starting point in the doctrine of God. Yet in a world confronted with dialectical theology and philosophy the approach was appealing.

Here we are plunged into the heart of the Christian gospel. Its message speaks directly about the relation of God and man, about man the sinner and Christ the Savior, about the work of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the gospel. No one can speak about the justifying God without touching all the major themes of the faith. Every strand of the Christian message converges on the question, How shall a man be justified before God?

Since this issue is so central, we become painfully aware of the superficiality of much that passes for present-day Protestantism. What once was the pivotal issue in preaching is seldom mentioned now. Rare are the references to justification. When it is still mentioned, men consider it irrelevant, hard to understand and totally unrelated to the problems which daily perplex their minds. Yet this is not so much an indictment of the doctrine itself or the teaching of the reformers as of man who does not know what is for his own good.

Salvation as the Remission of Sins

Today many people are so preoccupied with themselves and the round of daily life, that they have no time for God.

Various trends have helped to produce this new mentality both within and outside of the churches. Men look horizontally instead of vertically for their help. This change of direction is

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the result of the undermining of Biblical authority in our western world. An eclecticism which finds good in all religions but owes allegiance to none no longer understands the Christian faith. There is a pseudo-scientific mood which assures the masses that man is the master of all things. Respectability instead of religion has become the chief concern. Men look for peace of mind and heart rather than for peace with God. Much of the blame for this growing superficiality lies at the doors of teachers and preachers. Too much time is spent on the pulpit majoring in minors. No longer are the grand themes of Christianity proclaimed, lest the church lose what little hold it still thinks it has on its members. We have been lulled into a treacherous sleep so deep that it cannot hear the voice, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebr. 10:31)

More than aught else men must get back to the basic question, Wherein alone does true salvation lie? Only God's word gives the right answer. Because the matter is so foundational, the *Confession* does not hesitate to address a second article to the doctrine of our justification. Far from propounding a strange and scholastic theory, it speaks the language of the Scriptures to those whose hearts hunger for true peace.

We deal again with the salvation of men. This ought to be a chief concern of every human heart. Therein alone lies the happiness or blessedness of the human race.

Pertinently and practically our Lord directed the attention of his disciples to this matter, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven . . . for where thy treasure is, there shall thy heart be also." (Matt. 6:19-21) Divided allegiance is deadly. No man can serve two masters, Therefore we are urged to seek the kingdom of heaven. And no entrance is provided to this realm apart from the righteousness which is found with God alone.

With this righteousness we concern ourselves in every discussion about justification. Plainly Scripture teaches that the road to God is barred to all who remain in their sins. Not our

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ignorance, much less our finitude, but our sins have made separation between us and God. This abyss of separation can be bridged only by *the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake*. Here the gospel bugles blow, calling us away from all false seeking in order that we find our salvation in our Savior alone. Salvation consists in being forgiven, fully and freely and that by an act of God's pardoning grace.

Can anyone who reads the Bible doubt that this is the heart of its message to man? To be sure, it speaks eloquently of the God of all glory. It announces the majesty of his being and the mystery of his ways. It speaks of kings and peoples upon whom he has poured out judgments. Even the future of the created order is in some measure unveiled before the eyes of those who read with understanding. But running like a golden thread through all its pages Scripture joyfully announces that there is forgiveness. This the Israelites realized was the highest boon which God gave. "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom Jehovah imputeth not iniquity." (Ps. 32:1, 2) For this our Lord taught us to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Matt. 6:12) Repeatedly when the apostles preached, they rooted their glad news in the conviction that God for Christ's sake had pardoned all the sins of his people. (Eph. 4:32; Col. 2:13; 3:13; Rom. 4:7; Jas. 5:15; I John 1:9; 2:12)

The church's calling in this world is to call men back to the reconciling God. In Christ Jesus he proffers salvation. And this salvation is no more and no less than full and free forgiveness. Only God can take us as we are and make us what we should be, in order that thereby we may again rejoice in him who is our true life.

Appearing in God's Tribunal

Not all Christian churches, however, seem to agree where-in our forgiveness consists and how it is accomplished by God. Many suppose that he will simply pass over sins. Small wonder that those who regard forgiveness so lightly give little thought

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to God. It is supposed to be, according to Voltaire, God's proper business which we come to expect of him.

Such flippancy does grave injustice to what God has revealed about himself. According to the Bible, *in the remission of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake our righteousness before God is implied*. A transaction has taken place. According to the evangelical faith it is a forensic or judicial act of God.

In this respect it differs manifestly from several other divine acts accomplished for our salvation. These, of course, may not be divorced from each other. For a correct understanding of the mystery of redemption it is necessary to make some careful distinctions. Justification is not a change within us, such as is our regeneration or conversion or sanctification. Whereas these transform our spiritual condition, the former changes our state or legal position before God. It takes place outside of ourselves, even though deeply affecting us. It occurs in the tribunal of God.

Calvin repeatedly stressed that we must recognize God as our judge. Thus he devoted an entire chapter to the consideration of the tribunal wherein the sinner appears and justification is secured. Because of the many false views current on this score, we do well to pause here. Calvin wrote, "In the first place we should reflect that we are not treating of the righteousness of a human court, but of that of the heavenly tribunal; in order that we may not apply any diminutive standard of our own, to estimate the integrity of conduct required to satisfy Divine justice."¹ That which alone renders us acceptable to God is "so perfect" that it will be impossible to find it in fallen man. "Let us place that Judge before our eyes, not according to the spontaneous imaginings of our minds, but according to the descriptions given of him in the Scripture; which represents him as one whose refulgence eclipses the stars, whose power melts the mountains, whose anger shakes the earth, whose wisdom takes the subtle in their own craftiness, whose purity makes all things appear polluted, whose righteousness even the angels are unable to bear, who acquits not the guilty, whose vengeance when once it is kindled, penetrates even to the abyss of hell."²

When man appears before such a God, he is incited "to tremble through fear" rather "than to indulge in vain exultation." Nor are we assisted by any thought of our worthiness, even when comparing ourselves with those who wallow in unbridled sin. "This is nothing to God, to whose decision this cause must be submitted."³ Only humility is proper, when man appears before God. Here the reformer quotes Augustine with approval. "The only hope of all the pious, who groan under the burden of corruptible flesh, and amidst the infirmities of this life, is that we have a Mediator, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins."⁴ Our attention is directed to the contrast between Pharisee and publican, from which is concluded, "He is prepared for a participation of the benefits of Divine mercy, who has wholly divested himself, I will not say of this righteousness, which is a mere nullity, but of the vain and airy phantom of righteousness; for as far as any man is satisfied with himself, so far he raises an impediment to the exercise of the grace of God."⁵

Here we bring nothing; not even our faith, since this is but the fruit of God's gracious work within. "For with respect to justification, faith is a thing merely passive, bringing nothing of our own to conciliate the favor of God, but receiving what we need from Christ."⁶

Repeatedly it is charged that this doctrine of justification was a novelty introduced by Luther and Calvin. Nothing is farther from the truth. Almost unanimously the ancient church fathers taught the same truth. Clement of Rome, earliest of the fathers, insisted, "Therefore we, also, being called through his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves, neither through our own wisdom, or understanding, or piety, or works which we have done in holiness of heart, but through faith—that faith through which the Almighty God hath justified all that ever lived; to whom be glory forever, Amen."⁷ The texts cited by the reformers were quoted and similarly explained by such men as Ignatius, Justin Martyr and the writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus*.

Often Augustine is accused of teaching a justification on the basis of an infused righteousness rather than "forensic" justification by faith only. This is said to have opened the way to the Romish doctrine of merit. Although admitting that this father did not always speak clearly on this point, Buchanan demonstrates that the thrust of the argument cannot be maintained.⁸ Nowhere does Augustine argue that merit is to be found within man. Although including our renewal as well as forgiveness in our righteousness before God, there is no evidence that he so confused these two blessings as to make our inward change in any sense the foundation of being accepted by God. Precisely this was at stake in the days of the reformers. "Grace is given unto thee," says Augustine, "not wages paid to thee. Why, indeed, is it called Grace? Because it is given gratuitously. For by no precedent merits didst thou buy what thou hast received. The sinner, therefore, receives this grace first, that his sins should be forgiven him . . . Good works follow after a justified person, they do not go before, in order that he may be justified."⁹

Even during the middle ages, when the gold of pure doctrine was progressively tarnished, many insisted on an evangelical doctrine of justification. Anselm urged, "And if God would judge you, say, Lord, I place the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between me and thy judgment: otherwise I will not contend, or enter into judgment with Thee . . . I offer His merits for mine own, which I should have, and have not." Nor did Bernard of Clairvaux recognize any other basis for forgiveness. "To me, it is sufficient, only to have him propitiated, against whom I have sinned . . . The apostle says, 'If one died for all, then were all dead,' meaning thereby to intimate, that the satisfaction made by the One should be imputed to all, even as One conversely bore the sins of all."¹⁰

Now we should realize once for all what the church throughout the ages has meant by justification. It is that legal or judicial act whereby God as judge declares the sinner righteous for Christ's sake. God acts as judge. This does not conflict with his fatherhood, as some claim. Even earthly fathers are commanded

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to rule the lives of their children and judge their acts in accordance with the law's demands. The notion of a fatherhood prompted by love apart from law is foreign to the Bible. By this legal act God removes the guilt of our sins and restores to us the rights of sonship, including adoption into his family and an everlasting inheritance. This act is performed in the tribunal of God, where God declares that all his demands have been fully met for the sinner in his Son.

In this declaration God's mercy and justice meet. As the righteous judge he accepts and endorses the sacrifice of our Lord as the all-sufficient atonement for our sins, past, present and future. As our gracious father he freely forgives and receives us into his gracious fellowship. The key word is *imputation*, which implies that all the work of the Mediator has been put to our account. It is a declaratory act of God, by which the sentence of condemnation is revoked and we are accepted by him.

Although it takes place in the tribunal of God, this act passes into the consciousness of the believer. Without such a consequence, our justification would not be good news. To grant pardon to a prisoner under sentence of condemnation without acquainting him with this would provide little comfort. Thus God makes his gospel known, commanding us to accept it in faith. This response of faith is our passive or subjective justification, which is often referred to in Scripture as a source of inestimable hope and joy. Yet the justifying act itself can never be repeated. Man is either justified fully or he is not justified at all. When we embrace this message, we have peace with God and "rejoice in hope of the glory of God . . . because the love of God hath been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which was given unto us." (Rom. 5:1-5)

No Make-Believe With God

Against this doctrine many have protested.

Often the accusation is levelled that this teaching makes God a cruel tyrant who will not forgive apart from receiving

full satisfaction. Here divine pardon is said to be presented as of an inferior sort, since men will often forgive without restitution. Such objections root in a low conception of God and of sin committed against his majesty. More than that, they forget that God himself has made reparation for our sins in his beloved Son. Thus the gracious character of that pardon is not merely established; it is magnified above all that man ever does or can do. "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: for peradventure for the good man some one would even dare to die. But God commendeth his own love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners (later Paul even speaks of us as 'enemies'), Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:7, 8) The greatest demonstration of divine righteousness, holiness and truth is at the same time the unique manifestation of his mercy towards us.

Even more sharply do some insist that such a justification is an impious procedure. It reduces the whole matter of our acceptability to God to mere fiction. If justification is forensic and declaratory, then God must be guilty of speaking untruth by calling men righteous who in fact are very sinful and ungodly.

On the surface this seems to bear some weight. For if the sinner is unrighteous, how is it consonant with God's holiness and truth to declare him completely righteous and thus acquit him of all his sins? Often this argument was used by the Roman Catholics in contending with the evangelicals. Here we must remember that, although justification must be distinguished from the rest of God's saving acts, it may never be divorced from them. Apart from Christ man, indeed, is and remains forever unrighteous. But God has placed us in Christ. On the basis of this union, which we embrace and experience by faith, we are declared righteous in Christ. Forgiveness roots in our life-relation to him. The righteousness put to our account is not personal and subjective but the vicarious righteousness of the second Adam, the head and representative of the new human race. Thus the Bible never wearies of speaking of our being "in Him" and of his work as done "on our behalf." He is acknowledged as "the surety of a better covenant." (Hebr. 7:22) Paul connects Christ with Adam and writes, "For as through one man's diso-

bedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous." (Rom. 5:19)

Now this may not be regarded as a mere declaration, apart from the double activity of God in displaying his righteousness and love. "We obtain justification before God, solely by the intervention of the righteousness of Christ. Which is equivalent to saying, that a man is righteous, not in himself, but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation . . . For the Lord Christ so communicates his righteousness to us, that, with reference to the Divine judgment, he transfuses its virtue into us in a most wonderful manner . . . What is placing our righteousness in the obedience of Christ, but asserting that we are accounted righteous only because his obedience is accepted for us as if it were our own."¹¹

This is the glorious "as if" which assures us of redemption and restoration to God. It is not fiction but fact, grounded in eternal election whereby we were chosen in Christ. Through our Redeemer we are wholly acceptable to the heavenly Father.

In this way the message of justification becomes pivotal in all Christian preaching. Any minimizing or ignoring of it places the gospel of God's sovereign grace under a cloud. But for this reason, too, the reformers never separated it from those activities whereby God works within us a moral and spiritual change. Despite all the distinctions which they made, the reformers insisted on the unity of God's work of grace for the sinner. Thus Berkouwer reminds us that this word of forgiveness "was and remained determinative for the totality of life" in their preaching.¹² It was not a station which, once passed, could be forgotten. Rather, in the light of justification by grace it makes sense to speak of sanctification without making this a "second avenue along which we now, cooperating with divine grace, will hasten to the future." All is of grace in the work of redemption, its beginning and its middle and its end. Christ is the complete Savior of his people.

The Contrasting Roads to God's Favor

To the superficial reader the heated debates and discussions about the nature of our justification by God may appear somewhat frivolous and even fruitless. Many insist therefore that all the believer ought to ponder is the free gift of God without concerning himself too much with its precise nature, ground and value.

This would bring the grace of God into disrepute and endanger the life of God's children, however. Not without just cause did the reformers oppose Rome so vehemently. They saw with their own eyes and in a measure experienced in their own lives the awful consequences of perverting this central truth. Of this Calvin reminds us. "Here are two things to which we must be particularly attentive: to maintain the glory of God unimpaired and undiminished, and to preserve in our own conscience a placid composure and serene tranquility with regard to the Divine judgment."¹³ These can be attained in no other way "than our reception of gratuitous righteousness from his free gift."¹⁴ "We must come to the sacrifice by which God is appeased. For no man will lose his fears who shall not be assured that God is propitiated solely by that atonement which Christ has made by sustaining his wrath. In short, we must seek for peace only in the terrors of Christ our Redeemer."¹⁵

Here we are confronted with two contrasting roads to the favor of God.

One had been developed by Rome through long centuries of adding precept to precept. This harmonized with their insistence that we are justified on the basis of an infused righteousness which changes our nature and hence makes us acceptable to God. On this long and painful road none could ever be truly assured in this life of God's forgiveness.

The other road was outlined by the reformers in obedience to the Scriptures. It was the road which led men straight to Christ as the one in whom God declared sinners righteous out of mere grace apart from any merit in them.

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The long road had been outlined in all its details. Indeed, the sole foundation of reconciliation was still affirmed to be Christ Jesus. To receive the benefits of his person and work, however, Romish doctrine insisted that the sinner must meet three conditions. First of all, he must have proper contrition of heart as a preparation for receiving Christ. Also a detailed confession of all the sins that stood between himself and God had to be made to the priest who stood between God and the sinner. Finally, those who sincerely confessed were required to make suitable reparation or satisfaction for their actual sins by performing the penances which the church in Christ's name saw fit to impose. Because the perils of self-deception were always present, no one could be sure that he adequately met these conditions. As the conscience became increasingly sensitive to sin and to the majesty of God, the road became longer and darker. Realizing the impossibility of these conditions, the church indeed did whittle down the demands somewhat, especially for the average man. Yet it did so without conceding the principle that without meeting these demands man could have no peace with God. This structure of Roman Catholic piety remains unchanged until today. Only by the good offices of the clergy, participation in the sacraments, and continual observance of fasts and feasts will the soul at long last be free to participate in the righteousness and holiness which God provides in Christ.

All this the reformers swept away by preaching Christ in his fulness. For the evangelical believer there was no long and torturous road back to God. Not only had God taken the initiative. He broke down all the barriers between man and himself in Christ. Nowhere does Scripture teach that our intentions or our works in any way prepare us to receive divine grace, much less make us deserving of the same. Although forgiveness is experienced in the way of repentance, this is not a condition which we meet. It is rather the fruit of faith in God and his gospel promises. All is of grace alone.

Repeatedly it is charged that this leads to a careless and profane life. The evidence, however, is to the contrary. Because

of God's gracious work of creating and maintaining faith within us, our whole life is transformed. It is the long road which leads either to indifference or despair. The short road, which is the movement of God into our lives, not only bestows pardon and peace but daily prompts us to a life of loving service.

This needs emphasis today.

The evil leaven of the long road is still found among Protestants, even though in theory they hold to the gospel of full and free justification. Many fail to distinguish Scripturally between the Christian's position or state before God's law in Christ and his spiritual condition. Especially in some pietistic and fundamentalistic groups, reacting against the dangers of an historical faith, the necessity of meeting certain spiritual conditions is stressed in such a way that salvation by grace is obscured. Nor is this danger imaginary in Reformed churches. By a deep sense of sin and personal unworthiness some walk for many years in spiritual darkness and distress, failing to realize that salvation has been settled once-for-all in the tribunal of God. Hence they look for something within themselves as the ground whereon they hope that God will show them mercy in Christ. Thus they introduce into justification a foreign notion which subverts the gospel and robs believers of the joy of salvation.

With a humble yet triumphant faith we are to turn our eyes only upon our Lord Jesus Christ. "It is God that justifieth; who is he that condemneth? It is Christ Jesus that died, yea rather, that was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." (Rom. 8:33, 34) The preaching will discover to us all our sins of omission and commission. The believer echoes these truths and confesses his sins. Yet he looks always away from himself to his Savior. The world may accuse us of our many imperfections. With this judgment we must and will agree. Yet Christ has carried all our sins in his body on the tree of the cross. Our own conscience will assail us daily, but we do not despair. While bowing our foreheads in the dust because of our imperfections, we still rest in the Christ of God. Nothing can separate the justified sinner

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from the love of God. Therefore with all our hearts we repudiate the long road, which can only plunge men deeper into the slough of despondency and obscure the riches of saving grace. Ours is the short road, the road opened by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This road he commands us to take, for this road takes us straight to the heart of a reconciled and reconciling God.

The Problem of Our Daily Sins

Now if justification is a once-for-all act of God, by which all our sins, past and present and future, are blotted out, what need remains to pray for daily forgiveness?

That the Scriptures teach the necessity and propriety of such prayer is obvious. Some Antinomians, in their desire to magnify God's grace, insisted that these sins were not imputed to the new man but only to the old nature which itself is doomed to death. Thus they argued that prayer for pardon is unnecessary and may even be unprofitable and misleading for a child of God. Fear of falling into this extreme has plagued some Reformed theologians. A few did not dare assert unequivocally that also future sins are forgiven in justification. On this basis they spoke of a repeated or daily justification.

Now it is abundantly clear that justification admits of no repetition. Paul plainly affirms this. "But where sin abounded, grace abounded more exceedingly: that, as sin reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 5:20, 21) Similarly the writer to the Hebrews says, "For by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified." (Heb. 10:14) This is also God's assurance to Israel, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee." (Isa. 44:22) Our iniquities are removed from us as far as the east is removed from the west. (Ps. 103:13) God teaches us that he casts all the sins of his own into the depths of the sea. (Mic. 7:19)

Rome, recognizing the continual presence of sin in the believer's life, insists that in some way atonement must be made

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for sins committed after baptism. On this basis is built up the elaborate structure of penance. The Reformed taught that this detracts from the Mediator and his all-sufficient sacrifice. Usually they claimed that the guilt of sins has been cancelled but the inherent culpability remains. Thus there is no condemnation for them that are in Christ. Yet sin produces within the believers a sense of guilt and separation from God. Springing from the very faith which rejoices in justification through Christ is the desire to confess all transgressions and plead for assurance of pardon. Such prayer, then, is not only a need subjectively felt but also objectively necessary to obtain this assurance. Thus faith prompts us to sue for mercy, pardon and peace. In obedience to Christ, who taught us how to pray, we offer this petition. On this basis we experience not a second or third justification but rather a renewed conviction that in Christ we have truly been justified forever.

The Joy of Being Justified

On one matter we must be clear, before we leave the doctrine of justification to consider the sanctified life which learns increasingly to live by the riches of grace in Christ.

Justification never takes place in a spiritual vacuum.

This needs emphasis, when many seem to think that mere assent to Christ as Savior is sufficient. This is a gross devaluation of the gospel. In such instances it comes to be regarded as a magical formula to gain access to God and heaven. Such a life will necessarily betray its own barrenness. Here there is no heartfelt sorrow for sin and turning to Christ; much less any fruitfulness which the Lord has revealed as the goal of salvation.

Let us notice how naturally and effectively Paul makes the transition from justification to sanctification, from receiving grace to responding to it day by day. Reflecting on the fullness of our redemption in Christ, despite all fightings without and fears within the believing life, he affirms triumphantly, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in

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Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." (Rom. 8:1-4)

Responding to the gospel of justification by faith, the believer find his whole life stirred to spiritual activity. To this the *Confession* witnesses in its acknowledgment of what it means to be saved by Christ. In a few words our response is summarized: *and therefore we always hold fast this foundation*. Our blessedness is found in the gracious forgiveness of all our sins. In nothing else dare we rest for time and eternity. It is the solid basis for a new and consecrated life which we owe to God for all his benefits. Daily we echo the song,

*"O Christ, our hope, our heart's desire,
Redemption's only spring!
Creator of the world art Thou,
Its Savior and its King."*

The manner in which we hold to this foundation is further delineated. Always the saints engage in *ascribing all glory to God*. Since salvation is of God in Christ, we feel the impact of the words of the Old and New Testament writers who exhort us, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." (Jer. 9:23f; I Cor. 1:31) Instead, of boasting about ourselves and taking refuge in our piety, we humble ourselves daily before him. No prayer fits the spiritual condition of the true believer better than that of the publican, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." (Luke 18:13) *Never will we presume to trust in anything in ourselves*, for even our best works remain imperfect and polluted with sin. Not the soundness of our faith or the godliness which we pursue in gratitude, not the prayers which we offer or the works which we perform or the zeal which sometimes characterizes our lives provide us with access to God. Our only pleading-ground is Jesus Christ and his substitute righteousness.

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Therefore the believer finds himself always *resting and relying upon the obedience of Christ crucified alone.*

Wherever such faith is active, the consciousness of being justified produces a most precious and wholesome fruit in our lives. Knowing that our sins are wholly blotted out, we *enjoy confidence in approaching to God.* Has not the apostle reminded us of this greatest of all spiritual privileges? It is through Christ that we may and can come to the heavenly Father. This is "the grace wherein we stand." (Rom.5:2) We heed the injunction which says, "Cast not away therefore your boldness, which hath great recompense of reward." (Hebr. 10:33) By such lively faith in Christ and his merits we may confess that "we are not of them that shrink back unto perdition; but of them that have faith unto the saving of the soul." (Hebr. 10:39) Our consciences are freed from all *fear, terror and dread.* No longer do we seek to hide or excuse ourselves, like *our first father who attempted to cover himself with fig leaves.* We come to God in the assurance that he does not enter into judgment with his servants.

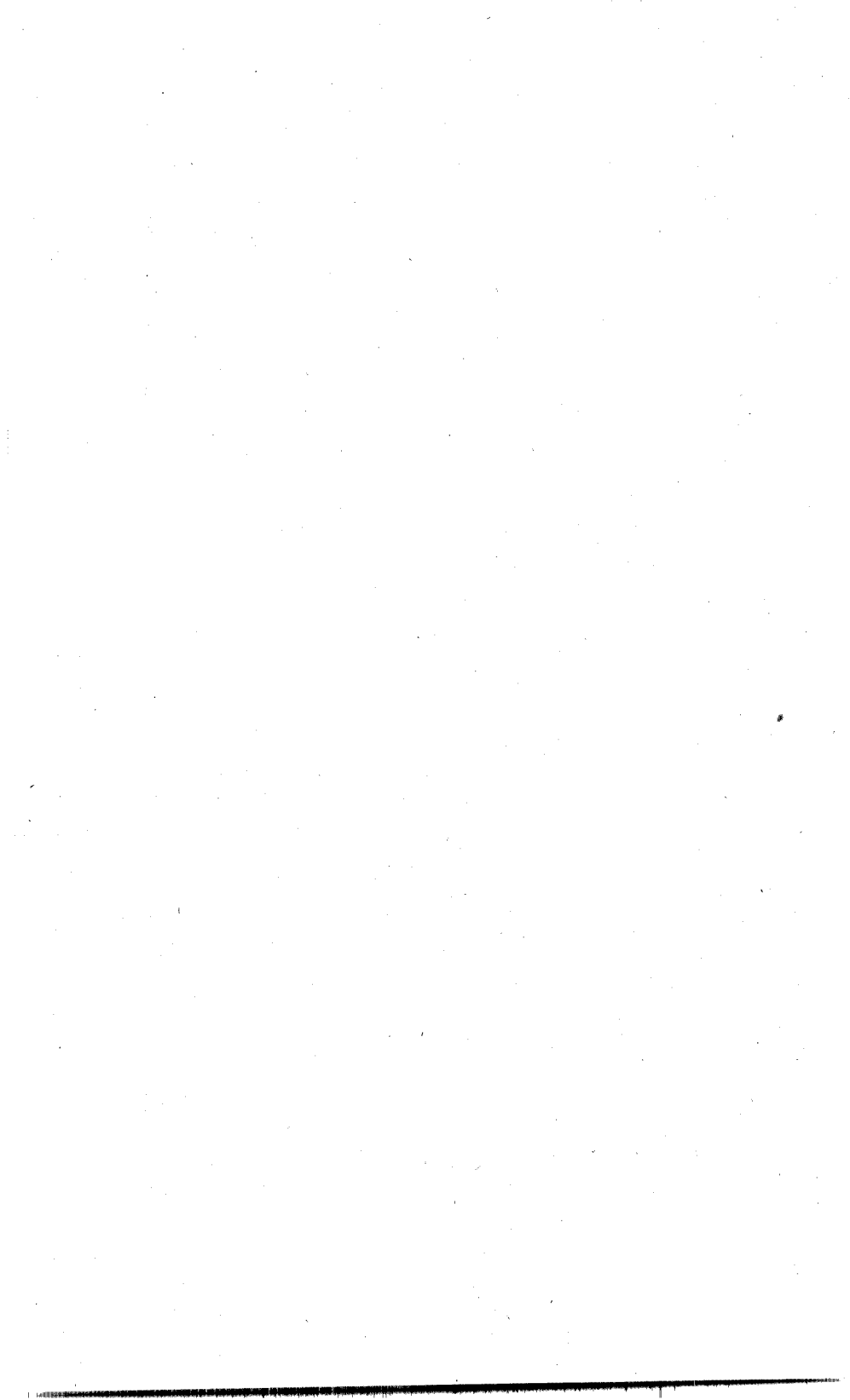
This is the classic Protestant answer to the objection that full and free justification makes men careless. Those who are justified by faith in Christ have once-for-all entered into the light of salvation.

In this light they indeed see for the first time the heinousness of their sins. They see these, however, in the full assurance that there is forgiveness with God, that he may be feared. Their sins are cancelled, and their persons have been accepted by God in Christ.

Then the joy bells ring in their souls. Their lips sing the songs of salvation. Their lives give evidence that for them to live is to live for God in Christ Jesus their Lord.

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1. Show how justification involves us in all Christian doctrines.
2. Why do you suppose justification isn't preached much in our day?
3. Do all true Christians have a soul struggle for peace with God? What was the experience of Luther and of Calvin? Is such an experience necessary to salvation?
4. How have many churches shifted emphasis in the message which they proclaim?
5. Define justification.
6. What is meant by imputation?
6. Which four main elements can you find in the Reformed view of justification?
7. Which three conditions must the believer meet, according to Rome, to be justified?
8. Show how also here sound doctrine is essential to the reality and experience of salvation.
9. What are Antinomians? State and refute some of their basic errors.
10. Why is it so necessary to stress justification as taking place outside of the sinner in God's tribunal? Does this emphasis on a judicial act make for a cold, contractual religion?
11. Why is it impossible for the believer ever to attain true peace with God on the basis of Rome's views? Does holding this view mean that such people can't be saved? Explain.
12. Discuss the distinction between our "state before God's law" and our "spiritual condition." Which is the more important? How are these two related?
13. Is it hard to know whether we have an upright faith? Explain.
14. Can anyone who sincerely seeks favor with God in the light of the Bible ever deceive himself for eternity?
15. What is meant by always holding fast this foundation?
16. What is meant by true self-examination? Why is it always necessary?



Chapter 24

Sanctified through the Spirit of God

We believe that this true faith, being wrought in man by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man, causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin. Therefore it is so far from being true that this justifying faith makes men remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it they would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore it is im-

possible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith, but of such a faith which is called in Scripture a "faith working through love," which excites man to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word.

These works, as they proceed from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, forasmuch as they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless they are of no account towards our justification, for it is by faith in Christ that we are justified, even before we do good works; otherwise they could not be good works, any more than the fruit of a tree can be good before the tree itself is good.

Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who "worketh in us both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." Let us therefore attend to what is written: "When ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do." In the meantime we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is through His grace that He crowns His gifts.

Moreover, though we do good works, we do not found our salvation upon them; for we can do no work but what is polluted by our flesh, and also punishable; and although we could perform such works, still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them. Thus, then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior.

ARTICLE XXIV

ONCE AGAIN the Christian faith is receiving more attention than it has enjoyed for some decades. Having passed through a world-wide economic recession and the woes of a world-engulfing war, many moderns are at wits' end. Scientists are often frank in admitting the perils of the knowledge gleaned by their pursuits. Psychologists readily confess that the final solution to man's needs lies not within himself. Man needs an anchor for his soul. Consequently in many quarters the claims of the Christian gospel are again at least discussed and debated.

In nearly every serious consideration we feel a painful lack. Much attention is being directed to the being of God. Frequent mention is made of the uniqueness of Christ. In an era which has begun to think ecumenically the doctrine of the church receives its due. But seldom, if ever, do we hear and read much about the uniqueness of the Christian life.

To be sure, fine things are said about Christian calling and obligation. Beautiful descriptions are given of religious responsibility. With approval Clement of Alexandria's emphasis on the joy of living by faith is quoted. "Holding festival, then, in our whole life, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning; in all the rest of our conversation we conduct ourselves according to the rule."¹

What we fail to hear, however, is how this Christian life is created within man who has turned away from God. Too often it is simply taken for granted that everybody is or at least wants to be a Christian. All that seems to be needed is some information and a few basic rules. Men have forgotten that the new and holy life comes from God. The beautiful imagery of Hosea, outlining God's rich provisions for a life sanctified to his service, is glossed over.

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*"When Israel was a child, then I loved him,
and called my son out of Egypt.
Yet I taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them on my arms;
but they knew not that I healed them.
I drew them with cords of a man, with bonds of love;
and I was to them as they that lift up the yoke on
their jaws;
and I laid food before them." (Hos. 11:1-4)*

To such ignorance and indifference to the truth, we must again proclaim that it is God who sanctifies his people.

The Golden Chain of Salvation

Here we testify to the great and gracious work of God through his Holy Spirit within our lives. This is the area of theological thought often called "soteriology," the doctrine concerning the bestowal of the blessings of salvation within us. Together with the doctrine of justification, it announces how we are restored to God's favor and learn to walk daily in the light of his countenance.

The work of God within us has often been called by the church the "ordo salutis," the way in which salvation is applied step by step until at last we are received into glory. A few aspects of this complex and complete work of grace are illumined in this article.

Scripture allows us to speak of such an order or golden chain. Indeed, we find nowhere on its pages a systematic presentation of all its details. Yet the indications of a pattern in God's work of grace within us are too clear to be ignored. The Lutherans often called attention to Paul's description of his ministry, wherein he received charge of God's calling "to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of satan unto God, that they may receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified." (Acts 26:17, 18) Here calling and regeneration, conversion and faith, justification, sanctification and glorification are all indi-

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cated. The Reformed in setting forth the order of salvation usually appealed to Paul's statement, "For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren; and whom he foreordained, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified." (Rom. 8:29, 30)

The desire to systematize this material is normal for the church, which is called by God to reflect upon the mysteries of his grace. Certain dangers, however, must not be ignored. We may easily be tempted to let our theological system dictate our interpretation of specific passages. Moreover, we may be led to forget the Spirit's freedom in applying this grace when and where and how it pleases him. Not a few within the churches have urged that his ministry must be experienced in precisely the same form, in the same order and to the same degree by all God's children. If we are aware of these dangers and seek to avoid them studiously, then a presentation of the order of God's way in and with his people will be helpful.

What we find at this point in Scripture is most instructive.

Here we are furnished with a full and rich catalogue of blessings which the Spirit imparts. Not always are identical terms employed. Often his works are referred to in figures of speech. Nor should we read precise doctrinal formulations into every passage which deals with this material.

These saving operations are described from several points of view. In them is displayed such a great and glorious variety, that we learn to rejoice in the riches of our salvation. All that we need for time and eternity has been pledged to us by our gracious heavenly Father. He has obtained this redemption for us in the Son of his love. And now its fulness is imparted by God the Holy Spirit.

Although these works may be set forth in several ways, one of the most complete and convincing approaches to the golden chain of God's redemptive activities in man has been presented by Herman Bavinck, outstanding Dutch theologian

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of a half century ago. He mentions three distinct operations and their attendant blessings.² The underlying approach is the recognition that divine grace restores what sin has ruined in man's life. In this way both the doctrine of Christ and of applied redemption (soteriology) are connected with the doctrine of man and his sin. Man's disobedience to God has involved him in sin as guilt, sin as corruption and sin as misery. From all three Christ has delivered us. He paid the price for our transgression. He fulfilled the demands of God's law on our behalf. He triumphed over all his and our enemies, the flesh and the world and the devil.

On this basis Bavinck teaches that the blessings of saving grace as applied to us are of three kinds. Christ restores us to a right relation with God, bringing back into our lives the harmony which the Creator intended. This is communicated in our justification, which guarantees the forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family. We have peace with God and freedom from the curse of the law. In addition, Christ renews us by the recreative acts of his Holy Spirit. Thereby the image of God which we lost in sin is restored. Such benefits are here enjoyed as our regeneration, calling, conversion and sanctification. In the third place, Christ preserves us unto a complete salvation by delivering us from all sin's results and bringing us to glory. Here we are assured of the preservation or perseverance of the saints.

As we embrace Christ by a lively faith, we come to enjoy light and life and liberty. In him we are "new creatures," having the aspiration and ability to walk in newness of life by his grace. We begin to understand what it means to be Christians, anointed with the Spirit to be prophets and priests and kings to God's praise. What is now begun within us God will bring to perfection in the day of our Lord's appearance.

None of these blessings ought to be considered in isolation from the rest. God's work of grace is one grand and glorious work. Neither may we ever separate these blessings from Christ and his Spirit. Grace remains grace for us, only in the measure that we recognize these as the work of the triune God on our

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behalf. In this light we also regard our sanctification. It is not our work but God's. Intimately bound up with faith and justification it communicates to us something of the fulness of Christ for us. The glory of the gospel is that it proclaims Jesus Christ who "is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him." (Hebr. 7:25)

The Sanctifying Work of the Spirit

The Bible views the Christian life from many aspects. This ought not surprise us, since God's work of grace is complex. The whole man is redeemed and reconciled and restored in the totality of his existence to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In denoting this new life, however, the Bible most frequently speaks of faith or trust. This is the initial response to God, which increasingly sets its stamp upon all that we are and think and do.

Essentially faith is simple. It consists of trust in or reliance upon God as he has revealed himself to us in his word. Its manifestations, however, are many. This is evident also here. In connection with our justification the *Confession* speaks of faith *which embraces Jesus Christ and all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him.* Now in considering sanctification we again speak of faith. Here we are told that it can never be unfruitful, even as the apostle teaches, "For if these things are yours and abound, they make you to be not idle nor unfruitful unto the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (II Pet. 1:18)

The life-principle of the Christian is faith.

How this becomes ours is here declared. In a sense all men have a kind of faith. This, however, is a far cry from that faith which terminates upon God in Christ Jesus. Only this latter is truly saving and satisfying.

We acknowledge that such faith must be *wrought in man.* It is a supernatural gift of God, the bestowal of something which is foreign to man in his sinful state. It cannot be produced within him by means of rational arguments or moral suasion. Yet

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such faith is not a substance, a "something" somehow added to his inner life. Rather, the Bible presents it as the re-direction and re-orientation of our hearts towards God and his service.

How does God produce such faith within us? At this point the *Confession* states the classic Protestant position. It is worked by the hearing of the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit. Calvin provides us with a lucid definition of such faith. "We shall now have a full definition of faith, if we say that it is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds and sealed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." Not the response of man but the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit who has wrought this new activity within him is basic to the new or Christian life.³

Speaking of that work the Reformed have always stressed the value and validity of the "means of grace," chiefly the preaching of the word. God deals with man in accordance with the laws for his nature and being which were established at his creation. Thus God comes to make himself known to the sinner, appealing to his mind and conscience. Although he can work his grace immediately, that is without any such means, the Scripture plainly teaches that he is pleased to make use of them. Yet they are never inherently efficacious. They do not by themselves produce the desired spiritual fruit. Only God can and does make them effective in our lives.

Thus the Reformed have always insisted on the indissoluble connection between the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. This insight was in a measure the result of long debates carried on in the days of the reformers. The Roman Catholics championed the notion that these means, chiefly the sacraments which were elevated at the expense of the word, worked "ex opere operato." Thus the visible signs and the invisible grace were regarded as inseparable. The Anabaptists and some mystical sects of those days insisted that God was absolutely free in communicating grace. Their presentation led to a devaluation of both the word and the sacraments, an evil from which much present-day Protestantism has not yet extricated itself. Luther

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frequently was forced to contend with these groups. This led him and his followers to give such prominence to the place of the means in our lives, that the gracious work of the Holy Spirit was overshadowed.

In conformity with Calvin's teaching the *Confession* declares that God alone is the efficient cause of our salvation, thus also of our faith-response. But he reveals to us the avenues by which he makes that grace known to us. He likewise promises that those who continue in a faithful and prayerful use of the same will be blessed. Without the use of the means man does not attain to the right knowledge of and trust in God, although apart from the Spirit's operation no grace is bestowed upon us. In this way all one-sidedness is avoided.

The value of these means has long been under fire among the liberals. Nor has this improved much among the neo-orthodox, in spite of their repeated emphasis on the word. The older liberalism discounted the word, since it refused to believe that here reliable testimony was given to God and his way of salvation. Reason was stressed at the expense of revelation. Against this Barth and his followers have reacted violently. In their case, however, there is still at work an Anabaptistic leaven, in that they stress a momentary encounter of God and the soul which may occur either in connection with or apart from the testimony of his word.

Against all deviations we must be on our guard, lest we do violence to what God's word teaches. Some have said many appropriate and wonderful things about faith, without grounding what they say in the full revelation of God. In this way the door stands wide open to subjective notions. Thus Mackay affirms, "Truth may be appropriately defined as 'thinking what God thinks' and Goodness as 'willing what God wills.' The supreme thought to which the mind of God has given birth is Jesus Christ. . . . But as supreme Truth is personal, the assent of the understanding and the consent of the will merge in the act of Christian faith. Thus what a man believes and what he does are indissolubly one in so far as his faith is real . . . Christianity becomes concrete in the new man in Christ, the man

who recognizes Christ to be the Eternal Truth and responds to him as the Eternal Goodness."⁴ Here is a modern effort to relate justification and sanctification, faith in Christ with a life of good works. Praiseworthy as is the effort, it is lamentably one-sided and potentially dangerous. The confrontation of Christ seems to be regarded as possible without bowing to the testimony of the Scriptures. Thus not the written word of God but "the spirit of the life of Christ is normative for all Christian life in every age."⁵ The individual decides pretty much by himself what he will regard as "the spirit of the life of Christ." Against such and similar confused reconstructions of the Christian faith our *Confession* lifts its warning voice. Our new life in Christ is wrought by the Spirit, who to the end that we may experience the fulness of saving grace binds us to the use of the means of grace.

Faith and Regeneration

The opening phrases of this article have posed a grave problem for some Reformed believers. Here we confess *that this faith . . . regenerates him and makes him a new man.*

This concerns the proper relationship between faith and regeneration.

Many Protestants have tended so to preach the gospel, that they make faith a condition for receiving the new life in Christ. Not only the Arminians, but also many descendants of Menno Simons and John Wesley have by this teaching allowed Pelagianism to steal into the churches. Once again free will either to accept or to reject the gospel apart from a prior work of the Spirit is maintained. In its worst forms it makes God dependent upon man in achieving his purposes of salvation.

Now a superficial reading of the *Confession* might seem to support this perversion of the Christian faith. Here it seems as if regeneration follows upon personal faith. Many have contended that at this point there is contradiction in the Reformed creeds, since the *Canons of Dort* plainly affirm that before anyone responds to God in faith he has received the grace of the new birth. In that declaration the quickening of dead sinners

is said to be worked entirely by God "without our aid."⁶ Occasionally the argument is heard, that the *Canons* departed from the early reformatory doctrine. It is said that they defended a rigid Augustinianism which fails to do justice to man's responsibility.

Instead of accusing the creeds of being contradictory, we do well to remember that possibly they speak of regeneration in two different senses. This would not be at all surprising, since the Bible itself leads the way here.

In Scripture we read of this regeneration in three senses. In its most restricted sense it is viewed as the implanting of the new life by the Holy Spirit. Here man is entirely passive. We are informed that by the Spirit's work we are "made alive together with Christ." (Eph. 2:5) It is our spiritual resurrection from death into which sin has plunged us. Thus we read, "The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof but knowest not whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is everyone that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:8) In this sense the *Canons of Dort* speak of our regeneration.

The Bible also looks at it from another aspect. Here regeneration is described as the first conscious manifestation of new life. It is wrought by the Spirit in connection with the gospel preaching. By enlightening our mind, inclining our will and stimulating our heart he prompts us to embrace Christ. Of this James speaks, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." (Jas. 1:18) In like manner Peter describes believers as "having been begotten again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the word of God, which liveth and abideth." (I Pet. 1:23)

In its broadest sense regeneration designates our complete spiritual renewal, including sanctification. Always we are here dependent on God's Spirit. Yet we are urged to respond personally and responsibly to the demands of the word. Thus Ezekiel called Israel to "cast away from you all your transgressions, wherein ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and

a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 18:31) Twice Paul refers to this plainly, reminding us that "our inward man is renewed day by day" (II Cor. 4:16) and that we must "be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man." (Eph. 4:24) In this sense the *Confession* speaks of our regeneration or renewal as a comprehensive work within us.

That these two distinct approaches have been taken in the creeds need not surprise us. Both are equally Scriptural. The approach was determined in a measure by the need of the times wherein the church lived.

In early reformatory days there was unanimity among evangelicals that the Christian life was the work of divine grace. Both Luther and Calvin insisted that this was the teaching of the ancient church with which they agreed. Salvation as God's work was not seriously called into question, except by those who were well on the way to repudiating the Christian gospel. The new life was in no sense a venture in which God and man cooperated. Thus they unitedly attacked the Romish theory of merit with its notion of infused grace and good works (faith working through love) as the ground of our justification.

The Synod of Dort met some sixty years later. By then the religious climate in Protestantism had changed markedly. Much of the early enthusiasm for salvation by grace had faded. In a measure the Lutheran churches had capitulated to the synergism of Melancthon, who strongly stressed a cooperation with grace. Even more objectionable were the novel notions which threatened the Reformed churches. The Arminians plainly departed from the doctrine of sovereign grace. They taught a semi-Pelagian view of free will, maintaining "that the corrupt and natural man can so well use the common grace . . . or the gifts still left him after the fall, that he can gradually gain by their good use a greater, that is, the evangelical or saving grace, and salvation itself."⁷ Against this denial of total depravity and efficacious grace the fathers of Dort contended. Thus they accented the origin of our faith-response. In the *Canons* they spoke of regeneration in its most restricted sense as the implantation of the new life-principle and its first manifestations.

From this it should be plain that *Confession* and *Canons* in no sense contradict each other. The former stresses the manner in which the new life comes to manifestation and bears fruit, while the latter defines the root from which it springs. Both insist with equal clarity and conviction that this life is a gracious gift of God in Christ Jesus our Lord by his Holy Spirit.

Faith Which Sets Us Free

No slander is more malicious than that grace makes men careless and profane. It has been hurled against the evangelicals throughout the years. Rationalists insist that we come to God only by clear understanding; moralists insist on good works as the proper road; mystics would have us aspire to the vision of God by disciplining the flesh and its senses. Only along such avenues, trying and toilsome, will we attain to the new life. All these together with the Romanists cannot comprehend the Biblical view that the new life as a gracious gift sets us free from sin's bondage.

We should be aware that this Biblical teaching concerning sanctification was attacked on two fronts.

To the Romanists the church sought to make clear that it is impossible for the regenerated to continue in sin. The new man delights in the law of God. Thus de Bres taught that *true faith*, which is the life-principle of the Christian, produces fruit, *causing him to live a new life, and freeing him from the bondage of sin*. Here the emphasis falls not so much on freedom from the guilt of sin, cancelled in our justification, as on the evil propensities of our old self. Grace never makes men indolent and indifferent to God's will.

With equal insistence the *Confession* attacks all antinomianism. These were people, claiming to embrace the Protestant faith in opposition to Rome, who argued that Christians were not under the law but under grace. Luther protested against such folk who taught that Christ had so removed all sin from the lives of his people that they were restored to a sinlessness similar to that of Adam before the fall. Consequently there

seemed to be no need "to perfect holiness in the fear of the Lord." (II Cor. 7:1) Salvation was regarded as identical with perfect holiness in God's sight. Not a few of the Anabaptists were infected with this notion. Thus Calvin was constrained to write, "Some Anabaptists, in the present age, imagine I know not what frantic intemperance, instead of spiritual regeneration—that the children of God, being restored to a state of innocence, are no longer obligated to be solicitous to restrain the licentiousness of the flesh, but that they ought to follow the leadings of the Spirit, under whose direction it is impossible even to err. It would be incredible that the mind of man should fall into such madness, did they not publicly and haughtily disseminate this opinion."⁸ All distinctions of good and evil, virtue and vice they claimed "proceed from the maledictions of the old Adam, from which we are delivered by Christ. Then there will be no difference now between chastity and fornication, sincerity and knavery, truth and falsehood. . . ." Convinced that the Spirit would not lead them astray, they who possessed the Spirit could do quite as they pleased. But says Calvin, "To Christians the Spirit of the Lord is not a turbulent phantom, which they have either spawned themselves in a dream, or received from the invention of others; but they religiously seek the knowledge of him in the Scriptures, where these two things are delivered concerning him—first, that he is given to us in order to our sanctification, to purify us from all our pollutions, and to lead us to obey the divine righteousness;. . . in the next place, that we are so purified by his sanctification, that we are nevertheless so encompassed with numerous vices and great infirmity, as long as we are burdened with the body."⁹ In this manner all antinomianism and perfectionism were rejected by the reformers, who urged Christians to seek their strength unto a new life only in the continual work of the Holy Spirit within them.

Several aspects of this new life deserve notice.

It is a supernatural work of God, ascribed primarily to the Holy Spirit. Although he makes use of means, the Christian brings thanks and praise to God for the fruitfulness of faith

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within him. "And the God of peace sanctify you wholly," Paul prays for the church, "and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved entire, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Thess. 5:23) Again we are exhorted, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; so neither can ye, except ye abide in me." (John 15:4) In the same vein we read, "Now the God of peace make you perfect in every good thing to do his will, working in us that which is well-pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ." (Hebr. 13:20, 21)

In describing this work of sanctification, the Bible mentions two aspects. It is a "mortification of the old man" by which our sinful self with its ambitions, pride and desires is crucified and put to death within us. "And they that are of Christ have crucified the flesh with the passions and lusts thereof." (Gal. 5:29) The second aspect is known as the "quickening of the new man," by which the believer begins to live more and more according to God's will. "Neither present your members unto sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves unto God, as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you . . ." (Rom. 6:13, 14) Here the intimate relation between regeneration as the implanting of the new life and sanctification as its growth and fruit-bearing is clearly indicated. This development is to be pursued in prayerful dependence upon God's Spirit throughout our entire life.

This sanctification embraces the whole man. Not only the soul but also the body is to experience the liberating power of belonging to Christ. Man's inner life cannot be radically changed without a corresponding transformation in outward conduct. "For ye were bought with a price: glorify God therefore in your body." (I Cor. 6:20)

Something of its complexity is denoted by the several texts which speak of the fruits of the Spirit's sanctifying work within us. That our mind is profoundly affected Jeremiah already mentioned to the people of his day. "And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, say-

ing, Know Jehovah; for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them." (Jer. 31:34) The will, too, is radically changed. "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have laid hold: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13, 14) Likewise our affections come unto God's control. "Put on therefore, as God's elect, holy and beloved, a heart of compassion, kindness, meekness, long-suffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving each other, if any man have any complaint against any; even as the Lord forgave you, so also do ye." (Col 3:12, 13)

In this work the believer is represented as working together with the Lord.

Here we must distinguish carefully. The cooperation of which the Reformed speak is of an altogether different kind than that which is insisted upon in Roman Catholic piety. Man is not an independent agent in his salvation. In sanctification God does not do part of the work and leave the rest to us. Rather, God effects his work of grace upon and in and through man as a rational and moral being who is transformed by the abiding Spirit within him. "So then, my beloved," Paul exhorts his readers, ". . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12, 13) Peter announces that God's "divine power hath granted unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that called us by his own glory and virtue." Having said this, he urges them, "Give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble: for thus shall be supplied unto you the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (II Pet. 1:3, 10, 11)

God and man do not enter into competition in effecting our sanctification. All is of grace, and yet in the same breath we confess that this gift of continuous grace heightens our responsibility. Never have the Reformed countenanced a concep-

tion which reduces men to "senseless stocks and blocks," as if God takes away "their will and its properties or does violence thereto."

Here we, indeed, acknowledge mystery. There is no point at which we may say that God's work within us stops and ours begins. All is of God; yet God working within us prompts us to work out our salvation. In this way the glory of his grace in Christ shines in and through our lives to his praise.

Good Works in the Believer's Life

This Biblical view of sanctification safeguards its place and purpose in the believer's life.

These are called the fruits of a true and saving faith. In defense of the sound doctrine our *Confession* asserts that *it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful in man; for we do not speak of a vain faith.* It can never be idle or vain, since it is of God himself. It is directed to the complete transformation of our life. Delighting in his own work, God is said to rejoice in those who trust his promises and obey his word. "For without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing to him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him." (Hebr. 11:6)

Such a faith may be described as *faith working through love.* The motivating power of the Christian's life is his love for God. Good works, therefore, are not done *out of self-love or fear of damnation.* Precisely here sound Reformed piety differs from the compulsion which drives many in the Romish church. Not slavish but childlike reverence is characteristic of those who through Jesus Christ have free access to the heavenly Father. We have been reconciled by the love which he has poured out in the Savior. God's love creates and sustains within us a love for him which is our response to the gospel's call to serve the Lord.

*"'Tis He that saveth me
And freely pardon gives;
I love because He loveth me;
I live because He lives."*

In this direction we must look for a solution to the relationship between love and law in the Christian life.

God's commandments are not harsh and grievous to those who know him as the heavenly Father. Of this Jesus reminds us, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments . . . He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him." (John 14: 14, 21) These are links in the believer's experience. God's Spirit prompts us to love him and demonstrate this in our obedience. In this way we come to enjoy an ever richer and more rewarding fellowship with God in Christ. By this our growth in the new and heavenly life is assured. Every attitude and action in the believing life is to be suffused with this quality, which God himself calls the fulfilment of the law. (Rom 13:8,10) Thus faith in the true and saving God prompts a life of loving service, since *these works . . . proceed from the good root of faith.*

The *Confession* details some aspects of these good works in our lives. This was a pertinent issue in those days, since on the value of the believer's work Rome and the reformation differed radically.

We should be clear on what was at stake.

Both Romanists and Protestants taught that good works were proper to the Christian life. Both insisted that they could and should be performed. In both instances there was an acknowledgement that divine grace was necessary unto good works. Nor did they differ on the fact that rewards are given.

The differences between the two views, however, were even greater. In the Roman church men were taught that good works contributed to man's salvation. In this sense they are to be regarded as meritorious. Although grace was essential unto performing them, this was a sanctifying grace of which those who received it had made themselves in some sense worthy. The reward was never bestowed out of mere grace. This could be maintained only in view of the Romish denial of man's total depravity. The only grace which Rome acknowledges is an

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"infused grace" with which man is to cooperate both before and after his justification. Although "it is always to the grace of the Holy Spirit that we owe" our works, according to modern Roman theologians, "they are *our* merit, for we have not abused but cooperated with grace." ¹⁰ Even more clearly is this position affirmed, when the writers add, "We see, thus, that the Bible encourages us to think of reward as the fruit of work. It addresses itself, as it were, to our sense of personal responsibility; it asks for an individual decision and acceptance of God's grace. The state of grace is not only a sanctifying state, but it also demands that we should earn the wages of supernatural life by our own labours." ¹¹ In this strange admixture of truth and error Rome has enmeshed itself. By this approach the church is able to bind the people to the hierarchy, who make God's grace available in the sacraments.

Now we understand better why the *Confession* develops the doctrine of sanctification as it does. Indeed, our good works are *good and acceptable in the sight of God*. But this is so, forasmuch as *they are all sanctified by his grace*. Nothing in even the lives of the most holy men is free from the stain of sin. Thus the Reformed condemn all perfectionist notions, which proceed from a superficial view of sin. Also the Roman conception of a "condign merit" in our works is reprehensible. It obscures the efficacious and all-sufficient grace of God. We are reminded that our works *are of no account towards our justification*. This is appropriated by faith alone. Even if we could perform a work completely free from pollution, *still the remembrance of one sin is sufficient to make God reject them*. For the conscience of man there is no peace, unless we rely wholly upon *the merits of the suffering and death of our Savior*.

The key to the Reformed understanding of good works lies in the phrase that *we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us*.

Before any fruit can be found, the tree must be good. Our new life is not the product of man's choice but the Lord's gracious work. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ

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Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them." Sanctification is bound up with God's prior work of regenerating us and uniting us with the living Christ. Good works are found only in those "who are born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:13)

To consider our works as meritorious is nothing short of blasphemy. It is arrogating the honor of God's work to ourselves. He must provide us with grace necessary to please him in all things. "Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which was our duty to do." (Luke 17:10)

Although God rewards these works, it is a reward of grace alone. By this assertion the reformers undermined the whole structure of Roman Catholic life with its effort to obtain merit in God's sight. For this position they appealed to Paul, who never disconnected good works from our gracious salvation in Christ. "But now being made free from sin and become servants of God, ye have your fruit unto sanctification, and the end eternal life. For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 6:22, 23)

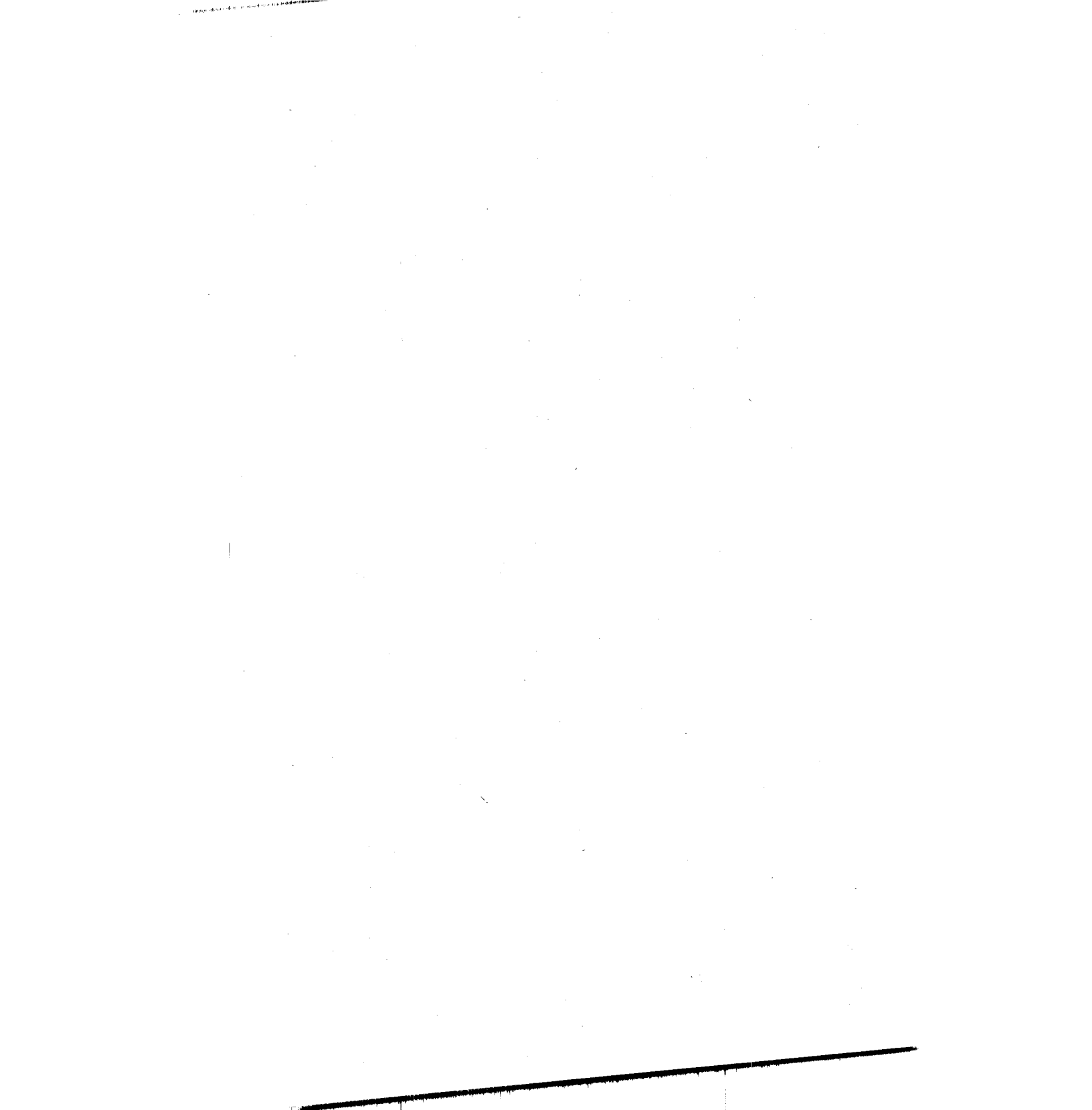
The glory of salvation lies in its gracious character alone.

Here man never enters into competition with God. He does not seek to add unto or complete the perfect work of the Savior. Always he approaches the Father in the consciousness of his own emptiness. Yet he may rejoice that with God is fulness of grace to make him joyful. In the precious merits of the Redeemer is all we need for time and eternity.

In our sanctification as well as our justification the believer looks to Christ alone. He is all our peace and all our power unto a life of loving service.

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1. What does Hosea's word (ch. 11:1-4) mean for the doctrine of sanctification? 2. In what sense is salvation a once-for-all work? In what sense is it a process? 3. What is the value of Bavinck's description of God's activities within man? 4. What is the distinction between justification and sanctification? 5. What is the Reformed view of "the means of grace" and their place in Christian living? 6. What standard or norm must always be applied to Christian experience of salvation? How does this function? Why isn't "sincerity" enough to validate our experience? 7. Discuss the difference of emphasis between Confession and Canons on the relation between faith and regeneration? 8. Against which Arminian error did the Canons feel compelled to warn the churches? 9. What is the difference between the Reformed and the Roman Catholic interpretations of "faith working through love"? 10. How is the doctrine of the Spirit's guidance in our life perverted in some groups? 11. Mention four main aspects of the Biblical doctrine of sanctification. 12. On what grounds have the Reformed churches rejected all Perfectionist notions? Which sects teach this error? 13. What is the Reformed conception of the possibility, nature and value of good works? 14. What is meant by a "reward of grace?" 15. How specifically are the believer's good works sanctified by God's grace? 16.



Chapter 25

The Law in the Christian Life

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honorableness to the glory of God, according to His will.

ARTICLE XXV

A CENTURY after Christ had lived, died and rose again, a man by the name of Marcion called the church to reformation. Coming from Pontus to Rome about 140 A. D., he was converted and joined the Christian community. In the first flush of his zeal he donated a large sum for the poor. Within four years, however, he forsook the gathering of the faithful and organized a sect which for decades threatened the Christian faith.

Marcion was convinced that the church of his day failed to practice what it preached. It compromised with Judaism and robbed Christianity of its purity and power.

On this basis he urged a radical break with the Old Testament. Even much of the New Testament, especially the writings of Peter and James and John, he considered foreign to the spirit of Christ. All he finally retained was his own gospel based on Luke's account and ten of Paul's epistles. The rest simply did not fit in with what he conceived purified Christianity to be.

In much the same fashion, although at times far less radically, those who called the church to reformation throughout the ages have reduced the written word. Among the higher critics the Bible is turned into shambles. Others, far more respectful, have nonetheless failed to do justice to the Old Testament. This neglect is evident among the Anabaptists and many of their descendants. Since Rome defended its ceremonies by an appeal to the Old Testament, the problem of its place in the life of the Christian believer was bound to be debated heatedly. Here the *Confession* seeks to show the right way for all who honor the unity and integrity of the written word.

Controversies Concerning Divine Worship

This article is of utmost practical importance for the believer's life. It deals with *the ceremonies and symbols of the law* which God himself had prescribed for Israel. In the days of the reformation Christians were by no means agreed what their relevance was for living a life well-pleasing to God. Radical differences had developed on the score of worship. All realized that this was not a subsidiary or second-rate concern. God does not allow his people to worship him in whatever manner may happen to seem good to them. And underlying this very practical problem was the question of the relationship of the Old to the New Testament.

On two aspects of the problem all seemed to be agreed.

None questioned at that time that the Old Testament was a dispensation of types and shadows employed by God to reveal the plan of redemption and prepare for the coming of Christ. Here Israel was instructed in the rudiments of the gospel. Only by consistently and conscientiously following the pattern which God prescribed could the people enjoy communion with him.

Nor did any deny that there was quite a different pattern of worship among the early church. Not long after Pentecost the church distanced itself increasingly from the elaborate ceremonies and rituals of the Jews. These, so the apostle had taught, were fulfilled in Christ Jesus who came "that he might redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." (Gal. 4:5) Paul had challenged his Galatian readers, "How turn ye back again to the weak and beggarly rudiments, whereunto ye desire to be in bondage over again?" (Gal. 4:9) A simple and sober worship of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ became the pattern.

The first rather complete account of such worship is provided by Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*, written about 150.

"On the first day called Sunday an assemblage is made of all who live in town or country into one place, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the Scriptures of the Prophets

are read as long as there is opportunity. Then when the reader has ceased, the President speaks and makes admonition and exhortation to the imitation of these excellent things. Then we rise together, and send up prayers. And when we have ceased from prayer, bread is brought in and wine and water, and the President sends up prayers similarly and thanksgivings to the best of his power, and the people approve by saying 'Amen;' and the distribution and participation of the consecrated things is made to each, and they are sent by the Deacons' hands to those not present."¹

Slowly but surely this simple service was exchanged for an elaborate ritual. Not long after the first fathers passed from the scene, new rites and ceremonies were introduced. Much of the early sobriety vanished. The new forms gradually were imposed upon congregations everywhere. In order to make the Christian faith more congenial to the masses who entered the church in Constantine's time, pictures and images were introduced as "books for the laity." Stress was laid on the sacraments. As these came to be regarded as vehicles of God's grace, the preaching of the gospel was increasingly obscured. The spontaneous prayers of the first centuries were replaced by fixed prayers, spoken or even sung by the clergy at appointed times.

None of these changes was made without bitter opposition and strife. Yet the simple service lost its appeal except in some of the schismatic and heretical groups. Protests became fewer and feebler. By the time of the Reformation worship had become so elaborate in Roman churches that the gospel was buried under a mass of symbols and ceremonies. The attention was directed away from Christ to the church. To defend these new ways of worship the hierarchy continually appealed to the Old Testament forms.

Much needed reformation in those days. Not only the doctrine but also the liturgy of the church had to be purified. Yet the roads followed by those who broke with Rome were not identical.

The Anabaptists, as the radical wing of Protestantism, virtually repudiated the position that the Old Testament was significant for the development of Christian doctrine, worship and practice. In an almost legalistic fashion they insisted on a return to the simplicity of the early church. For them the New Testament was of paramount authority. Christ's coming was viewed as a radical break with all that preceded it.

Other reformatory groups, while rejecting the Romish ceremonies and the doctrines upon which they were based, retained as many of the ancient rites as in their opinion were not inconsistent with the gospel. Thus in Anglican and Lutheran churches altars, vestments and liturgical year were preserved.

The Reformed or Calvinistic pursued another path. Here the general rule was adopted that whatever God plainly enjoined on the New Testament church was obligatory. All other rites and ceremonies were to be banished. Thus while much of the simplicity and sobriety of early worship was restored, the underlying argument for this differed sharply from the contentions of the Anabaptists. The Reformed defended strenuously the unity of the two testaments. Although recognizing the differences in administration, the unity of Old and New Testaments was always affirmed. In this light alone we can understand the implications of this article of the *Confession*. The symbols and ceremonies may not be reintroduced, yet the gospel testimonies of which the Old Testament is full are to be preserved and taught clearly to the church of all ages.

The struggle for pure and proper public worship goes on today.

In all branches of Protestantism, as well as within the Roman Catholic church, there is a liturgical reawakening. Much of it dates from the previous century. By now it is assuming greater proportions and resulting in far more incisive changes than many realize. In many quarters the Lord's table is being replaced by an altar. Vestments and candles have found their way into churches where fifty years ago such changes would have been anathematized. Pulpits are draped with colored cloths

in harmony with the changing seasons which the church celebrates. An appeal is made to the eye instead of the ear. The sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper, are elevated to a dominant place in public worship. Feeble protests are soon stifled by the argument, that none of these changes need attack the heart of the Christian faith. Much of this renewed liturgical interest goes hand in hand with the growing ecumenical movement, which hopes that men who cannot agree doctrinally may at least decide to worship together. Nor is this strange, when we remember that the introduction of these changes has often been accompanied with a soft-peddling of the preaching of the word.

These changes are not so innocuous as they seem. We do well to listen to what Ilion T. Jones says in his *A Historical Approach to Evangelical Worship*. "No inexorable law of necessity is at work transforming Protestant worship again into a priestly cultus, but it will so be transformed unless its ministers are willing to pay the price of the leadership entrusted to them. If they lose confidence in the importance and significance of their faith and in the ability of men, redeemed by the grace of God, to live by it; if they give up because going is hard and retreat because the odds are against them and the results scant; if they submit fatalistically and pessimistically to what appears to be the end of a cycle, then Protestantism will revert to some form of priestly paganism. And some day many years hence another costly, agonizing reformation will be necessary to restore it once again to its original course."²

All this makes the present article of the *Confession* relevant for the church's life today. Here we deal not with details of worship but underlying principles. Unless these are recognized and defended, we may soon be bartering away our spiritual liberties for a mess of liturgical pottage.

The Confession of the Reformers

Were the reformers alive today, they would likely with one voice utter warning against churches so deeply engrossed in liturgical changes.

These changes are not so innocent as they appear on the surface. Principles, assumed consciously or unconsciously, control practice also in worship.

This is clear from church history. Throughout her long history the Roman church confessed that Christ's coming into the world demanded the rejection of those types and symbols which characterized Israel's temple service. As late as 1441 the papal decree *Pro Jacobitis* declared that all the legalistic aspects of the Old Testament and especially the Mosaic law *have ceased* with the appearance of our Savior. All the sacrifices and ceremonies of the old dispensation were imposed to point forward to the coming of the better things in Christ. Thus it would seem as if Rome spoke much the same language as the reformers.

Yet when two say the same thing, they are by no means always agreed.

The reformers insisted that all these ceremonies were fulfilled in and by Jesus Christ. The Roman church argued that these were fulfilled in Christ and therefore in and through the church. The ritual of the Old Testament, including altars, purifications, priests, incense and vestments, are now perfected in the liturgical treasures of the church as Christ's spiritual body on earth.

The question was not whether the church has the right and duty to regulate in God's name the worship of believers. On this matter all were agreed. Rather, the point at issue concerned the nature and scope of this authority which Christ conferred on his church. Must the church now point to Christ alone or to Christ and his church? Were the Old Testament ceremonies shadows of a reality which now is in heaven where Christ is (Hebr. 8:1-5), or of a reality which Christ fulfils within the visible church on earth? The answer to these questions depends on our conception of Christ and his saving work, of the relationship of Old and New Testaments, and of the present ministry of the church in the world.

On this score particularly Calvin warned against Romish worship. Often he is accused of having no eye for a beauty, a charge which may be dismissed lightly in the light of his testimony. Rather, the reformer was prompted by a deeply religious motive to criticize the innumerable ceremonies of Rome. In themselves perhaps beautiful, they are to be rejected as improper and unlovely when judged in the light of God's word. He writes about this in his tract on *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, presented in 1544 to the imperial diet at Spire. "I come now to ceremonies, which, while they ought to be grave attestations of divine worship, are rather a mere mockery of God. A new Judaism, as a substitute for that which God had distinctly abrogated, has again been reared up by means of numerous puerile extravagancies, collected from different quarters; and with these have been mixed certain impious rites, partly borrowed from the heathen, and more adapted to some theatrical show than to the dignity of our religion."³

He lists particularly three evils which have perverted the church. "The first evil here is, that an immense number of ceremonies, which God had by his authority abrogated, once for all, have been again revived. The next evil is, that while ceremonies ought to be living exercises of piety, men are vainly occupied with numbers of them that are both frivolous and useless. But by far the most deadly evil of all is, that after men have thus mocked God with ceremonies of one kind or other, they think they have fulfilled their duty as admirably as if these ceremonies included in them the whole essence of piety and divine worship."⁴

By these means the gospel of Christ was obscured and brought into disrepute. Instead of enjoying the freedom with which Christ had set them free (Gal. 5:1), the believers were brought into a legalistic bondage. The people were dependent on the hierarchy, who alone could dispense grace and explain the details of worship. Rome failed to honor the distinction between the Old and New Testaments. This failure both dishonors God and obscures Christ. "For, if we would not throw every-

thing into confusion, we must never lose sight of the distinction between the old and the new dispensations, and of the fact that ceremonies, the observance of which was useful under the law, are now not only superfluous, but vicious and absurd. When Christ was absent . . . ceremonies, by shadowing him forth, cherished the hope of his advent in the breasts of believers; but now that his glory is present and conspicuous, they only obscure it."⁵

How well de Bres learned his lessons from Calvin is evident in this article. He summarizes for us what the church has learned at the time of its reformation. *We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished, so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians.* Here is no room for compromise. Purification of the church is properly obtained in submission to the word. Only that belongs in our worship which has been taught by Christ and his apostles.

Worship According to the Word

The reformers were not purely negative. After cleansing God's church from superstitious and frivolous ceremonies, they sought to reintroduce a service according to the plain teachings of the New Testament. Here they were guided by the words of our Lord, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24)

In all this the recognition of the struggles of the apostolic age played a prominent part. Many of the early Christians struggled with the question whether the Old Testament ordinances, especially circumcision, were mandatory for those who confessed Christ. To this contention which arose the council at Jerusalem gave a decisive reply. (Acts 15:23, 28) At stake was the central truth of the Christian gospel. Did Christ completely fulfil the laws and ceremonies of the Old Testament or not? How must the relationship between these two dispensations be construed? Especially the Galatian churches were torn with dissension on this score. Therefore the apostle warned so ve-

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hemently against all judaistic elements which threatened the grace-character of God's word. Not by the law but by grace alone are the people of God saved. This was, according to Paul, fully as true of believers in the old dispensation as in the new. Thus he emphasized the unity of the covenant in all dispensations, while not for a moment denying the differences in administration. (Gal. 3:6, 8, 16) Here he dealt with the thorny matter of the relation of law and grace. His answer is clear and consistent. The law, which prescribed symbols and ceremonies, "is become our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith is come, we are no longer under a tutor." (Gal. 3:24, 25) Therefore *the use of them must be abolished among Christians.*

Nowhere are the implications of this position more clearly set forth than in the epistle to the Hebrews. This is in large measure the charter and constitution for Christian worship.

Within the church there is no longer room for an altar, for Christ has come and appears before God as our heavenly high priest. (Hebr. 7:26-28) He as altar, sacrifice and priest has perfected his people forever. Nor do we have special earthly sanctuaries or holy places, for we are "come unto mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." (Hebr. 12:22) The mediation of earthly priests is both unnecessary and monstrous, since Christ has bestowed his unction and taught us all things. (I John 2:20; I Cor. 2:15) Believers are now a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, called to offer up spiritual sacrifices through Christ which are well-pleasing to God. (I Pet. 2:5, 9; Hebr. 13:15, 16; Rev. 1:6; 5:10) Officers are indeed appointed by God in his church to edify the saints and build up the body of Christ. (Eph. 4:11) But these are not intermediaries; only auxiliaries or instruments by whom the Savior is pleased to stimulate our life of faith, devotion and obedience.

On this basis the reformers with one consent insisted on the centrality of gospel preaching. For this they found abundant warrant in the New Testament.

God no longer teaches us by means of symbols and ceremonies but by the living proclamation of Christ crucified. (I

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Pet. 1:23, 25) The church is exhorted to abide steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. Only two sacraments are added to the word. Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs are employed to praise God. Prayers are appropriate and even mandatory. Opportunity is to be provided for giving alms. But in all the descriptions of New Testament worship simplicity and sobriety are stressed. Nowhere is there an indication that this should be elaborated; much less, that there is warrant for a multiplication of symbols. In large measure God's people are free to develop a specific pattern of worship in its details. But the broad outlines must always conform to the grand and good news that Christ has fulfilled for us all the laws and ceremonies of the Old Testament. In public worship we are to seek and stress God's revelation in Christ alone, "that in all things he might have the preeminence." (Col. 1:18)

On three scores, therefore, the reformers joined battle against Rome and its elaborate worship.

By introducing that which does not belong to New Testament worship, that church ignored the distinction between the two testaments which God had so patently revealed. Thereupon, it obscured the gospel of full and free salvation by directing men to the church instead of to Christ alone. And finally, it wickedly robbed believers of the freedom which the Savior merited for his own and imposed a new yoke of bondage. The joy of salvation is experienced only in evangelical worship which preaches a rich Christ for the poor sinner.

The Value of the Old Testament

Having defended sound worship principles and practices against the Romanist deformations, the *Confession* maintains the abiding value of the Old Testament against those who esteemed this lightly.

Such there were in the early days of the Reformation.

Especially among the Anabaptists there was a sizeable number who discredited the writings of Moses and the prophets. It was regarded as a dead letter, a book of servitude and exter-

nal holiness. Often its message was denounced as of far less value and validity than the teachings of our Lord. This had serious and far-reaching consequences. Almost universally these people refused military service and repudiated the use of oaths. Christians were not supposed to have much to do with ordinary life. The spiritual was radically divorced from the natural.

Against such an extreme position the reformers chose consistently. Calvin, Beza, Ursinus, Bullinger and many others, while recognizing the differences obtaining between the two dispensations, insisted on the underlying unity of Old and New Testaments. In the main their line of argumentation was the same. God spoke to patriarchs and prophets of the wondrous grace which he would make manifest in the new day. Thus the Old Testament, according to these teachers of the church, was replete with gospel promises. Even the detailed legislation for Israel's life resounded with the overtones of his gracious covenantal dealings with his people. Christ and his apostles endorsed the whole Old Testament and used it to confirm the way of salvation made manifest in the New. Thus the latter cannot be understood and appreciated apart from a knowledge of the former. In his writings de Bres did not hesitate to warn the Anabaptists that they were unwittingly propagating errors common to Marcion, the Gnostics and the Manichaeans.

Today this antipathy to the Old Testament has taken new forms.

The older liberalism did not hesitate to deny its value and validity. Its view of God, the law and duty were judged as unworthy of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. For decades little attention was paid to these ancient writings in preaching, except in so far as some of the prophetic writings stressed social responsibility. Among many fundamentalists the notion is championed that "law" is found in the Old and "grace" in the New Testaments. The dispensationalists proceed to even greater lengths in regarding large sections of Scripture as irrelevant for New Testament believers.

The neo-orthodox apparently have rediscovered the Old Testament. Among them there is a strong insistence that much

of its message deserves the careful attention of the church. Consequently, valuable contributions have been made to our understanding of the time and circumstances in which God made himself known to believers in those days. Yet all this, as J. I. Packer points out so conclusively in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, in a thoroughly liberal fashion denies the authority and infallibility of God's word. While speaking much of the urgency of returning to "biblical theology," they fail to do justice to the Bible as God's authentic and abiding self-revelation to man in both Old and New Testaments. In their attempt to be all things to all men (orthodox and liberal alike) they end up in disputing among themselves and undermining the Christian faith. They, fully as much as the older liberals, would find it impossible to subscribe to this article of the *Confession* in good faith.

While insisting that *the use of the ceremonies and symbols of the law must be abolished among Christians*, we acknowledge that *the truth and substance of them remains with us in Jesus Christ*.

The church neglects the testimony of the Old Testament at great peril to herself.⁶ The Bible is a unit. We cannot walk in the full light of the gospel, if we restrict ourselves to the New Testament. Too often in personal devotions and preaching the church has ignored God's message to the patriarchs and prophets. We fail to see how luminous was God's revelation of the coming Christ long before he was manifested in the flesh. The height and depth of reconciling and redeeming love cannot be appreciated apart from those witnesses which have been preserved for the church of all ages. Where these remain unknown, spiritual understanding and activity will be superficial. Christ calls us to search the Scriptures, all of which testify to him.

Therefore we *use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel*. Like the men on the Emmaus road we must have the Scriptures opened to us, in order that we may understand all things concerning the Christ. (Luke 24:46, 47) This requires consistent preach-

ing on the Old as well as the New Testament. The whole history of God's redemptive purposes must be made plain. Here are pitfalls which should be studiously avoided. To disregard the uniqueness of each step in the old dispensation will lead to unwholesome perversions. Never may we equate ourselves with Abraham, David and Isaiah. Merely drawing a few religious or ethical lessons does despite to the uniqueness of the old dispensation and God's self-revelation at that specific time. Every passage speaks of Christ, in whom all the promises are fulfilled.

In addition, the Old Testament retains its validity *to regulate our life in all honorableness to the glory of God, according to his will.*

Usually in speaking of the Old Testament we distinguish the moral, the civil and the ceremonial laws. The law of the ten commandments, though containing certain ceremonial and civil aspects, retains its force in the church of all ages. This law is proper to man's being. By grace we are enabled to follow its precepts again in cultivating a life of good works which shall be to the praise of God. The ceremonial laws which regulated Israel's worship pointed forward to the atoning work of the Savior and were fulfilled by him. The civil laws were grounded in God's announcement of himself as king of his covenant people. In these laws we find many matters which pertained peculiarly to the Jews. Yet the underlying principles are valid for all peoples and nations. On this basis they deserve respectful and repeated attention.

For the Christian all of life is religiously conditioned.

We refuse to compartmentalize our lives by limiting our worship of and obedience to God to some small part. In his word, given in both Old and New Testaments, God demands that we recognize the sweeping scope of his claims upon our lives. Our relationship to God and self, to fellow man and the created order is regulated by his revealed will. To ascertain this we must listen to his voice which speaks so eloquently of him as the God of the covenant. This conviction alone will pro-

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vide a powerful antidote to prevalent secularization of life.
With the saints of the Old Testament we still sing,

*"Thy Word is as a lamp unto my feet,
A light upon my pathway unto heaven;
I've sworn an oath, which gladly I repeat,
That I shall keep, as always I have striven,
Thy righteous judgments, holy and complete,
When unto me Thy helping grace is given."*

1. Show how church worship roots in basic conceptions and principles concerning the Christian faith.
2. Why do you suppose a simple and sober worship fails to appeal to many people? If Old Testament worship was elaborate and beautiful, shouldn't this be true also of public worship today? Explain.
3. How would you evaluate the revival of liturgical interest today?
4. Why did Calvin so vehemently oppose Romish worship?
5. What is meant "that all the shadows are accomplished" in Christ? Is the conclusion drawn from this correct?
6. Why and in how far does the church have authority to regulate divine worship?
7. Why didn't God provide a detailed liturgy in the Bible for his church today?
8. Is there any place for symbolism in public worship today? Explain and prove your answer.
9. Which three main objections did the reformers have against Roman Catholic worship? Are these valid today?
10. Is the Old Testament widely ignored in Protestant churches today? Can you illustrate?
11. What is meant by the organic unity of the two testaments? Mention and discuss several results of denying this unity.
12. How must the Old Testament be preached and taught in the Christian church?
13. According to which New Testament principles and precepts is the church to worship today?
14. What is the value of the book of **Hebrews** for the subject discussed in this article?
15. What is the place of the law in the Christian's life?

Chapter 26

The Intercession of Our Savior

We believe that we have no access unto God but alone through the only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous; who therefore became man, having united in one person the divine and human natures, that we men might have access to the divine Majesty, which access would otherwise be barred against us. But this Mediator, whom the Father has appointed between Him and us, ought in no wise to affright us by His majesty, or cause us to seek another according to our fancy. For there is no creature, either in heaven or on earth, who loves us more than Jesus Christ; who, though "existing in the form of God," yet "emptied himself, being made in the likeness of men and of a servant" for us, and "in all things was made like unto his brethren." If, then, we should seek for another mediator who would be favorably inclined towards us, whom could we find who loved us more than He who laid down His life for us, even "while we were His enemies?" And if we seek for one who has power and majesty, who is there that has so much of both as He "who sits at the right hand of God" and "to whom hath been given all authority in heaven and on earth?" And who will sooner be heard than the own well beloved Son of God?

Therefore it was only through distrust that this practice of dishonoring, instead of honoring, the saints was introduced,

doing that which they never have done nor required, but have on the contrary stedfastly rejected according to their bounden duty, as appears by their writings. Neither must we plead here our unworthiness; for the meaning is not that we should offer our prayers to God on the ground of our own worthiness, but only on the ground of the excellency and worthiness of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is become ours by faith.

Therefore the apostle, to remove this foolish fear, or rather distrust, from us, rightly says that Jesus Christ "in all things was made like unto his brethren, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted." And further to encourage us to go to Him, he says: "Having then a great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet "without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help" us "in time of need." The same apostle says: "Having boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith," etc. Likewise: Christ "hath his priesthood unchangeable; wherefore also he is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

What more can be required? since Christ Himself says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." To what purpose should we, then, seek another advocate, since it has pleased God to give us His own Son as an Advocate? Let us not forsake Him to take another, or rather to seek after another, without ever being able to find him; for God well knew, when He gave Him to us, that we were sinners.

Therefore, according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Jesus Christ our only Mediator, as we are taught in the Lord's Prayer; being assured that whatever we ask of the Father in His Name will be granted us.

NO INDIAN has so appealed to the western world as Gandhi. Even those who criticized his politics felt themselves strangely drawn to his person. Here was a man who attempted to practice what he preached. Deeply religious in all his motivations, he spent his extraordinary life struggling for goodness.

In his autobiography he reveals his failure. "It is a constant torture to me that I am still so far from him whom I know to be my very life and being. I know that it is my own wretchedness that keeps me from him."

Here was a man who was strongly attracted to Jesus Christ. Time and again he referred to the uniqueness of his person and ministry. Yet Gandhi found it inconceivable to confess Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation. As a result there was for him no satisfying answer to the problem of his own sinfulness. Realizing that he could find peace only by living in close communion with the divine, he missed the road by refusing to recognize that God has opened the way to himself in Christ alone. Thus all his prayers and tears and works failed to provide him with true peace.

It does make all the difference in the world what we believe.

On this score the Scriptures speak plainly. Here faith is described as our ingrafting into Jesus Christ. Now the withered branch of our life can bear fruit. Into it flows the life-giving power of him who loved us and gave himself for us. As he abides in us, he commands us to abide in him. (John 15:4) From him alone is our fruit found. Christian conduct, as the fruit of saving faith, stands in daily need of sanctifying and sustaining grace. This God is pleased to give in response to our prayers offered in the name of Christ, our heavenly high-priest, who

ever lives to make intercession for us. This is the cornerstone of Christian piety, resting upon the immovable foundation of the Savior's redeeming and reconciling work. The believing Christian is a praying Christian. He prays, knowing that his prayers are caught up, mediated and sanctified by the praying Savior. Thus the road of daily communion with God always stands open for him who comes to God in Christ's name.

The Open Door to God

The God of all glory has so created man, that he cannot know any fruition or blessedness in his life apart from God. Dr. Richard Halverson wrote recently in his *Man to Man*, "Man out of touch with God is a caricature! As the fish was made for water, man was made for God . . . God is the *native habitat* for which man was created, in which man is to dwell." This merely echoes the words of the apostle, "For in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28)

Nowhere is man's utter dependence on and yearning for the true God more beautifully expressed than in the psalms. "O God, thou art my God; earnestly will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee, in a dry and weary land, where no water is." (Ps. 63:1) "O my soul, thou hast said unto Jehovah, Thou art my Lord: I have no good beyond thee." (Ps. 16:2) "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee." (Ps. 73:25) With these confessions all the saints of God in every age join in.

But how can we commune with God? This is the problem which besets everyone who has learned to know himself in the light of God's word. It is not the problem of our limitations; it is rather the problem of our sinfulness.

God is of purer eyes than to behold evil. Nor does he commune with whose words and works are stained with sin. He dwells in unapproachable light and reveals himself as a consuming fire for those who work iniquity.

How, then, can the believer, who recognizes his sinfulness and must daily wrestle with sinful thoughts and words and deeds, approach God? God alone can tell us how to come unto

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him. This he has done without equivocation in his word. His is the work of complete salvation. He has reconciled us to himself, by which is opened the way to communion with him as our gracious Father. By this restoration we have "received the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." (Rom 8:15) It is ours solely through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *We believe that we have no access unto God but alone through the only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous.*

Without Christ the road to God remains closed forever. In this way the *Confession* seeks to warn us against taking any of the other avenues by which men have attempted to find communion with God. In ignorance or arrogance they have rejected this straightforward insistence on only one road as harsh or cruel or presumptuous. The pages of human history are replete with efforts to find some other way into his fatherly favor. All these, according to the Bible, are doomed to failure. In no uncertain language our Lord introduced himself to the people of his day. "I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and go out, and shall find pasture." (John 10:9) Again to the perplexed Thomas he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6) Here love speaks the truth. It shuts every false door and barricades every wrong way. No one can go to God with his sins and sorrows, with his cares and concerns, unless the road lies open before him. The Christian gospel declares that there is such a road, opened not by man but by God. This road is Christ alone.

Prayer in Christ's Name

The avenue by which we enter into experiential communion with God is prayer.

True prayer is a high and holy art. God not only requires it of his children, but himself shows us how it must be offered. In the words of the *Westminster Catechism*, "Prayer is the offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will." In this our lives are surrendered unto him, whose will alone is good and right. By this we both enjoy fellowship with him and are made useful in his service.

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Consequently we find that Scripture represents God's people as a praying people. They cannot live without prayer, because they cannot and dare not live without God, To him they cry in their distress. Upon his name they call in the day of trouble. To him they come with ascriptions of thanks and praise, as well as with intercessions on behalf of others. In simplest language, prayer is talking with God. Such talking, if it is to please our heavenly Father, must be in conformity with his expressed will. Only true believers understand the soul's urge, which prompted the poet to sing,

*"Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Unuttered or expressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.*

*"My God, is any hour so sweet,
From blush of morn to evening star,
As that which calls me to Thy feet,
The hour of prayer?"*

But refreshment and renewal will follow in prayer's wake, only when we travel the God-ordained way. Therefore we speak of prayer offered in Christ's name. This is far more than a cliché, a phrase idly appended to a long list of requests. We can and dare approach God only through him whose all-sufficient merits enable us to stand before the One who is true and righteous altogether. Therefore we profess and plead,

*"O Thou by whom we come to God,
The life, the truth, the way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod;
Lord, teach us how to pray."*

To pray properly demands a recognition of our Savior in the fulness of his person and work.

We come to God through him, because he is *the only Mediator*. "For there is one God, one mediator also between God and man, himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all; . . ." (I Tim. 2:5, 6a) Not only does he stand between

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God and man to declare unto us the divine majesty but especially to reconcile us to God. This name designates the uniqueness of both his person and position. Dr. H. Bavinck has aptly emphasized this, when speaking of Christ as Mediator. "He is not a third party, who from without steps between God and us, but he is the Son of God himself, the effulgence of his glory and the express image of his substance, sharing in the essence and attributes of the divine nature, and at the same time the Son of man, head of the human race, Lord of the church. He does not stand between the two parties, but he is both parties in his own person."¹ This guarantees our open road to God.

Likewise is he our *Advocate*, a title borrowed from the word of God directly. "And if any man sin," John writes, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

The preciousness of this name ought not elude us. He is the one called in alongside of our helplessness and unworthiness to plead our case with God.

So little does this seem to speak to many believers today, that we do well to consider Calvin's comments. "But in order to show how we return into favour with God, he says that Christ is our advocate; for he appears before God to this end, that he may exercise towards us the power and efficacy of his sacrifice. That this may be better understood, I will speak more homely: The intercession of Christ is a continual application of his death for our salvation. That God then does not impute to us our sins, this comes to us, because he has regard to Christ as intercessor."² On such a substantial foundation we are encouraged to approach God at all times with our every need.

Nor may we doubt that we shall be heard for Christ's sake. Here we must remember the intent of the incarnation, by which God has sent his Son into the world for our restoration unto himself. Of the interceding Christ we confess: *who therefore became man, having united in one person the divine and human natures, that we men might have access to the Divine majesty.*

At this point the unity of Scriptural doctrine is demonstrated. No longer is God to be regarded as far removed from us.

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Far less are we who come in Christ's name to be affrighted by the holiness and righteousness of God. Because Christ is the kind of Savior which the Scriptures affirm, he is our sure refuge in all the alarms and anxieties of life. In his divine person are united the human and divine natures, without separation and without confusion. With his person as *the righteous* one God is always well-pleased. Thus the church draws near to the Lord of heaven and earth in union and communion with her Savior who is her life.

The Protests of the Reformers

Were all professing Christians agreed on the uniqueness of the Savior's highpriestly work in heaven on their behalf, this article could well have been cut short here. However, church history testifies to profound disagreements on this score. The reformers were constrained to contend against a theory and a practice which denied coming unto God through Christ alone.

Throughout the middle ages the practice of approaching God through the saints and the virgin Mary had taken deep root in the Roman church. So completely did this saturate the lives of the people, that the very name of the Savior filled men's hearts with fear. Few could any longer sing with Bernard of Clairvaux about "Jesus, joy of loving hearts." In almost every cathedral and city church relics of the saints were preserved. These were paraded on special occasions and publicly venerated by the masses. Such superstitions were greatly fostered by increasing ignorance of Jesus Christ as the only and all-sufficient Savior. Even Luther confessed of his early years, "It was exceedingly bitter for me to tear myself away from the worship of the saints, for I was steeped and fairly drowned in it." To be sure, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) ordered modifications in Roman Catholic piety by its reforming edicts and thus removed some of the grosser and more glaring forms of superstition. Yet it refused to face the basic issues at stake.

Although protests had been registered against this deformation of the faith long before the Reformation, the struggle did not become widespread until the days of Luther.

It is true that at the beginning this reformer expressed regret that so much of his time and energy was consumed in arguing against the veneration of saints and their relics to the neglect of some of the weightier matters of the gospel. A prolonged debate, he felt, might obscure our full and free justification which is the heart of the Christian faith. Yet he wasted no words in affirming that prayers to the saints and the virgin were clearly without biblical warrant. He opined that such veneration would cease, as soon as men and women learned from the Bible that Christ alone gives access unto God. Later Luther realized how deep-seated were the practices to which the people had become accustomed. As a result, in his later years he contended even more strongly against the rampant superstitions of Rome. Although willing to concede that possibly the angels and saints in heaven pray for the church on earth, he denied that this possibility offered any warrant to offer up our prayers to them. Such practices he condemned as idolatrous. To accord the honor of prayer to the saints was a flagrant violation of the first commandment.

Melanchthon, assistant to and successor of Luther, defended this position against the Romish charges of impiety. Proper honor, he claimed, is shown to the saints, when first of all we thank God for providing us with a record of their lives; in the second place when our faith is strengthened by contemplating their struggles and victories; in the third place when we earnestly strive to follow their example by God's grace. He repudiates any notion that the saints possess merit which they can bestow on us in answer to our prayers.

Calvin also faced this question repeatedly in his reformatory labors. Many people, although inclined to the pure doctrine of God's word, were fearful of discontinuing their prayers to the saints and the virgin learned in their early years. Many of the arguments of the other reformers were repeated by Calvin. Even more strongly than some others, he condemned all such prayers as unbiblical. The highest and most acceptable service which we render to God, so he argued, lies in earnest and continual prayer by which we approach the most High in Christ's

name. Although Scripture records many prayers of the saints, nowhere do we discover that they ever prayed in the name of any creature.

At bottom, all such prayers are a denial of Christ, who is God's gracious gift to his people. No one else is worthy to occupy the position of Mediator and Advocate on our behalf. By employing saints as their patrons, the Romanists rob the Savior of the unique honor which is his by right of the perfection of his person and work. Patiently Calvin sought to reply to every objection raised against the evangelical position. Since the saints were concerned with the salvation of others while on earth, Rome concluded that this continues among them unabated and even perfected in heaven. Therefore we are urged to implore their aid. All this, so the reformer insisted, was mere guess-work on the part of the church. Nor would he be swayed by the Romish argument based on a distinction between a mediatorship of atonement and a mediatorship of intercession, reserving the former to Christ alone and assigning the latter to Christ with the cooperation of the saints and the virgin Mary. Appealing to the clear testimony of I John 2:1, the reformer urged that atonement and intercession might not thus be separated, since they were but two aspects of the one great work of redemption wrought by Christ.

The Grace and Glory of the Savior

Underlying Romish principles and practices was a deeply religious motif. Despite the glaring inconsistencies and errors which were championed, the church did not ignore the transcendent majesty and holiness of God.

To review the controversy concerning the intercession of Christ with or without the cooperation of the saints is therefore relevant and refreshing for the church today. The question is by no means out of date.

During recent centuries the fear of God has been greatly forgotten. This was accomplished not so much by the arguments of unbelievers as by the emphasis of many who claimed to

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preach Christ. Little respect for God's being and reverence for his covenantal demands seemed to be in evidence. For many decades one could listen almost in vain for a testimony to his holiness, righteousness and majesty. The only divine quality with which church members seemed to have even a passing acquaintance was his love. But having divorced this from his justice, they retained only a corrupted and perverted view of God's grace in Christ Jesus. In the opinion of many God could be approached by man at any time and in almost any manner which might at the moment commend itself. In consequence, few were perplexed with the problem how man may have access to God. The true awareness of sin as the barrier between God and man had evaporated from the religious conviction and confession of the masses. In a measure the climate within the churches has been modified for good by the impact of Barth and his disciples. But their refusal to be completely bound by the Scriptures as inerrant vitiates many of the fine things which they affirm about the majesty and holiness of God. The answer to the irreverence with which many treat the God of all glory and grace lies not in existential theology but rather in the emphasis of the *Confession*.

For thousands in reformation times this article of faith inspired hope and produced peace. The Roman Catholic Church had consistently filled men's minds and hearts with dread. God was proclaimed as an angry Sovereign and Judge who avenged all sins committed against his majesty. For generations his attributes of justice, righteousness and holiness obscured his fatherly favor in Christ. Because the divine nature of our Lord was often stressed at the expense of the human, men were as afraid of the glorified Savior at God's right hand as they were of God himself. In their frantic desire for solace and strength men resorted to the saints and especially to the mother of our Lord.

To meet this need the reformers announced again the gospel of full and free grace in Christ. God has provided us with a Mediator and Advocate who is both all-sufficient and all-merciful. He *ought in no wise affright us by His majesty, or cause*

us to seek another according to our fancy. All the grounds upon which Rome pleaded for an intercession by the saints were swept away. By this the burden which oppressed countless believers was lifted.

How foolish and sinful it is for men to seek another than Jesus Christ the righteous. *For there is no other creature either in heaven or on earth, who loves us more than Jesus Christ.* He did what none of the saints could or would do. He voluntarily assumed our place before God's law, paid the penalty and fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf.

But, so the argument ran, can we be assured that he will be favorably inclined to us, when we call upon him in our sin and stress? In spite of our promises we turn away from him so often to practice the very things which we profess to hate. Yet here the *Confession* reminds us that Christ loves his people with a love infinitely greater and more glorious than that of any of the saints. We were reconciled to God through the death of his Son "while we were enemies." (Rom. 5:10) This ought to console our hearts that "much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." (Rom. 5:10)

Man's deluded mind may register yet another objection to coming unto God through Christ alone. Our needs are so many and varied, that specific intercessors for specific conditions and circumstances seem warranted. In this vein the Roman church encouraged people to pray to one saint for the healing of eye diseases, another for the cure of stomach ailments, yet another in seasons of childbirth, while a fourth stood ready to allay the pain of burns. Carpenters were assured of help, if they called upon St. Joseph. Teachers might turn to the blessed Cassianus. Hunters ought to invoke the aid of St. Hubert. For physicians there was great help with St. Luke. Each country enjoyed its patron saint, while many cities and towns enjoyed the special protection of someone in this gallery of exalted creatures. But evangelical Christianity repudiated all this as trumpery which tore men away from the all-sufficient Savior. *If we seek for one who has power and majesty, who is there that has so much of both as he who sits on the right hand*

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of God and to whom hath been given all authority in heaven and on earth?

If finally men urge that God will certainly answer the prayers of the saints who have lived and died in faith, then the *Confession* tears this notion which obscures Christ out of men's hands and hearts. *For who will sooner be heard than the own well beloved Son of God?*

None, indeed, may come to God as he is. The way remains forever closed to those who come in their own strength or who plead their own merits. But while recognizing the need for mediation and intercession, the *Confession* leaves no room for calling upon the saints. Those who refuse to come through Christ alone are guilty not only of foolish fear but also of distrust. They reject the gracious assurance of our Lord, "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." (John 14:13) Calling upon the saints does not honor but flagrantly dishonors them. They never approached God in any other name or upon any other merits than Christ's. The Romish position is weighed and found wanting both by Scripture and by the lives of the saints whom they profess to honor.

Has Rome Shifted Position?

In this debate Rome was compelled to reply to the evangelicals. This was done officially by the Council of Trent, which introduced many reforms into the life of the church. Not only was the level of the clergy raised, but also the piety of the masses was affected by the decrees and canons of this council.

At times it is argued, especially by those who long for some form of reunion with Rome, that this church is no longer the same as in the days of the reformers. What is forgotten is that much was accomplished without yielding any ground to the evangelical faith. Rome prides itself on never retracting or revising any officially adopted positions. To this day the whole structure of calling upon the saints remains intact. An incidental modification may be made, as in 1961 when the name

of Philomena was removed from the registry of the saints on the grounds that her existence was not proved. This, however, does not touch the issues at stake.

Much is made in Roman Catholic piety of the veneration of relics, crucifixes and images. This is intimately bound up with the cult of the saints and the virgin. As early as 788 this veneration was authorized by the church. Indeed, it is argued that no relic may be worshipped. But this is also the retort of the heathen when accused of bowing down to wood and stone. They also are not so ignorant or foolish as to believe that divine powers actually reside in the objects of their adoration. God's warnings against idolatry to the children of Israel are much to the point in this discussion. (Deut. 4:15, 16) By means of all such graven likenesses, the heart of man is easily turned away from a recognition of and reliance upon the only true God. This is solemnly reaffirmed by John, who exhorts the saints, "My little children, guard yourselves from idols." (I John 5:21)

To understand Rome's position, and this is proper for us, we must realize that the veneration of the saints is closely connected with its conception of church. Its view of the church's union and communion with Christ differs markedly from that of the Protestant faith. All who belong to the church, whether triumphant or militant or suffering (in purgatory), are joined to Christ and in him to each other. On this basis Karl Adam, outstanding advocate of the Roman faith, argues, "No help comes to us, but that the members of Christ in their manner cooperate with their Head."³ Should we reply that God does not need such help, he replies, "God can help us without the saints; but He will not help us without their cooperation, for it is His nature to be communicative love."⁴ Friedrich Heiler assailed this position on the ground that Roman theory and practice differ radically from each other. The former may appeal to Scripture and tradition, but the latter is shot through with pagan accretions. Always the reply to this charge is indignantly made. Rome refuses to be regarded as polytheistic. There is but one God and one Mediator. But by virtue of their union with Christ the saints and especially the virgin now cooperate to accomplish our redemption.

This illumines much of what Rome teaches. We are told that because Christ assumed his human nature from his mother, "Mary is the mother also of all His grace."⁵ In salvation the church through her illustrious members, the saints and especially Mary, cooperates with God in Christ Jesus. "When a member has not made sufficient reparation for his sins, when after forgiveness of sin and the remission of its eternal punishment, there remains yet a debt of 'temporal' punishment, which the just God in His wise ordinances attaches still to forgiven sin, then all the members of the Body help to bear this burden of punishment, and then the Church in virtue of her power of binding and loosing may supplement the poverty of one member out of the wealth of another."⁶ This is "the treasure of the Church," a sacred and efficacious family inheritance in which all who belong to mother-church may share. Now we can understand why the prayers of the saints also seem to them so powerful. "The Catholic, therefore, is jealous to expiate and suffer for the 'poor souls', especially by offering the Eucharistic sacrifice."⁷

Increasingly Rome has distantiated herself from the evangelical faith by developing the cult of Mary. It is recognized that Scripture has little to say on this point. Yet on the basis of tradition the church feels competent to elevate her to a position little lower than that occupied by the Savior.

The argument will shock every true Protestant. Karl Adam insists that Mary not only "preceded all others along the way of redemption" but "even helped to prepare the way. Without her consent there had been no redemption, and therefore she is for us all the 'Gate of heaven'." Here the parallel between Eve and Mary is pressed to an unbelievable extreme. "Just as Eve's consent to the serpent's temptation brought sin and ruin, so did Mary's consent to the angel's message introduce redemption. So Mary possessed not only a personal relation to the Son of God and her personal salvation, but also a relation to the 'many' who are redeemed by her Son. She is the mother not of the Redeemer alone, but also of the redeemed; and so she is the mother of the faithful. The Catholic acknowledges in heaven not only a Father, but also a mother . . . Mary is as it were a

gracious revelation of certain ineffable and ultimate traits in the nature of God, which are too fine and too delicate to be grasped otherwise than as reflected in the mirror of a mother. Ave Maria!"⁸

Small wonder that the Protestants, who learned to bow before the written word alone, contended with Rome. Here little is left of the all-sufficiency of the Savior, no matter how often his person and work are claimed as the ground of our redemption. God "hath at the end of these days spoken unto us" not in Mary but "in his Son." And this Son "who being the effulgence of his glory and the very image of his substance" is the one by whom alone we can come to God. (Hebr. 1:2, 3) "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, and in him ye are made full." (Col. 2:9, 10) To this end we need no "mother in heaven" next to the Son to bring us into the fatherly favor of God.

The difference between Rome and the evangelicals comes into sharp focus.

All the terminology employed to defend the prayers of the saints and the virgin is foreign to God's word. Here we read of adoration and veneration, of works of supererogation and merit. Well may it be asked how practicing Catholics can distinguish in their prayers between "dulia and hyperdulia," between "hyperdulia and latria" which may be offered to God alone. It is a doctrine, indeed, which speaks of Christ. But it has no room for Christ *alone*.

Nor has this development been halted among the Romanists. The distance between the interceding Savior in heaven and praying church has been widened. More saints have found their way into the church's calendar. Especially noteworthy is the emphasis placed on Mary. She is exalted to a position far above that accorded to her in earlier years. Officially such titles are being ascribed to her as "mediatrix of divine grace," "queen of heaven," and "source of all perfection." It is incumbent upon all faithful Roman Catholics to believe in her immaculate conception, by which she was freed from the stigma of original

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sin, and her bodily assumption or ascension into heaven, by which she was spared the humiliation of physical death. Nearly every Roman Catholic land has its special cult of the Virgin. We read about our Lady of Lourdes in France, our Lady of Fatima in Portugal, and the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico.

Well may one wonder how soon she will be elevated still more. The daily devotion which she receives at countless altars and shrines far exceeds the love and adoration which in practice are accorded to our gracious Savior. The cult of Mary and the saints is no extraneous growth within the Roman church, easily ignored or quickly removed. It is deeply imbedded in the structure of its theology and piety. Since Rome refuses to admit the possibility of any error in her official doctrine, there seems to be little hope of rapprochement between her and Bible-believing Protestantism.

The Prayer-Life of the Believers

This article of faith is among the longest in the *Confession*. The reasons for this are plain.

For the development of the Christian life in faith and hope and love the people of God need daily access to the God of all grace. Hence emphasis on the intercessory work of our Lord in glory was in place. Likewise, it was mandatory that this doctrine be set off from the perversions introduced by Rome, who urged men to seek solace in the prayers of the saints and the Virgin Mary.

One other aspect of this truth remains to be considered. It is of a more practical nature. We bear witness to the blessedness of living a prayerful life in accordance with the teachings of God's word.

Here we are reminded of two encouragements to draw nigh to God. The first proceeds from the supreme worthiness of our Savior. Both his love and his power guarantee help in our time of need. In his person we find *a merciful and faithful high priest, to make propitiation for the sins of his people*. He understands us better than all the saints; yea better than we

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even understand ourselves. *For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted.*

To this is added a second encouragement. We are urged to contemplate his finished work. Nothing more need or can be added. The question of our salvation and our consequent standing with God has been settled once-for-all. There is no place for any Romish conception of Christ and . . . ! The word of God announces salvation by Christ alone! Our unworthiness is no longer a barrier between God and us. *Neither must we plead here our unworthiness; for the meaning is not that we should offer our prayers to God on the ground of our own worthiness, but only on the ground of the excellency and worthiness of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is become ours by faith.*

Ours is the obligation to pray without ceasing. We are to come as we are, confessing our sins and relying only on the perfect work of the Savior who renders our imperfect prayers acceptable to his Father.

We are commanded to draw nigh unto God. For us it may no longer be a question whether we feel like praying or not. God asks that we seek his face, which is turned in pity to us who come in Christ's name. For the sake of the Savior he is and always remains our gracious father.

This will prompt us to suitable humility. The praying Christian is well aware of his own unworthiness. Thus in prayer he consciously and consistently takes refuge in the atoning work of his Lord. By faith his righteousness becomes ours. This gives us standing and boldness to make all our requests known to God. Such prayers are circumscribed in their content by the teaching of our Savior. To his disciples he gave the perfect pattern to which our calling upon God ought to conform.

And in harmony with God's gracious promises we may cultivate the blessed assurance, that our prayers are more certainly heard of God than we feel in our hearts that we desire these things of him. The intercession of our Redeemer in heaven stimulates us to a life of continual, humble and effectual prayer. In Christ alone we have the key which unlocks all the secrets of true prayer.

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1. What is the place of prayer in the Christian life? 2. What basic problems are involved in our prayer life? How are these answered in this article? 3. Show how this article was formulated in the light of its times. 4. What is meant by Christ as our advocate? How is this involved in praying in his name? 5. How may and should we show proper honor to the saints? 6. What deeply religious motivation prompted the reformers to attack prayers to the saints? 7. How would you explain the deep attachment of many Roman Catholics to the saints? 8. Show how this article magnifies the all-sufficiency of our Savior. 9. How does Rome defend prayers to the saints? 10. What three distinct kinds of religious honor are defined by the Roman church? 11. How would you explain the growing position which Mary occupies in that church? 12. List four Biblical encouragements to pray in Jesus' name alone. 13. What is meant by Christ's heavenly high-priesthood? Does this doctrine receive its due in the churches today? 14. Mention at least five requirements for true prayer. 15. What does the Lord's Prayer teach concerning the proper content of our prayer? 16. What are *relics*? What place do they occupy in Roman Catholic piety and worship?

Chapter 27

The Church as Christ's Congregation

We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This Church has been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this that Christ is an eternal King, which without subjects He cannot be. And this holy Church is preserved or supported by God against

the rage of the whole world; though it sometimes for a while appears very small, and in the eyes of men to be reduced to nothing; as during the perilous reign of Ahab the Lord reserved unto Him seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal.

Furthermore, this holy Church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit.

ARTICLE XXVII

TRAVELERS in ancient times often went in peril of their lives.

Few passages were so dangerous as the straits of Messina lying between Italy and Sicily. On one shore was the cruel rock of Scylla, while near the opposite shore lay the whirlpool of Charybdis. Only the most skillful could steer a successful course between them. Many who escaped shipwreck on Scylla did so by foundering in Charybdis.

For the church it is essential to steer a straight course in her teaching and preaching. This is especially necessary when formulating the doctrine of the church. Not a few have been wrecked on the rocks of an institutional Christianity, where the strength and solace of faith is destroyed, while others have allowed themselves to be sucked into the whirlpool of individualism and subjectivism.

Of these twin perils the church today must be especially aware. One of the chief aspects of Protestant theology in our century is the recovery of the notion of the church. Men have begun to react, and rightly so, against the excessive individualism which ravaged Christendom for the past few centuries. Yet this recovery shows that all is not well. J. S. Whale reminds us that to study the history of Christ's church is like a visit to Madame Tussaud's with its distorting mirrors. One makes you look like "a clothes-prop" while in the other you are like "a barrel." "You recognize yourself in both mirrors; it is your overcoat and muffler, your walking-stick and your face; but the exaggerations are deplorable, almost painful."¹ He tells of the relief of returning to the plane mirror, wherein the normal self with its imperfections again appears.

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In this series of articles the *Confession* seeks to bring us face to face with the only accurate mirror. So long as we look at the church in the light of human opinions, ancient traditions or historical accidents, we shall never know what the true church is. Only God can declare to us the miracle and mystery of the church in this world.

Confusion Concerning Christ's Church

As believers we have already confessed our faith in God and his works, in man and his deep-seated need, and in Christ and the salvation which he obtained for those who are his own. Now there remains a consideration of the manner in which God accomplishes his gracious purposes in our lives through the ministry of Christ's Spirit. This introduces us to the doctrine of the church and her calling.

Here we have a painful and perplexing problem.

As never before the churches have become aware of their brokenness. Since 1910 when a world-wide conference was held at Edinburgh, leaders have been insisting that the fragmented churches must reunite. Especially the situation on the mission fields seemed to demand moving in this direction. These voices have become stronger and more strident as a result of two world wars. Easier methods of communication and transportation have made it possible to become acquainted with believers everywhere.

The many discussions which have been held demonstrate how Christian believers, confessing every Lord's day to their unity in Christ, cannot seem to get together.

The Roman Catholics maintain their absolutistic claim to being the only true church. Submission to the papal see they require of all who would seek a measure of union. The Baptists and their descendants demand an acknowledgement of the autonomy of each local church as a company of experiential believers ingrafted into Christ with the sign of believers' baptism. Episcopal ordination as a testimony to apostolic succession is the watchword of many Anglicans. Meanwhile the Presbyter-

ians and Reformed stress with more or less vigor an adherence to the Scriptures as the norm for sound doctrine.

In recent years church unions have been effected, also in Canada and the United States. Always the result has to this date been adding to the number of denominations. Thus the splintering of Christendom goes on. Even Rome knows no real unity within herself except that of a totalitarian organization. Deep internal fissures have occasioned ruptures with Rome in Czechoslovakia, United States and the Philippines. At times the churches cooperate to attain specific practical goals, but meanwhile each continues to worship in its own way. All around are the teeming thousands and millions who first were indifferent to the Christian gospel, then hostile to all churches. Everywhere the church has lost her hold on the masses.

Many causes have operated to produce this sad condition. Much has been the fault of the church herself. There has been a failure to preach the sound gospel. Generations have grown up as baptized members of the church without the most rudimentary acquaintance with the faith. Often no clear trumpet was sounded against the enemies of worldliness, materialism and religious superficiality. Men have frequently looked to the mountains of organizational machinery for help rather than to the God of all grace.

Viewed from a purely human perspective, the church's situation looks hopeless. Yet faith at this point is neither surprised nor dismayed. All these things have been clearly announced in Scripture. Amid the confusion we can and do take heart, knowing that Christ's promise, "I will build my church," (Matt. 16:18) can not fail. Historical investigation into the situations which obtain offers little hope. We must get back to the norms of God's word. It alone can teach us what the church is and to what she has been called in the shifting scenes of history. Our spiritual myopia will be largely cured, when once again we realize the glory of Christ's church. To this the *Confession* calls our attention.

The Reformatory Doctrine of the Church

To understand what the *Confession* teaches, we do well to review something of the church's history until that time. Doctrinal development in large measure reflects life. In this way the Holy Spirit step by step leads the believing church also into the truth concerning herself.

Already the earliest church fathers spoke about the church. From the beginning it was thought of as "the communion of the saints," the gathering of all those who were united in common faith. With the rise of heresies this faith-life had to be more explicitly described. Since the church's unity was threatened, increasing emphasis was placed on the visible organization which possessed the apostolic tradition and was ruled by the bishop as successor to the apostles.

Among the sects an altogether different strain of thought prevailed. The Montanists of the second, the Novatians of the third, and the Donatists of the fourth centuries reacted against growing externalization. Repeatedly they pointed to corruptions and argued for a "pure church" ideal. On these grounds they broke with the visible organization and set up competing churches.

In response to this critical situation Cyprian urged that the unity of the church was grounded in the unity of the bishops. All who refused to submit to the lawfully elected and appointed bishop not only forfeited church fellowship but also salvation. Against the Donatists Augustine argued along similar lines. As a theologian he maintained that the church was the communion of all who were chosen in Christ and sanctified by the Spirit. As a churchman he moved in the direction of identifying the church with the visible organization to which the sacraments were entrusted. This inconsistency has puzzled the church ever since.

During the middle ages the second strain of thought in Augustine was developed and changed beyond recognition. The bishop of Rome was confessed as the vice-gerent of Christ,

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Salvation was made dependent on the sacraments dispensed by the hierarchy. The visible church was identified as the kingdom of God apart from which there could be no salvation. Immediately after the Reformation these views were officially formulated and adopted. According to Cardinal Bellarmine the church is "the company of all who are bound together by the profession of the same Christian faith and by the use of the same sacraments and are under the rule of legitimate pastors and principally Christ's vicar on earth, the Roman pontiff." To this day Rome stresses the visibility of the church. It is regarded as the extension of Christ's incarnation. It is distinguished in two aspects: the teaching church, consisting of the clergy to which the attributes of unity, catholicity, apostolicity, infallibility and perpetuity are primarily ascribed, and the hearing church, consisting of all the faithful who reverence the authority of the former. To the soul of the church belong all who possess the supernatural gifts and graces which may be lost. To its body belong all who are baptized. The church actually dispenses the grace of God through its officers. It is God's means of salvation.

Against this construction of God's work of grace the reformers protested. Often they have been accused of disrupting the true unity of Christ's church and having no real interest in her existence and welfare. Nothing is farther from the truth as anyone who takes time to read in Luther's and Calvin's works knows.

In harmony with his position on justification by faith only Luther stressed the church as the company of believers, established and sustained by Christ the head. There is but one church, although we may rightly distinguish between its visible and invisible aspects. Its essence is to be found in communion with Christ by faith. Yet it becomes clearly visible in this world since the Holy Spirit works through the word and sacraments. Here Luther himself ought to be quoted. "If thou wilt be saved, then begin with the faith of the sacraments." Again he writes, "There would be no Bible and no sacraments without the Church and the ecclesiastical ministry."

Strongly reacting against Romish externalism the Anabaptists moved to the extreme left. Above all else they emphasized the subjective faith-response of the individual. In a manner similar to that of Montanists, Novatians and Donatists they argued for a "pure church" and condemned along with Rome the reformation churches. Although containing emphases which ought to be appreciated this movement spawned heresies and schisms which threatened the Christian faith. Among its champions individualism ran rampant. With increasing rigidity a discipline was enforced which shattered the unity of family, church and community.

Basically the Reformed position showed close kinship with the Lutheran. Yet there were relatively important points of difference. To a lesser degree the Reformed stressed the organization and the means of grace as indispensable to salvation. Here especially the work of the Holy Spirit came into greater prominence. From the beginning church discipline was restored as one of the marks of the true church, a task which the Lutherans largely assigned to the civil magistrates. As a result the Calvinistic Reformation, not so much in theory as in practical consequences, came to occupy middle ground between the Lutherans and Anglicans on the one hand and the Anabaptists on the other.

Calvin on the Church

To understand what the *Confession* teaches at this point, we do well to come to grips with the major emphases of John Calvin. From his writings de Bres borrowed much that we find again in this and succeeding articles of our faith.

It would be fascinating to trace the development of the Reformed conception of the church from Calvin's writings, chiefly the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. We will content ourselves with a few remarks.

In the first edition the Genevan reformer inveighed against the externalism of Rome and taught that the church was the body of believers in communion with Christ. This body can exist

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without visible form and administration, so long as the word is purely preached. Since the church consists of the elect, it has existed from the beginning of time even when hidden from men's eyes. The second edition shows a greater appreciation for the church as a means instituted by God for the salvation of his people. All that was formerly taught is reiterated, although now the visible organization receives its just due. About 1537 Calvin for the first time came into close contact with the Anabaptists. Now he was constrained to develop the Scriptural view of the church in opposition to some of their extreme positions. He recognized that the Bible speaks about the church in a double way; sometimes stressing the church as the body of the elect and believing, then again as the body including all those who are baptized and have professed their faith. Within the latter group, thus the visible church, there are always hypocrites and wicked men. Yet these are not two churches. In the final edition of 1559 the stress on the visible church is even stronger. He regards the church as one of "the external means or aids by which God calls us into communion with Christ, and retains us in it." His first chapter here is entitled, "The true church, and the necessity of our union with her, being the mother of all the pious."

Several statements clarify his position admirably. Having taught the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ alone, he adds, "But as our ignorance and slothfulness, and, I may add, the vanity of our minds, require external aids in order to the production of faith in our hearts, and its increase and progressive advance even to its completion, God has provided such aids . . ." Of the gospel he affirms that God "has deposited this treasure with the Church, He has appointed pastors and teachers, that his people might be taught by their lips; he has invested them with authority; in short, he has omitted nothing that could contribute to a holy unity of faith, and to the establishment of good order."³ This was a far cry from the kind of private interpretation on which the Anabaptists insisted. Nor will Calvin speak of the visible church apart from a consideration of the invisible, or of the invisible without reflecting upon the visible. "There

could not be two or three churches, without Christ being divided, which is impossible.”⁴

In discussing the church Calvin claimed, “This article of the creed, however, relates in some measure to the external Church, that every one of us may maintain a brotherly agreement with all the children of God, may pay due deference to the authority of the Church, and, in a word, may conduct himself as one of the flock.”⁵ This must be remembered when reviewing these articles. We shall not understand de Bres and his *Confession*, unless we remember that visible and invisible church may never be divorced, even though the invisible is never perfectly reflected in the visible. This will help us to understand why the Reformed insist that “outside of the church there is no salvation” and again that “the true church and the false church” can be clearly distinguished by those who apply the rule of faith.

Let us, then, listen again to what Calvin teaches. The visible church becomes, as it were, a means unto the end of faith-fellowship with God which is the true life of the invisible church. “We may learn even from the title of *mother*, how useful and even necessary it is for us to know her, since there is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her, nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh, and ‘become like the angels.’ For our infirmity will not admit of our dismissal from her school; we must continue under her instruction and discipline to the end of our lives. It is also to be remarked, that out of her bosom there can be no hope of remission of sins, or any salvation, according to the testimony of Joel and Ezekiel; In these words the paternal favour of God, and the peculiar testimony of the spiritual life, are restricted to his flock, to teach us that it is always fatally dangerous to be separated from the Church.”⁶

This sheds light on the true view of the church. First of all, this doctrine is an article of faith. No matter what desolations and disgraces mar the life of Christ’s church on earth, we

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believe that the true church is, has been and always shall remain on this earth until our Lord returns. This we confess with all our hearts, since *Christ is an eternal King, which without subjects He cannot be.*

Although the distinction between visible and invisible church is proper, we may not divorce these two. To do so is contrary to Scripture and injurious to spiritual life. All that is confessed in these articles is acknowledged of both aspects of the church's life, though only with proper reservations to the visible manifestation of the church at any given time. This may sound like double-talk. Yet such is the language of faith, which recognizes that Christ is still busy building his church through the ages. Not until this work is accomplished will the true church be fully manifested. In these articles the ideal which God holds before his people is taught. Yet it is no Platonic idea devoid of concrete reality in this life. By the power and Spirit of the living God it comes to expression, sometimes more and at other times less clearly, so that we know where and how Christ is building his church also among us. Because of this we must join her fellowship, learn from her all the days of our earthly life, cherish her with warm affection, submit ourselves to her government, and seek her welfare as living members.

The Essential Nature of the Church

Now in faith we are ready to affirm what the church is.

The *Confession* provides us with a definition which may well direct our thoughts, words and acts on this score. *We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed in His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.*

Clearly the church is of God, not of man.

Strongly is this stressed here, an emphasis much-needed in our day. The church is not a voluntary association of those who have some religious interests or profess to some religious

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experiences. It is God who has chosen the church in Christ. He has cleansed her with the Savior's blood and dwells in her by his Holy Spirit. Much in the church's life seems to militate against such a view. Yet in faith we witness to the triumph of God's grace. He builds and preserves a church unto himself.

First and foremost, the church is a *holy congregation*, a "gathered" flock belonging to God by right of purchase. This true church responds to his voice. Both Old and New Testament never weary of speaking about the pastoral, the shepherd-sheep relation which God sustains to his own. This is evident from the terms used to designate the church. Repeatedly in the New Testament it is called the "ecclesia," the ones called by God himself. Christ used the term in connection with Peter's confession. (Matt. 16:18) Later it took on deeper meaning for the disciples and was often employed by them. It designated a circle of believers in a definite locality. (Acts 5:11; 11:26; I Cor. 11:18, 14:19, 28; Gal. 1:2; I Thess. 2:14; etc.) In at least one place it indicates a group of churches within a given area. (Acts 9:31) In a more general sense, it denotes the whole body of professing Christians throughout the world. From this point of view Paul discussed the doctrine of the church in First Corinthians and Ephesians. Finally, in its most comprehensive sense the "ecclesia" embraces all who are joined to Christ, whether on earth or in heaven. (Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; Col. 1:18, 24) Our word *church* derives from a Greek term meaning "that which belongs to the Lord." So it was used of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:20) and of the Lord's day. (Rev. 1:10) The early Christians soon applied it to themselves as the body of believers who recognized Christ's lordship over their lives.

Many figurative descriptions also illumine the church's nature. She is repeatedly called the body of Christ (Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:18; I Cor. 12:27) and the temple of the Holy Spirit or God. (I Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21, 22) Peter addressed believers as "living stones" which are erected by God into "a spiritual house." (I Pet. 2:5) Several times the church is spoken of in Old Testament terms as the Jerusalem that is above, the new Jerusalem, or the heavenly Jerusalem. (Gal. 4:26; Hebr. 12:22; Rev. 21:2) All

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these indicate the close association which the church sustains to the eternal God in Christ Jesus.

We are therefore constrained by the Bible to speak of the church in the light of the believer's relation to God. From him alone proceeds our salvation. The church is the company of the saved. Here Christ is both Savior and Head. The only confidence of the church lies in the eternal and immutable promises of God in Christ.

Thus the chief characteristic of her life is faith. This is emphasized by the Bible. Since faith is primarily God's gift and not man's response, we should not speak of joining the church but rather of being joined to the church. Our act of believing is but the response which is elicited within our hearts by the gracious Spirit. He calls us by the gospel preaching. This in no wise does violence to personal responsibility. In the Scriptures we are taught that we must repent and believe. But those who answer this call acknowledge that "it is God who worketh in us, both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12) Ours is the life of faith-fellowship with Christ. Without this none should claim the privilege of church membership. Nor may any church tolerate within her bosom those who refuse to live by faith.

This emphasis on faith does not reduce the church to an aggregate of individuals. Faith experiences not only union with God but also with fellow Christians. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you also, that ye also may have fellowship with us: yea, and our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ." (I John 1:3) All false individualism is cut short by what God himself says about his church. The Christian individual knows no life apart from Christ's body; that body comes to manifestation in his fellowship with those who are Christ's.

The Attributes of the Church

The true life of the church, wrought and preserved by the God of all grace, manifests itself in the world. Thus we may

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rightly speak of attributes or characteristics which pertain to the church. Perfectly do they apply to the church as God sees the company of his people; relatively but nonetheless really do they apply to the church as we learn to know her and share in her life on earth.

First of all, we confess the church's unity. There is *one* and only one Christian church.

Much in church history seems to give the lie to this confession. Yet here we allow ourselves not to be led by experience or insight. God's word teaches us the true and abiding unity of the church. Its roots lie in the one and indivisible Christ. "But all the elect are so connected with each other in Christ, that as they depend upon one head, so they grow up together into one body, compacted together like members of the same body; being made truly one, as living by one faith, hope, and charity, through the same Divine Spirit, being called not only to the same inheritance of eternal life, but also to a participation of one God and Christ."

Church unity with Christ implies both gift and obligation.

We are to rejoice by faith in what is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Day after day, in our preaching and practice we must recognize him who is the fountain of our life. In the measure that believing individuals and congregations engage in this faith-activity, the unity of the church will come to expression. This is a far cry from the attempts of ecclesiastical leaders to foist church union upon ignorant, indifferent, or unwilling church members. Such efforts usually result only in bringing together what does not belong to Christ according to his word. We sin grievously against the true unity of Christ's church when ignoring or minimizing the claims of God's truth.

Because we know in part and prophesy in part, a drawing together of believers and congregations and denominations which have long lived in isolation from each other will present almost insurmountable difficulties. Yet this never justifies a passive acquiescence in the present situation. The lines of com-

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munication among all who love the truth as it is in Christ Jesus must be increasingly opened. Any high-handed decision to maintain isolation betrays a measure of either fear or phariseeism. Even as believers are to "have the same care one for another" (I Cor. 12:25), so denominations have the calling in Christ's name to teach and warn and comfort one another with the living word of God. Even the refusal of others to give heed does not dismiss us from our duty. Here God's patience with us ought to stimulate our patience with each other. Step by step many of the breaches in the visible church can and will be healed for those who walk in faith and love by God with whom all things are possible.

Whatever differences still obtain, Christians may never forget that they are one in Christ. In all her activities the church must heed the word of Paul, "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The nature of this true unity is clearly indicated, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all." (Eph. 4:3-6)

This text, pointed and pertinent as it is, does not answer all the detailed problems of the oneness which ought to characterize true believers. With these we must wrestle daily in humble and hearty faith. Yet these words point the direction in which our faith must move. Without the movement of a truly witnessing faith we give the lie to our profession and dishonor the Savior. As Head of his church he is busy gathering his own in the true fellowship of faith and hope and love.

The second attribute of the church is holiness.

Here much the same tension between what God requires and what we are becomes apparent. Those who champion a "pure church" ideal would locate this holiness in the lives of those who profess Christ. As a result standards of church membership have been imposed which go far beyond what God's word allows. This not only wrecks havoc with the church's unity but also elevates human ordinances above the Scriptures. Frequently a proud, harsh and legalistic spirit is produced in such

churches. Others would locate the church's holiness in Christ and his ordinances in the church. Many are admitted to full membership who give no evidence of God's work of grace in confession and conduct. Great ignorance of the gospel and not infrequently gross forms of ungodliness are tolerated. Here there seems to be no acknowledgement that such blemishes reflect upon the Savior and bring down God's wrath upon the whole congregation.

The holiness of the church roots in Christ's holiness as Savior of the body. This quality he both imputes and imparts to us whom he himself designates as holy. This, indeed, does not mean that Christians are perfect. Nor does it imply that every member of the church shares in this holiness. The warnings against hypocrites and unbelievers within the visible church in Scripture are too clear to be forgotten. Yet all true and living members of the church are holy. They have been born again unto a new life. Thus they learn to "delight in the law of God after the inward man." (Rom. 7:22) The Spirit applies all the treasures of Christ, the all-sufficient Savior, which we learn to appropriate by faith. In this light we can better understand what the *Confession* later affirms about the government of the church and the place of excommunication.

So also are we to confess the church's catholicity. As a third attribute of Christ's church this universality is both a present possession and a future hope of Christian believers. It is guaranteed by the Savior himself. Wherever the living Christ reveals his glory and grace, there we find the church which belongs to him.

Therefore we refuse to identify the church catholic with any specific ecclesiastical organization. *We confess that this holy church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world.* It has existed from the beginning of time and continues to the end of the world. With all our hearts we repudiate the claims of Rome to being alone catholic on the grounds of its antiquity, its possession of all divine truth and graces, and its large numbers. As evangelicals we confess to the church's

catholicity in a far truer sense, when affirming that to her belong all believers who have ever lived, now live and are yet to be born. In a more restricted sense, we may apply this attribute to the visible church by recognizing as proper members of Christ's body all who expect their salvation in Christ alone.

Many questions arise in this connection.

Does our confession condemn all denominationalism? Are we ever justified in speaking of one denomination as true church, while implying or affirming that all others are false churches? Is organizational unity made mandatory by God's word? Is it to be considered desirable and, if so, on what conditions? At what point does a given church or denomination cease to represent the true church and degenerate into a sect? Is the Roman church sectarian, since it has at many points departed from God's word and elevated human traditions? Does the *Confession* permit a classification of churches into groups relatively more or less true? Some of these matters call for attention when considering other articles in the creed.

Here at least it is plain that Christ is head and lord of his church. All authority derives from him and must reflect his will. Nor can doctrine be divorced from duty. To depart from the norm is suicide for an ecclesiastical organization. And the warning is always in order, that we may not divorce the visible from the invisible church. These attributes must be reflected in the church as she exists here and now.

The Preservation of the True Church

The establishment of Christ's church in this world is a miracle. By his divine power and grace God has called a church out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Her foundations lie in divine election. This the Scriptures clearly teach. The saints and faithful at Ephesus are the ones whom God "chose" in Christ "before the foundation of the world." (Eph. 1:4) In Thessalonica the believers knew their "election." (I Thess. 1:4) The "sojourners" to whom Peter wrote received their position "according to the foreknowledge of God

the Father." (I Pet. 1:2) This electing grace is never represented as static. Because of his eternal choice God calls his people by the preaching of the word. He has cleansed and sanctifies them by the Spirit of Christ. His church God makes his special workshop in this world. He takes sinners, dead in trespasses and deserving of his wrath, and makes them instruments to the praise of the glory of his grace. All this God does by joining them to Christ, from whom springs all our life now and in the world to come. The church is not a social club, aimed at the promotion of religious interests and civic betterment. It is God's instrument to bring people to the full experience and enjoyment of salvation. We believe and confess that,

*"The church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
She is His new creation,
By water and the Word;
From heaven He came and sought her,
To be His holy bride,
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died."*

Too quickly we speak of "my church" and "your church." Such identification of the church, even in its visible form, is contraband. As soon as the church becomes mine or thine, she ceases to be church. Her life comes from and belongs to Christ alone. Whatever is contrary to his express will must be eradicated. Only then can we confidently expect the church to continue in spite of the opposition of wicked men and the rage of the devils. The guarantee of our life is Christ.

Now we rejoice in the assurance that the church will continue. This includes also its visible form in the world. Her appearance, however, changes in the shifting scenes of world history. To this our attention is called by the *Confession*. In Ahab's day there was little that looked like true church. Elijah found it almost impossible to recognize the lineaments of the church in an apostate generation. Yet God had his seven thousand who refused to bow their knees to Baal. Only the prophet's

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shortsightedness and sin prevented him from discovering those who belonged to the Lord.

Church history through the ages warns us against simply identifying the organization to which we belong as the true church. To be sure, wherever the marks are preserved, there is Christ's body. But the life of the church is always richer, deeper and fuller than that of the segment to which we belong. Nor does the Bible fail to warn us that God keeps his church under surveillance. "And if the righteous is scarcely saved, where shall the ungodly and sinner appear . . . For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God." (I Pet. 4:18, 17) Often the church's life seems like the ocean's ebb and flow. Days of spiritual awakening and refreshment are followed by seasons of darkness and decay. The onward march of the Christian faith, in connection with which the church is established, has stirred some nations while for a time leaving others in a quiet backwash. From certain churches, in fulfillment of his word, God has removed the candlestick out of its place. Failure to repent produces sad results for generations to come. In this light we must learn to read the stories of the church's life among the nations. In every place and at all times God manifests his grace and his judgment. Where the full gospel is proclaimed, there God builds and blesses his church. (Acts 13:48)

Therefore Christians confess that *this holy Church is preserved or supported against the rage of the whole world*. Many are her enemies. Often they attack from without; still more often from within. The antithesis between sin and grace, unbelief and faith is sharpened as the centuries pass. In every form of opposition the church recognizes the activities of her arch-enemy, the devil. She takes seriously the warnings of God's word, "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time. And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child." (Rev. 12:12, 13) But the church takes heart. She is assured of God's presence and protection. "And to the woman were given two wings of a great

eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and a half a time, from the face of the serpent." (Rev. 12:14)

Through the devious paths of world history God continues to work out his plan of salvation. No matter how weak and widely scattered his saints seem to be, they are safe.

God always preserves his own.

And this he does by his all-encompassing grace. They are *joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit.* "For whosoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith." (I John 5:4)

1. Why do you think the doctrine of the church has been so long ignored by American Protestantism? 2. What is the relation between church and salvation according to Scripture? 3. What is meant by the church as "communion of saints?" What is meant by the church as "Christ's body"? 4. What Scriptural objections can you register against the "pure church" ideal? 5. What value did Calvin attach to the church? 6. In what sense is the church the mother of believers? Is this a concession to Romanism? 7. Define visible and invisible church. Can you defend this distinction in the light of Scripture? 8. Why is the chief characteristic of the church always faith? What is the relation between faith and sound doctrine? 9. If the church must be preserved by God's grace alone, what place is there for our calling and responsibility? 10. What is meant by the true unity of the church? 11. Can there properly be room for differences in doctrine within the church? State reasons for your answer. 12. How must the holiness of Christ's church come to expression in our personal and congregational life? 13. Do you think God approves of separate denominations? List your reasons. 14. Why isn't the Christian Reformed Church a member of the National Council and the World Council of Churches? Is this the result of a fear-complex? 15. In what sense must the church always be reforming herself? What duty does this impose on every member?

Chapter 28

The Call to Church Membership

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the

same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God has established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

ARTICLE XXVIII

IN A SERIES of lectures at Kurfuersten Schloss in Bonn, Karl Barth began his consideration of the church in a striking way. "We must be brief in this section, which by rights ought to be very thoroughly treated. Our lecture hours are numbered. But perhaps there is no harm in that. Today there is rather too much than too little said about the Church. There is something better: let us *be* the Church."¹

These words may well be taken to heart by all Christian believers. Doctrine is never an end in itself. It should rather stimulate a faith-activity by which what we believe is practiced in humble and hearty reliance upon God's grace. This is the more necessary in the doctrine of the church, where so much confusion and contradiction exists and many have failed to learn the way which God has with his children. In the church we stand under the judgment of God's word. Here we must learn to die unto ourselves, our prejudices and practices which never escape the stain of sin. Far better than talking about the church is the Christian resolution to be church of the Lord Jesus Christ in the world.

All this, however, may never tempt us to minimize what God says about his church. We cannot be church, unless we know what the church is. The nature of her life as *an assembly of those who are saved* is revealed in Scripture. This is no presumptuous pronouncement, even though the unbelieving world continually accuses us of a "holier-than-thou" attitude. Rather, this confession is a humble acknowledgement of the miraculous and mysterious movement of God's grace which binds our lives to Christ through his Spirit and Word. What it means to be member of that church is outlined in this article.

Outside of the Church no Salvation

The opening phrases of this *Confession* sound so exclusivistic, so self-congratulatory. The church, we say, has received salvation. Here and here alone is salvation received.

But can we make this profession in good faith?

Indeed, the Bible speaks in lofty language about the assembly of Christian believers. It is a divine institution with divine powers and prerogatives. Yet the life of the church is stained with sin. Every earthly manifestation of this body bears ample witness to its transiency and transgression. And since there is but one true church of Christ, comprising both visible and invisible aspects, we find ourselves in a quandary. How shall we be able to say such great things of the church which we have learned to know and love?

Ours will have to be the standpoint of faith. We believe that there is such a body of believers, because God says in his word that he has established and continues to preserve it against all the rage of our foes. He has reconciled the church to himself in Christ. He fills her with the gifts and graces of his Holy Spirit. Without God therefore there would be no true church. In a very real sense, then, the doctrine of the church is for the Bible-believing Christian a consequence of his reliance upon the God of all grace.

This will give the lie to Rome's charge that the reformers were not at all concerned with the church. All that interested them was their individual salvation. Irresponsibly they tore themselves loose from the body of Christ. Even today Anglican writers often accuse Luther and Calvin of neglecting the church. Yet J. S. Whale is convinced that he does not overstate the case by calling Calvin "the Cyprian of the sixteenth century; his massive theological system and his momentous historical importance find their explanation in the four words which sum up the whole of Christian history, *Ubi Christus ibi Ecclesia* (Where Christ is, there is the church)"² Cyprian, you will remember, was the first church father to address himself specifical-

ly to the doctrine of the church. He laid the foundation upon which the Roman hierarchy has built. During the centuries, however, Christ was obscured in that church. Corruptions in doctrine, government and worship cried to high heaven for correction. The Renaissance had flooded the higher echelons of clergy and laity with a worldly spirit, which was not only tolerated but at times openly espoused by the papacy. Long before the Reformation called for a break with the existing organization, that church was breaking itself down from within. To preserve a church for himself God raised up Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. Especially the last-named by his profound scholarship, organizational genius and complete submission to God's word paved the way for the triumph of the reformatory movement. In one nation after another not only was the pure gospel preached, but also the church in its visible form was re-established according to the word. Calvin especially insisted that church organization must be bound to the Scriptures. Even many who did not assent to all the details of his teaching were influenced by the directives which he gave for ecclesiastical life.

Together with Luther he defined the church as the *assembly of those who are saved*.

This is Biblical language. Not all that calls itself church is church. Nor may anyone and everyone claim the right to church membership. Christ taught his disciples that he would build his church upon Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matt. 16:16) This is the central truth of the Christian religion. To affirm this in faith is a fruit of the Spirit's work within us. "And no man can say Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit." (I Cor. 12:3) On Pentecost Christ poured out this Spirit upon his disciples, uniting them to his fulness and driving them out to be his witnesses in this world. (Acts 1:8; 2:4) The Spirit inspired them to speak "the mighty works of God." (Acts 2:11) In the church as "the temple of God" this Spirit took up his residence. (I Cor. 3:16) No membership in the church is valid apart from the promise and presence of the Spirit's work. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." (Rom 8:8) He unites us both to our head and to

each other as fellow-members of Christ's body. "For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body . . ." (I Cor. 12:13) And because there is "one body, and one Spirit," we are exhorted to "keep the unity of the Spirit." (Eph. 4:4, 5) Calvin as the theologian of the Holy Spirit was consequently competent also to be theologian of the church for the Protestant faith. His insistence on the church as *an assembly of those who are saved* has become our confession.

Only in this light can we grasp the implications of the next phrase concerning the church, that *outside of it there is no salvation*.

This sounds utterly foreign to most Protestant ears. To many it smacks of Romanism which makes salvation dependent upon its recognized hierarchy as mediators between God and man. Now nothing is farther removed from the Reformed convictions than such a construction of these words. This is a perversion of the Biblical doctrine of the church. The true unity of the Christian congregation may never be equated with organizational oneness. In God's word emphasis is laid upon our spiritual fellowship with Christ, which comes to expression in sound doctrine and pure worship. This insistence, however, may not tempt us to champion the notion that the external and visible form of the church is of little account. We learn to know God's church only in and through its historical manifestation. More than that, the Bible warns against trusting our subjective judgments while disregarding and even despising the work of the Holy Spirit in the church of all ages. Always the individual and social, the personal and communal aspects of our salvation in Christ are interwoven in New Testament teaching. They do not exist side-by-side, in isolation from each other. To be a Christian means to have fellowship with the living Christ and in the same moment with his people. To break this fellowship lightly, on the basis of personal prejudices and insights, is to imperil our salvation. How else could we hear the word of the living God, except through the preachers whom he has sent? And how could such preachers receive their commission, except by the church which believes and lives by the word of God?

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Aptly does J. S. Whale comment, "Certain it is that for St. Paul, and for New Testament Christianity, to be a Christian is to be a member of a living organism whose life derives from Christ. There is no other way of being a Christian. In this sense, Christian experience is always ecclesiastical experience. The gospel of pardon reaches you and me through the mediation of the Christian society, the living body of believers in whose midst the redeeming Gospel of Christ goes out across the centuries and the continents."³

Now we can understand why Luther, Calvin and their contemporaries expressed themselves so clearly and circumspectly on the point of the church.

They refused to identify the true church with any specific ecclesiastical organization. Wherever the word is purely preached, there is the church. Constrained by the Spirit who indoctrinates us into the truth as it is in Christ, *those who are saved* live in fellowship with each other. Apart from Christ there is no salvation. And he is pleased to communicate his grace in connection with the means which he has instituted and preserved in this world. To separate oneself from the assembly where the rich Christ is proclaimed in obedience to the Scriptures is a heinous sin involving most serious consequences. "Hence it follows," so Calvin warned at this point, "that a departure from the Church is a renunciation of God and Christ. And such a criminal dissension is so much the more to be avoided, because, while we endeavour, so far as lies in our power, to destroy the truth of God, we deserve to be crushed with the most powerful thunders of his wrath. Nor is it possible to imagine a more atrocious crime, than that sacrilegious perfidy, which violates the conjugal relation that the only begotten Son of God has condescended to form with us."⁴

All this is plain language.

The true church is not dependent upon the weak faith and feeble endeavours of God's children. Then no Christian society could rightly call itself church of the living God. The church is there where Christ is. And he dwells by his Spirit among those

who hear and believe his word. This is not guaranteed by the antiquity or solidity of the external organization. It is safeguarded only by God who addresses us daily with his word of grace. "For to prevent imposture from deceiving us," Calvin taught, "every congregation assuming this name should be brought to that proof, like gold to the touchstone. If it has the order prescribed by the Lord in the word and sacraments, it will not deceive us; we may securely render to it the honor due to all churches."⁵ In such an assembly which embraces the gospel promises we behold the true church of our Lord. Outside of her fellowship there can be found no salvation for us and our children.

The Call to Church Fellowship

Now the *Confession* comes to grips with the specific duties of those who claim faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because the true church is what she is according to God's word, *no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself.*

In the early days of the Reformation a strong warning had to be sounded against individualism. The call had come to reorganize the church according to God's word. Many allowed this liberty rooted in the word of God to degenerate into license. There was not merely loose living. Rome had tolerated this for generations without so much as winking an eye. Now, however, the right to private interpretation was pressed to illegitimate conclusions. No wonder that from the Romish point of view Protestantism opened a veritable Pandora's box. Mischief of all sorts grew by leaps and bounds. Many self-styled preachers arose. Among them were not a few who laid claim to receiving visions. Seeds of dissension were sown in many evangelical congregations. Often these prophets argued that the reformation of individual and congregational life proceeded too slowly and imperfectly. These set themselves up as guides to a new and better way.

Some like the two Socini and Servetus muddied the pure waters of the gospel with their new doctrines. Some of the

simple folk were led astray by such heresies. Others, like the Anabaptists, insisted on taking the Scriptures literally and imposed a new legalism on the believers. They argued against infant baptism, attacked all connection between church and state, and even dreamed chiliastic dreams of a new world order wherein the persecuted would with Christ rule all men and nations. Others went still farther, holding that all churches were so grossly deformed that believers should separate themselves from every visible church organization.

In opposition to these Scripturally indefensible positions the reformers taught that all believers should unite with the church. This was to be done in obedience to the word, which makes demands upon both the individual and the congregation.

Indeed, the visible church can become corrupted and deformed almost beyond recognition. This is done when either more or less is demanded than what God plainly teaches us. Because the traditions of men were exalted at the expense of the living Christ, the reformers refused to recognize Rome as true church. This does not imply that all who belonged to her were destitute of salvation. Yet the marks of Christ's church were sadly lacking. These had to be restored in obedience to God. And where the Roman church refused to heed the call to true reformation and even banished those who sought her welfare in this way, the evangelicals were left no other recourse than to withdraw from her.

Thus with one accord the reformers and their disciples insisted that they were not separating themselves from Christ's church; merely from a corrupt organization which by its disobedience to the word and will of God had forfeited every right to the name of Christ's church.

Today this need for church fellowship in our lives deserves new emphasis. Here, where the word is purely preached and the sacraments properly administered, Christ communicates the blessings of salvation.

This implies the obligation to cultivate fellowship with those who are Christ's. To belong to the church is more than being

enrolled in a visible organization. Our love for and loyalty to the visible church must spring from the deep conviction that we are ingrafted by grace into Christ's body. In the words of John Donne, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Strong ties bind us to family, community and nation. So God has created us. We cannot live by and for ourselves. But sin has distorted all human relationships, turning men away from God and his revealed truth. In consequence, our help and hope for life-in-fellowship cannot come from this world. All life's relationships can be restored only by God's grace in Christ, who is the second Adam, the new head of the human race. And this restoration is experienced in the fellowship of Christ's congregation, where we learn to live together as his brothers and sisters. This is the church's answer to the lonely and hungering heart. It calls all men everywhere to seek life and warmth and shelter in the communion of the saints with the seeking and saving God in Christ.

With new urgency the church must open wide her arms to all men and nations. This is the more compelling in the face of the rise of world-wide Communism. Someone has appropriately diagnosed the situation thus, "The fundamental appeal of Communism for the industrial man, for disillusioned Renaissance man, lies in the fact that it offers security with something of the sanction of a religion—man being incurably religious."⁶ Its religion, indeed, is of this world, glorifying social man in his ambitions and achievements. Here there is no room for the God of the Scriptures; the state is god. Nor is there need for salvation through Christ, since in his togetherness with others he strives for a new and better life by his own efforts. Its false faith and hope and love "together combine to present Communism to multitudes as the true way to community in which they can lose their sense of isolation, aloneness and fear."⁷

We do well to realize that Communism is "the great heresy of Christendom." The glory of the church's life as a fellowship with God and one another has too long been tarnished. Too long have we allowed the accidents of birth and breeding to

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play their role within the assembly of God's people. Barriers between rich and poor, educated and illiterate, black and white have not been leveled in obedience to the gospel. Pointing out these failings, which the church has long tolerated or even excused, the enemies of Christ have been able to register great gains.

Yet not humanism or existentialism or even Communism has the answer to the deepest needs of the human heart. In Christ alone has the way to the heart of God been opened. And where this is purely preached and truly believed our hearts are opened to all who love Christ in sincerity. More than ever must we be motivated as was Paul in writing to the Corinthians. Their fellowship was fast disintegrating because of a loveless spirit which placed higher premiums upon personalities than abiding principles. "We are ambassadors therefore on behalf of Christ, as though God were entreating by us; we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be ye reconciled to God." (II Cor. 5:20) This reconciliation paves the way for reconciliation to each other in a fellowship of faith, love and service. "For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office; so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and severally members of each other." (Rom. 12:4, 5) In this fellowship alone we can grow up in all things into Christ our Lord.

The Duties of Church Members

Now follows a list of our obligations, the performance of which will demonstrate the reality and riches of our communion with Christ and each other. Although expressed in general terms, these involve far-reaching consequences for those who love and serve the Savior.

No man may ever *be content to be by himself*. This places Christian responsibility where it belongs. Too easily in our days men are tempted to shunt their obligations. They criticize the church for being cold. Unless others ceaselessly seek to woo and win them, they are offended. Such people place the desires and delights of self above the demands of the gospel. The church,

indeed, must walk in Christ's way who came to "seek that which goeth astray." (Matt. 18:12) But when this message of reconciliation and redeeming love is brought, all who hear are commanded to respond. Included in such faith-response is the calling to seek and maintain fellowship with those who are the Lord's.

Therefore *all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with the church.* It seems likely that de Bres uses the two words, "joining" and "uniting," to stress two aspects of this obligation. We may not speak lightly of membership in the organized church. Much less does the Scripture give warrant for a church fellowship which knows of no rules, refuses to keep record of those who claim to belong, and prides itself in leaving everything to the individual conscience. We must learn to take our proper place in the congregation. But even more, our "joining" must be a "uniting" from the heart by which we seek the honor of our Savior and the welfare of our fellow members.

To this end we must engage ourselves in *maintaining the unity of the Church.* This has far-reaching implications. Many difficulties arise to threaten this oneness. We take our sinful selves into the believing fellowship, as do all God's children. All the days of our life we must bridle our lips and discipline our lives, in order that we may not become a stumbling block to others. Not a few have forsaken a sound congregation on such flimsy grounds as being offended at what someone has said and done or seeking a more congenial group of church members. Too many seem to unite with a church for what they can receive rather than for what they ought to give. Also here the principle of Christian living announced by our Lord applies, "For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it." (Mk. 8:35) Nothing should be more zealously guarded and cherished than our communion with Christ which is experienced together with his people.

Now this unity is to be maintained by believers *submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof.*

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Here the lineaments of the true church come into clearer focus. The church as mother of the faithful is charged with teaching them the Lord's ways. This follows from Christ's charge to the apostles, "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." (Matt. 28:20) In church fellowship we are to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Savior. Thus the church labors in Christ's name "for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ; till we all attain unto the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." (Eph. 4:12, 13)

This text opens large perspectives for the church's calling. The standard which she uses is the word. Herein is revealed the faith once-for-all delivered unto the saints. For much of the palpable ignorance of and indifference to the gospel, the church has none to blame but herself. She has failed to employ education in Christ as a means of evangelism. Such knowledge, blessed by the Spirit, produces a spiritual maturity wherein is recognized something of "the fulness of Christ." But to this end all who belong to the church must heed her doctrine and discipline which are derived from Christ. Faith without works is dead. Thus the Savior warns, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21) Thus as a loving spiritual mother the church chides and corrects those who go astray, even to the point of inflicting the God-appointed censures in order that souls may be saved. Without such sound doctrine and good order in the congregation, spiritual life fails to flourish to the praise and glory of God.

The church as true church, however, always points beyond herself to Christ who alone is our life and salvation. Thus by submitting to doctrine and discipline which is according to God's word we are engaged in *bowing our necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ*. All that the church asks of her members must square with the will of the Savior who purchased us with his blood. Where this is done, she will through her offices and officers lead us into fuller fellowship with the covenant God.

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Here the reformers took sharp issue with Rome. It made the church an end in herself. The glory of mother-church cast deep shadows over the glory of God. Whenever the visible church so draws men and women away from the Redeemer, she ceases in proportion to her defection to be true church. Nor may believers ever submit to such a bondage which robs them of the consolations of Christ.

So instructed by the living word believers *as mutual members of the same body* will engage in *serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.*

This was the church's secret in the years immediately following Pentecost. Of that holy company we read that "the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul: and that not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." (Acts 4:32) What we find here was not so much community of property as community of provisions according to each one's need. This rule always obtains for the New Testament church. More than material possessions, however, must be shared. In Christ's church none may live unto himself. Paul has made this plain, "And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting; he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness." (Rom. 12:5-8)

Today this needs underscoring. The spirit of selfishness is much abroad and has invaded Christ's church. In a crassly materialistic civilization too many are concerned chiefly with a better standard of living. Prompted by an inordinate desire, they regard Christianity as "a way of gain." We must realize anew that Christ provides us with his church as a school wherein are to be learned lessons in self-denial and sacrificial service. Here we are to esteem others higher than self and labor for their advantage, even when disadvantage seems to accrue to

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us. "If any man would come after me," said our Lord, "let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matt. 16: 24) Without such self-discipline, which rejoices in serving others for Christ's sake, our profession of faith becomes sounding brass and clanging cymbal.

The "saints" with whom we exercise such fellowship are far from perfect. In them as well as in ourselves we find remnants of sin which continually war against the word and Spirit of Christ. Yet our holiness must manifest itself in our willingness to recognize that we are "set apart" for service. In church fellowship we must learn daily to lay aside the old man which "waxeth corrupt after the lusts of deceit" and put on the new man "that after God hath been created in righteousness and holiness of truth." (Eph. 4:22, 23) Here we do not choose our brothers and sisters in faith. They are given to us by God. With them we must so learn to live, that others may say of us what was affirmed of the ancient church, "Behold how these Christians love one another!" This is life in God's family. To live that life is required by our membership in Christ's church on earth.

The Call to Separation

In its consideration of membership in the true church of Christ the *Confession* discusses one more duty which rests upon it.

This will likely make little appeal in our day.

Here we are called upon to take the position that at times separation from existing ecclesiastical organizations is mandatory for those who love and serve Christ according to his word. Not every group that calls itself church of Christ is entitled to this name. From such self-styled churches separation may become obligatory, in order that our fellowship with Christ and his people *be the more effectually observed*. Implied in this is the acknowledgement that such communion may by various factors become "less effectual" and even impossible. When the church authorities demand that we submit to a doctrine or

discipline which flagrantly contradicts God's word and persistently refuse to heed the call to reformation, *it is the duty of all believers . . . to separate themselves.*

In order to understand these words we must distinguish carefully.

The sin of schism is among the most grievous plagues which has afflicted Christ's church on earth. Already in apostolic times it reared its ugly head. Finding flaws in the congregation, the Montanists, Novatians and Donatists destroyed the unity of the congregation in many places, often without any apparent justification. Also in reformatory times this evil was rampant. Calvin warned against this repeatedly. No one may destroy the unity of the church, because he finds many faults in the lives of her members. Our acknowledgement of the "communion of the saints" is immediately followed by the recognition that Christ's people live by "the forgiveness of sins." This does not permit us to excuse or minimize or ignore the infirmities which mar the lives of believers. Because of these we are exhorted to flee daily to Christ who washes us in the precious fountain of his blood. But to separate from the church because sins are still found within the church cannot be harmonized with God's word.

What is intended at this point by the *Confession* involves the essential nature of the church's life. Here we are concerned with the question whether the church manifests itself as a faith-fellowship. What may not be tolerated are deviations from the Scriptural norms for doctrine and discipline. If the Christian gospel is persistently obscured or denied, the church ceases to be church. From those groups which refuse to be loyal to Christ's word we are commanded to separate ourselves. By so doing, we sever our connections with *all those who do not belong to the Church*. To justify such actions there is ample evidence in Scripture. "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship have righteousness and iniquity? or what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what portion hath a believer with an unbeliever? and what agreement hath a temple

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of God with idols? for we are a temple of the living God . . .” (II Cor. 6:14-16) Although Paul warns here first of all against communion with the world, his teaching implies also separation from the false church. By denying the faith, she has joined hands with the enemies of God and his cause.

During the early days of the Reformation this was a grave problem especially in France. Many who heard and believed the gospel were in a difficult position. For personal and practical reasons they dared not break openly with Rome. Some were afraid of outright persecution. Others realized they would forfeit their social and political positions. Not a few would be cast out by their families. Hence they continued to attend mass in the Roman church, while acknowledging to their friends that they were “secret believers.” Often they sought justification for their actions by appealing to Naaman’s example, who was convinced of the folly of idolatry, acknowledged the God of Israel, but felt constrained by his position to attend the king who worshipped in heathen temples. (II Kgs. 5:17-19)

To this situation the *Confession* addresses itself. No one may compromise his faith in our only Lord and Savior, who wills that we shall worship him according to his word. *Even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it*, the path of Christian duty is clear. In the spirit of Peter and John believers ought to obey God rather than man. (Acts 4:19)

The results of disloyalty on this score are indicated. Here the *Confession* does not presume to judge concerning the eternal destiny of men. This prerogative belongs alone to God who discerns the hearts of men and nations. Yet *all who separate themselves from Christ’s congregation or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God*. With this pastoral warning the present article closes.

Sacrifices, indeed, must be brought at times for the sake of being faithful to God and his word. Yet his commandments also in this respect are not grievous. He asks that we shall openly acknowledge him before all men and seek our fellowship with his people. Those who act in obedience have Christ’s prom-

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ise, "Every one therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven." To those whose church fellowship is marred by unfaithfulness and disobedience to his command he comes with warning, "But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32, 33)

1. In what sense may we speak of the church as **an assembly of those who are saved**? Is this Biblical? Are there dangers in this position? 2. Can a person be saved without membership in a visible church? Explain. What do you think the **Confession** means here? 3. Into which sins do those fall who refuse to join a church? How serious are these sins? 4. Does it make any difference for salvation which visible church we join? 5. Does God join us to the visible church, or do we join by our own choice? Explain. 6. Wherein does the true unity of the church consist? How must this be preserved? 7. Is separation from the church in which we were born or made profession always a sin? Explain. When does such an act definitely become sinful? 8. In what sense is Communism a "Christian heresy"? 9. How can we make the church a true spiritual fellowship? What do you think of social events in the church's life? 10. Which is more important—unity or truth? Can you prove your point from Scripture? 11. Why does the **Confession** so closely connect doctrine and discipline here? 12. Did the early Christians practice communism? Explain. 13. How does edifying our fellow Christians contribute to personal growth in grace? 14. List several ways in which each of us can and should labor for the welfare of fellow Christians. 15. Do you think we have too many church separations today? Prove your point in the light of Scripture. 16. Do you think Christ had public profession of faith in mind when he spoke of "confessing" and "denying" him? Explain. May the church tolerate adults who refuse to make public profession of faith? How should we deal with them?

Chapter 29

The True and the False Church

We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church. But we speak not here of hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not of the Church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the Church.

The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church. Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.

With respect to those who are members of the Church, they may be known by the marks of Christians; namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him.

As for the false Church, it ascribes more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does it administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His Word, but adds to and takes from them, as it thinks proper; it relies more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry.

These two Churches are easily known and distinguished from each other.

ARTICLE XXIX

THE CHURCH is not held in high esteem today.

Millions who are members seldom darken her doors. Others come only to criticize. Still others listen to what is preached only to forget the message straightway. Nor does the difficulty lie solely with the imperfection of individual members. In her organized form the church has too frequently failed to reflect upon her unique nature and calling in the world.

How different is the estimate which the Savior puts upon his church. Indeed, he knows the sin and shame with which her members have stained their lives. He sees her struggles and failures. But to this end has he manifested himself in the church, that she might learn to live by and for him alone.

Of this Paul reminds us, when writing, "even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Eph. 5:25-27) This is the consolation and challenge of all true Christians. Theirs is a hope built not on man but on God. As Spurgeon aptly said, "The church may go through her dark ages, but Christ is with her in the midnight; she may pass through her fiery furnace, but Christ is in the midst of the flame with her."

The question, however, is not misplaced where the Savior so builds his church. Most of us will remember the rhyme of Defoe,

*"Wherever God erects a house of prayer,
The devil always builds a chapel there
And 'twill be found upon examination,
The latter has the largest congregation."*

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The Bible announces certain standards according to which Christ builds by his word and Spirit. Not every organization that calls itself church is deserving of the name. Christian believers therefore are under obligation to test the life of the church by the specifications announced in Scripture. And only when ours is a fellowship in a Christ-approved congregation, can we be rightly assured that he works his saving grace in our lives.

The Problem of the Sects

This spiritual responsibility to test our church membership in the light of Scripture does not come easy in our day. The matter has been greatly complicated by the rise of rival organizations all claiming to be the true church of Christ.

At the outset the *Confession* takes sharp issue with the prevalent notion that all churches are pretty much the same. Such an approach is both irresponsible and dangerous: It betrays a gross indifference to the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. Repeatedly our Lord and his apostles warned believers against false shepherds, whose errors would lead the flock astray. Not only our present spiritual welfare but also our eternal salvation may be at stake.

In this light our duty becomes clear. We are confronted with one of the inescapable "oughts" for faith. In seeking to *discern which is the true church*, we must act *diligently* and *circumspectly*. No one who allows himself and his children to be exposed to false doctrine will escape unharmed. In his concern for our salvation God has provided the sure touchstone. His word announces clearly which are the marks of the true church, by which she may be clearly distinguished from the false. The urgency of this duty is underlined here in the reminder that *all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of Church*.

Painful and perplexing has been this duty for Christians since the days of the Reformation. By that time the unity of the visible church seemed to be permanently shattered. Indeed,

from the beginning the church of our Lord had never been organizationally one. Already in apostolic times sects and heresies had sprung up. Most of these, however, had been largely confined to one geographical area and for the most part even limited to a century or two in their influence. Throughout the middle ages the influence of Rome had increased to the point, where it was able with the help of the state to attempt the extermination of those who refused to bow. Even though the Greeks and Latins parted company in 1054, this division never affected the life of the masses in western Europe. Rome's unity, however, was more nominal than real. Numerous calls for reform had been sounded for centuries preceding the time of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin. Many of the monastic orders quarreled among themselves not only about administrative but also doctrinal matters. Much of the organizational unity was a decorative facade which disguised deep fissures which the hierarchy usually refused to admit and always found impossible to heal. The Reformation, arising in the days of the new learning and assisted by the invention of the printing press, merely brought these differences out into the open. Nearly all the divergences within the Protestant movement had deep roots in the church of the middle ages. No one, not even the rankest rationalists of the early sixteenth century, really proclaimed anything that was totally new. Rome had merely driven the divergent convictions and notions underground.

As in one nation after another the stranglehold of the hierarchy was broken, all these doctrines were openly proclaimed. Many self-styled preachers went around to gather groups of like-minded individuals around them. Ancient heresies were revived and dressed up to fit the new times. While Christ was busy reforming and reviving his church, the devil had a field day. Successfully he sowed the seeds of pride and prejudice and passion in many quarters. In all this confusion, aggravated by the spiritual ignorance in which Rome had kept the multitudes for generations, it became exceedingly difficult for believers to know where the true church of Christ was found. Sound instruction on this specific point was plainly necessary.

The first warning is sounded against the sects.

For us it will be difficult to evaluate precisely what de Bres and other reformers meant by "sects," if we attempt to answer the question in the light of present-day usage of the term. This word has been employed differently by different people and different groups. Until now the Roman Catholics insist on labelling all who refuse allegiance to the Romish hierarchy as sectarians. Church historians in our day frequently argue that all churches were originally sects, outgrowing this status as they became larger, more traditional in their approach, and increasingly tolerant of others. Such usages of the term, however, cannot be harmonized with Scripture.

That the Bible speaks of sects and heresies is plain. The several parties among the Jews are spoken of as sects, as for example, "the sect of the Sadducees" (Acts 5:17) and "the sect of the Pharisees" (Acts 15:5). To distinguish them from the Jews Christian believers were called "the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5) and "this sect" (Acts 28:22). The term is used normatively by the apostle Paul, who closely associates it with the word "heresies." We read in his description of what was found in Corinth's congregation, "I hear that divisions (schisms) exist among you; and I partly believe it. For there must also be factions (heresies) among you, that they that are approved may be made manifest among you." (I Cor. 11:18, 19) The former is a deficiency of love which produces alienation and disruption, while the latter is disagreement in doctrine. Where this difference is found, the true Christian will be sharply distinguished from him whose faith is either faulty or false. Such factions, divisions and heresies the apostle attributes to "the works of the flesh." (Gal. 5:20) Peter makes an even stronger statement concerning such sects or heresies, "But there arose false prophets also among the people, as among you also there shall be false teachers, who shall privily bring in destructive heresies, denying even the Master that bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction." (II Pet. 2:1)

In this sense the *Confession* uses the term *sect*. It signifies any and all who, purporting to be true Christians, bring in false doctrine. Often the appearance of these erroneous notions concerning the gospel is accompanied by evil conduct. Usually the

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sects will exalt one or a few doctrines at the expense of the rest of Scripture truth. Such one-sidedness may produce notions which flagrantly conflict with the gospel. Not infrequently they claim for themselves and their leaders special revelation or guidance of the Spirit. From God's word it is clear that sectarianism is rooted and grounded in false doctrine. In this sense de Bres employed the term in his *Confession*.

Since the days of the Reformation sectarianism has spread like wildfire. Many Christian churches have capitulated to heretical influences. Their failure to proclaim the doctrine which is according to godliness has stimulated the proliferation of peculiar religious movements. Many of these, like Mormonism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses and others, can by no stretch of the imagination be considered Christian. But much of the blame for their phenomenal rise and influence must be laid at the door of those churches which have forsaken their calling to teach and preach the full counsel of God in Christ. In such a confused religious situation ours is the calling to remind people that there is a true church and a false church. The line of demarcation between them may never be effaced.

The Issue of the True Church

Here we are to deal with a matter which demands clear and careful formulation. At this point the *Confession* concerns itself not with the presence of hypocrites and ungodly in the visible manifestation of Christ's body.

This we do well to remember. As long as the church is in the world, she will have within her fellowship some who are not saved. The parables of our Lord plainly point in this direction. The Sower scattered the good seed of the gospel which fell upon several kinds of soil. (Matt. 13:3-9) There where Christ sows good seed, the devil scatters abroad the tares. (Matt. 13:24-30) In the net are caught both good and bad (inedible) fish. (Matt. 13:47-50) In like manner Paul spoke of "many unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers . . . whose mouths must be stopped." (Tit. 2:10, 11) Jude warned against those "who are

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hidden rocks in your love feasts when they feast with you, shepherds that without fear feed themselves; clouds without water." (Jude, vs. 12) Whenever their appearance is detected, they must be made the objects of warning, discipline and even excommunication from Christ's church. Yet this insistence does not commit us to the "pure church" ideal. No Reformed church dares make the claim that it is free from the presence of all unconverted and sinful members. But in obedience to the Scriptures ours is the aim of manifesting ourselves ecclesiastically as "true church." We refuse to divorce the visible from the invisible church, since essentially they are one and the same. In both her *body and communion*, that is in organization and life, the church must demonstrate the marks laid down by the Bible. These marks are objective, permanent and therefore discernible to all who walk by the rule of faith.

No problem seems more thorny than that of the multiformity of the churches. It has engaged the attention of Christian believers in the past as well as today. But with a new urgency it is with us now. As never before we are painfully aware of the brokenness of Christ's church throughout the world. On the mission fields rival churches have been engaged in bringing the message of God's grace. The sects have made countless inroads in all lands. Minor differences have become the occasion in many lands for new schisms. Personal pride and prejudice have not infrequently prevented a coming together of what according to God's word belongs together in Christ. In such a situation it need not surprise us that some people refuse to make any distinction at all between true and false church, arguing that all visible manifestations of Christ's body are both under divine judgment and recipients of divine grace. Still others have used the disunity of the churches as an occasion to decry and denounce all church organization.

Already Luther addressed himself to this problem, especially when he was frequently accused of having broken the oneness of Christ's congregation.

He insisted that from the beginning there have been "two churches," which Augustine called Cain and Abel. From Christ's

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warning to "beware of false prophets" (Matt. 7:15), he urged that the distinction must be clearly recognized and consistently maintained by believers. The test by which the true church may be known is clear. It is found there where the true and accurate knowledge of Christ is found. Any appeal to antiquity, size or influence is rendered illegitimate by the Scriptures. Embroidering upon this theme Melanchthon pointed out that often in what is called the church ungodly and unbelieving men hold sway. Such a church organization ought to be recognized as a forerunner of antichrist who shall appear in God's temple. (II Thess. 2:4) Bullinger even contrasted Christ's church with the church of the devil which may be properly called Sodom, Babylon, the gathering of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, the kingdom of antichrist, and the synagogue, school and bawdy house of satan. To this gathering belong, according to him, all heathen, Turks, Jews, schismatics, enemies of Christ and hypocrites.

Calvin also spoke of two churches, the true and the false. He maintained that all who in his day proclaimed the pure gospel were involved in a struggle similar to that of the prophets and apostles, men rejected and vilified and persecuted by those who pretended to be God's people. Neither external form nor impressive claims are sufficient. In the fourth book of the *Institutes* he argued that the true church was found among Israel so long as the people observed the covenant of the Lord their God. In the measure in which they forsook his ways and turned to idolatry and superstition, they lost that privilege of fruitful and saving fellowship with God. Still God did not completely forsake them but continued to address them with his word and sacraments. Thus no one could deprive them completely of the title as God's people and church. Yet where the word is publicly and with impunity trampled underfoot, the church ceases to be church. In this vein the Reformed creeds speak of the church on earth. Various names may be given to such a false and apostate gathering. Between the true and false churches is a warfare which may recognize no armistice. From within as well as from without the true church is always under attack. By various means and at all times the devil seeks to destroy the true church by obscuring and opposing the gospel

of God's grace in Christ and especially by deceiving men into accepting the false church as true. What is at stake in this battle throughout all generations is the reliability and inviolability of God's word of salvation. Most appropriately John Ruskin has commented on this, "I believe that the root of almost every schism and heresy, from which the Christian church has ever suffered, has been the effort of men to earn, rather than to receive, their salvation."

The Marks of the True Church

But how shall we be able to discern which is the true church? Here with one accord the Reformed confessions have spoken of the marks or qualities which distinguish the true church from the false.

There have been differences of emphasis on this point. Some of the earliest reformers spoke of only one mark: the pure preaching of the word. Soon there was added to this the proper administration of the sacraments. In many instances as also in our *Confession* the faithful exercise of discipline is mentioned as a third mark. Although himself an ardent defender of discipline, Calvin warned that in certain instances where the church was in process of reformation this third characteristic might still be sadly deficient. He counselled that believers should never separate themselves from a church which, though still far from ideal in its exercise of discipline, was making a valiant effort to reform and purify itself according to the word. Thus he preferred to speak of two marks.

In this article the ideal is held high. *The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishment of sin. To sum up the matter there is added: in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church.*

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The heart-beat of this confession is clear. God's people know themselves bound to his word. This does not make them servants of the dead letter. Rather, the word of God is living and sharper than any two-edged sword in challenging us with the issues of life and death. It demands whole-hearted allegiance to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. But this allegiance must manifest itself in obeying his revealed will. By means of his word and Spirit the Head and Savior of the church preserves and protects and purifies his people. All who undermine the authority of the word rob themselves and others of hearing the voice of the Savior. They have exchanged the word of the living God for the shifting opinions and theories of men.

It is likewise evident that these three marks sustain a very intimate connection to each other. Not one of the marks can exist effectively without the other two. Wherever discipline is neglected, the sacraments will be profaned by the presence of those who use them in ignorance, superstition or unbelief. Such corruption both results from and results in a conspicuous neglect of the pure preaching of the gospel. The charter of the church's life and liberty is the abiding word. Where this is obscured or denied, dissensions are bound to arise. The disturbers in Christ's church are not those who defend the fundamentals of the faith but rather those who in the name of tolerance accord human theories full rights next to God's truth. "The way to preserve the peace of the church," said Matthew Henry whose commentaries are still held in high honor by Bible-believing Christians, "is to preserve the purity of it."

Now a surprising conclusion is drawn. *Hereby the true Church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.*

It may well be questioned whether church members today will wholeheartedly subscribe to these words. Many insist that they can't make out which is the true church. It may be asked, whether they have ever earnestly and eagerly submitted both themselves and the congregation to which they belong to the scrutiny of God's word. It is so much easier and more comfortable to follow the line of least resistance. Many personal and

social ties bind us to the churches in which we were born. Yet such loyalties, commendable as they may be up to a point, may never obscure our loyalty to Christ and his word. Every church member has the obligation to discern *diligently and circum-spectly* in the light of the Scriptures which is the true church.

How this test operated in the days of the Reformation is instructive for us today.

The reformers were faced with almost insurmountable problems on this score. The visible unity of Christ's people was apparently shattered for all time. Protestants came to stand sharply over against Roman Catholics. Nor was there any apparent unity for a long time within the camp of the reformers. Zwinglians and Calvinists in Switzerland found each other as brothers in the faith only after several years. Meanwhile the distinctions between Lutherans and Reformed were more sharply accentuated. The evangelicals with one accord took sharp issue with the rationalists and mystics who undermined the authority of the Bible. In many communities and countries the Anabaptists were a divisive force, at times quarreling even more heatedly among themselves than with others. That the Protestant faith was not even more hopelessly divided may be attributed in large measure to the fact that Luther, Calvin and their followers insisted that the life of Christ's congregations be tested by these objective marks.

All evangelicals were agreed that because Rome continually and consistently persisted in its rejection of the doctrine of Scripture, all true believers ought to separate themselves at once from that organization as a false church. However, the reformers did recognize that in some sense the title church still applied. Luther compared that church in his day with Israel in the time of Hosea. "The Papacy is that which after baptism negates baptism and changes it into satisfaction; thus also they change the keys into satisfaction. We indeed admit that the papists also exercise the offices of the church, baptize, administer sacraments, etc., since they still bear the name of Christ and on the strength of his command do these things. But when they seek to use such an office against us, we declare this ac-

according to the judgment of Christ (John 16:3) as void and without power and regard them as really secessionists and apostates from Christ's church . . ." Thus he could add, "The papists have established a new, false church. They have replaced the ancient baptism with penances, introduced indulgences, instituted the sacrifice of the mass as an abominable idolatry, denied the doctrine of Christ's all-sufficient Mediatorship, added to God's word, and many other evils." In agreement with this Melancthon denounced the Roman church as schismatical and heretical. Bullinger compared the prelates and priests with antichrist. Because that church was full of idolatry, false doctrine and the innocent blood of martyrs, all true believers ought to separate themselves from her fellowship at once. Nor was Calvin's judgment much milder. Their teaching concerning true and false church was far from an ideal speculation; it was a most relevant and practical distinction applicable to the discernible realities of their own day.

Seemingly more difficult was the application of this criterion within the bosom of Protestantism.

All rejected the rationalism of the two Socini and refused church fellowship with those groups in Transylvania and Poland which adopted this false doctrine. Likewise, Lutherans and Calvinists denounced the notions of the mystics who had no appreciation of the visible church. In view of the excesses which characterized many of the Anabaptists, especially before the time of Menno Simons, their splinter groups were regarded as sectarian and schismatic. Among them was plainly discernible a strange admixture of truth and error. We need only recall the extreme claims of the leaders of the Munster episode to realize to what lengths emphasis on the "inner light" and the guidance of the Spirit apart from the written word often went.

This left the Lutherans, the Reformed and the Anglicans as the recognizable and recognized heirs of the historic Christian church. For many decades close contact was maintained between the last two. Bullinger taught in England for several years and exerted a powerful Calvinistic or Reformed influence during the early period of the Reformation in that land. Even

at the Synod of Dordt (1618-19) representatives of the English church were present and took part in the doctrinal deliberations.

Much more involved and tragic were the relationships between the Lutherans and the Reformed. The question soon arose whether the followers of Luther could in good conscience acknowledge the Swiss and French Calvinists as members of the true church. On this point Luther himself spoke at times sharply and heatedly. After the colloquy of Marburg (1529) he did not hesitate to urge the German princes to banish or even exterminate the "sacramentarians," as the followers of Zwingli were called at the time. Among the older preachers only a few followed the reformer himself. The younger generation, including such men as Westphal, Hartmann, Timann, Hesshusen and Beyer, were more fanatic. Most of the princes refused to follow Luther's advice in consequence of which Lutherans and Reformed existed side by side in many communities and cities. When the French Calvinists were persecuted for their faith, such Lutherans as Melanchthon, Marbach and Brenz wrote on their behalf to the French king. These they acknowledged as their brethren for Christ's sake, even though differences on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper existed. Several Lutherans were also deeply interested in closer fellowship with the Calvinists. Thus it is all the more regrettable that Melanchthon, whose influence was great in both groups, supposed that little good would result from a synod as some urged.

Similar differences of opinion on the Lutheran churches existed among the Calvinists. Many were convinced of a deep and underlying spiritual unity and refused to recognize a schism. To them the Lutherans were also true church. Others, as a result of the fanaticism of some of the younger Lutheran preachers which in a few instances led to persecution of the Reformed, insisted that schism was an undeniable fact. Still others claimed that a distinction had to be made between more and less true churches. These refused to consider the Lutherans a false church or sect.

No one urged the unity of all evangelical Protestant churches with greater consistency and conviction than John Calvin. All

who embraced the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether in Germany or Switzerland or France or England, constituted the one true church. In his second polemic against Westphal he urged the Lutherans not to destroy the unity and conjunction of those churches whom God together had liberated from Rome. To Cranmer he wrote urging an ecumenical synod of all churches where the word of God was truly preached. Although recognizing the presence of doctrinal differences on the Lord's Supper, he maintained that even on this point there was such a unity of conviction on its proper use, purpose and validity, that differences of opinion on the nature of Christ's presence could be treated with proper moderation. Because of this Calvin did not hesitate to sign the Augsburg Confession and urged others to do the same. Throughout his life he urged that the spiritual unity of Christ's people should also be visibly expressed.

The essential unity between Lutherans and Calvinists was also defended by Farel, Bude and Beza. Even John a Lasco, who had suffered so much at the hands of extreme Lutherans, never denounced the Lutheran churches as false. All these men spoke clearly on the distinction between true and false church. They repudiated church fellowship with Nestorians, followers of Schwenkfeld and Servetus, and the Anabaptists. But to them the Zwinglians, Lutherans, Calvinists, Waldensians and Bohemian Brethren, constituted the one true church of Christ. Even Dathenus argued that in certain circumstances it was permissible for Reformed parents to have their children baptized by Lutheran ministers.

A somewhat different position was taken by Bullinger, Peter Martyr and Haller. In view of the actual situation they insisted that the unity of these churches had been broken. As the opposition of the Lutherans in several quarters intensified, many of the Reformed became embittered. Even a joint synod, they felt, would bring no relief. But among the Reformed only Caspar vander Heyden maintained that the Lutheran church (here referring chiefly to the church at Frankfurt) was no longer a true church of Christ, because its official administration was

entrusted to men who were heretics, schismatics and persecutors of true believers.

In the *Confession de Bres* attaches himself largely to the position of Calvin. He often spoke in lofty and laudatory language of the Lutheran preachers and churches. In view of all that we know of his position from his life and writings, we may rightly conclude that this article does not allow us to brand as false churches all denominations other than our own. Such a narrow churchmanship contradicts both the spirit and the letter of the Reformed faith. This by no means invalidates the distinction between true and false church. That distinction is Scripturally defensible. With it all true believers must operate. The church in its organized form, both congregational and denominational, must always engage in testing its doctrine and life in the light of the marks indicated by God's word. No church on earth perfectly exhibits these, so that the command to continual reformation is always in order and ought to be obeyed. And wherever possible, all true churches of Christ ought to engage in drawing into closer fellowship with each other, in order that their common commitment to Christ as Savior and Lord may be more clearly and fully manifested.

The Reunion of Christendom

Since the days of the Reformation the question of reunion has engaged the attention of the churches. At times the insights and desires were stronger and purer than at others. Now with the marked development of modern communications and transportation our world has shrunk. It takes less time today to travel from New York to New Delhi, than it did in Calvin's day to go from Geneva to Wittenberg. We are far more aware of the problems of fellow believers in Africa, than men were of neighboring communities and countries in the past. For many years the various branches of reformatory Christendom seemed sufficient unto themselves. They knew little about each other; sometimes they even seemed to care less. During the last one hundred years the representatives of these churches have met each other first on the mission fields. Against the almost in-

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superable hosts of heathenism the messengers of Christ learned not only that they needed each other but also that often they had much more in common than they had ever dared to hope. This has prompted in large measure the ecumenical movement which has been burgeoning before our eyes especially since the close of World War II. Well can we understand why many have claimed that "the greatest event in the church's life" today is its growing external unity. Whether it is also the best that is happening should be carefully examined.

To discuss in detail the growing ecumenical movement in the light of the *Confession* at this time will not be possible. This would demand a separate and systematic treatment too detailed to be included here. Yet a brief survey of some of the salient aspects is in place. It should demonstrate that what our creed has to say about Christ's church, its marks and mission in the world, is extremely relevant.

Beginning with the Edinburgh conference in 1910 churches from many lands have met together to discuss the problem of church unity. Conferences have held regularly ever since. Some of them have dealt with faith and order; others addressed themselves more specifically to the task of the church. At Amsterdam in 1948 the World Council of Churches was born. It not only "came together." It declared its avowed intention "to stay together." During this period interdenominational councils of churches were established in many lands. Meanwhile many denominations united their forces. Already in 1925 the Methodists, Congregationalists and many Presbyterians joined to form the United Church of Canada. Similar mergers have taken place in the United States, not only between churches of similar background but also among those with widely divergent traditions of doctrine, church polity and liturgy. One of most widely acclaimed took place on the mission field, where Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed and Congregational groups joined to constitute the Church of South India.

In this ecumenical movement which has captivated the imagination of countless Christians throughout the world two

quite different schools of thought may be found. Many insist on a growing together in Christian fellowship short of organic union. They would argue that independent existence of distinct denominations even within one community does not destroy true unity. Others, and this group is gaining greater influence as the years pass, refuse to rest content until all denominations are assimilated in one great world church. In this vein Charles Clayton Morrison writes, "In a word, the whole aspiration and purpose of this world-wide movement among Christians is to bring the Church of Christ into an empirical existence so that we *can* see it, *can* lay hold of it, and so that it *can* lay hold of us and draw us to itself. The goal of the ecumenical movement cannot be envisaged in any terms short of the actual embodiment of the now unembodied Church of Christ."¹ Similar views are expressed by Leslie Newbigin, whose work *The Household of God* has won wide acclaim, "And, if the Council be regarded as anything other than a transitory phase of the journey from disunity to unity, it is the *wrong* form."²

Undergirding these efforts is a specific view of the nature and calling of the church in this world. Whether evangelical believers and churches can cooperate with this movement will depend in large measure on how well they are able to agree with this approach.

Among ecumenical leaders the "greatest scandal of Christendom" is said to be denominationalism, organizational disunity. This has been repeated so often, that many have come to believe it without proof. That Christ insists on one church organization seems to be widely accepted today. But precisely how this can be achieved in the present situation is not clear. On this point there is no unanimity. What is plain, however, is that church polity is stressed at the expense of doctrine. To quote Charles Clayton Morrison once more, "What, in a united church, shall we do with our differences? There can be only one answer. They must be welcomed and embraced as essential to the fulfilment of the Christian life."³ How the church can tolerate contradictory views concerning God, the nature of man, sin, Christ and salvation and still lay claim to a deep and real

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unity is never explained. Nor are we informed how such a united church can speak clearly to the world, when its leaders are not agreed on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. What is plain is that the ecumenical movement has a conception of Christ's church much more akin to that of Rome than that which has been championed by reformatory Christendom. Mohler, a Roman Catholic theologian of the last century, has contrasted the two views succinctly in his analysis of Lutheranism and Catholicism. "The latter teaches that there is first the visible church, and then comes the invisible, whereas Protestantism affirms that out of the invisible comes the visible church, and the first is the ground of the last."⁴

In view of this approach which is openly propagated, we need not be surprised that also those who maintain the Reformed confessions have been critical of the ecumenical movement. A wholehearted endorsement they regard as a betrayal of the Christian gospel.

Does this imply, then, that they are satisfied with the present situation? Indeed not. Together with evangelicals throughout the world they are deeply concerned with the brokenness of the church. Much that passes for denominationalism they would condemn in the light of God's word. Churches which have sprung up through the centuries in various parts of the world but holding basically the same doctrines ought to draw into closer fellowship. Avenues for fruitful discussion on the basis of God's word ought to be opened up wherever possible. Even deep wounds inflicted by past divisions can be healed by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. We have the promise of our Lord, to which all believers should cling firmly, "I will build my church." (Matt. 16:18) His wonder-working power to build and to bless is not straightened in our day or even by our failings. In him alone lies the hope of the churches. Those who are faithful to his word will learn to appreciate each other, as they take note of their common life in Christ. Instead of presuming that the tides of history will suddenly reverse themselves and bring into one organization all who name Christ's name within this generation or the next, they are content to pray and work and

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witness with less pretentious ambitions. The healing of the church's wounds, if this is to be permanent and pleasing to God, will be slow. Not our medicines but God's mercies will have to accomplish this miracle. Those mercies are experienced already now by all who seek their unity in the Christ of Scriptures. Not the ecumenicists who would unite what does not belong together but the evangelicals who by faith claim their oneness in the crucified and glorified Savior can sing in truth,

*"Elect from every nation,
Yet one o'er all the earth,
Her charter of salvation,
One Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses,
Partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses,
With every grace endued."*

The Marks of the True Believers

Since the church is composed of members, it follows with undeniable logic that the characteristics of the true church are reflected also in the life of its membership. Thus the *Confession* properly addresses itself to *the marks of Christians*.

Here we see anew how the Reformed confessions have ever attempted to maintain a wholesome balance in their presentation of Christian truth. This is manifested first of all in their view of the essential nature of the congregation. We take sharp issue with Rome which would reserve the marks largely to the objective ordinances and the hierarchy which represents Christ on earth and bestows grace in his name. This does violence to what Scripture teaches about the unique nature and responsibilities of professing Christians. "But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." (I Pet. 2:9)

Here several marks are listed. Yet a careful reading of this section demands that we recognize the first characteristic of the Christian life as determinative. It sets its stamp upon all the

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rest. As the true church in obedience to her Lord proclaims the word in its purity, so the true Christian will respond to that proclaimed word *by faith*. This is what God plainly requires of all who hear the gospel. Those who are true and proper members of his congregation learn to live by faith. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen . . . and without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him." (Hebr. 11: 1, 6)

Even as churches may deceive themselves into thinking they are true church of Christ when they are not, so also church members can deceive themselves and others on the score of the legitimacy of their membership in Christ's church. No one who is devoid of saving faith has any right to claim a portion with the people of God. This does not commit us to the "pure church" ideal, since hypocrites can hide their deficiencies from others and even the unbelieving and ungodly can for a season remain undetected within the fellowship of the church. Yet the word always challenges us to self-examination and lays upon the congregation the task of disfellowshipping those who plainly give evidence that they are not of Christ. (I Cor. 5:11; II Thess. 3:14; Titus 3:10, 11) On the basis of these marks believers are to exercise mutual supervision and censure among themselves and thus assist in keeping the church free from all that which gives offense to Christ and his faithful people. These marks are objective characteristics of a life of faith, the manifestation of faith in both confession and conduct. Thus the Reformed churches have insisted on experiential religion and warned against a dead orthodoxy without falling into the snare of making specific spiritual experiences a standard for admission into church fellowship. No one, so they argued cogently from God's word, can or may attempt to judge the secrets of the heart.

This persistent refusal to judge the heart, however, does not imply that *the faith* requisite for church membership cannot be to a proper degree ascertained. Its initial activity is described as *having received Jesus Christ as the only Savior*. There

is more here than meets the eye. The Reformed churches have never been satisfied with a mere repetition of these words. In order that men and women may make the good confession, they were first of all to be instructed in the facts and mysteries of the Christian faith. This was regarded as one the chief responsibilities of Christ's church, which has been ordered by the Savior to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them . . . ; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I command you." (Matt. 28:19, 20) Faith according to the Scriptures consists of both a sure knowledge of God and his promises revealed in the gospel and a hearty confidence that all our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. This requires indoctrination, so essential to a well-rounded and wholesome Christian life in these days of spiritual indifference, superficiality and apostasy.

Such resting in Christ for salvation stimulates the believer to spiritual activities. These are characteristic of all who are saved. Without attempting to be exhaustive in its treatment of the subject, the *Confession* outlines what happens in the lives of those who have received Christ as *the only Savior*. Here we confess that (1) *they avoid sin*, which for Christ's sake they have learned to know and hate and flee as contrary to God's glory and their own joy in the Lord, and (2) *they follow after righteousness*, the pattern and purpose of which is revealed in God's word. In obedience to the God of their salvation they (3) *love the true God and their neighbor* which is the fulfilment of the whole law. (Rom. 13:10) In pursuing this goal which is pleasing to the heavenly Father they (4) *neither turn aside to the right or left*, so that their service may be truly rendered in singleness of heart, and (5) *crucify the flesh with the works thereof*. (Gal. 5:24)

But even as the true church on earth never exhaustively and perfectly manifests the glory of God's grace within her, so also believers so long as they are in this life do not attain to perfection. Even the holiest men in this world have only a small beginning of this true obedience to the God of their salvation. Therefore we acknowledge, *But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities*. These

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are of many kinds and manifest themselves in a variety of ways throughout their earthly pilgrimage. Often their faith is weak, and their love grows cold for a season. In many things those who belong to Christ stumble. Yet this in no wise cancels out the radical and definitive distinction between believers and unbelievers. In a very real sense the church is composed in this life of sinners, but sinners of a very definite sort. They are sinners who know and acknowledge their sins and trust that in Christ those sins have been freely forgiven them. A Christian can and does fall into sin; he never can continue in sins until the end of his life. Of true believers it can be confidently affirmed that *they fight against them* (all these *infirmities* which they still find within themselves) *through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him.*

The Marks of the False Church

In conclusion we are reminded that the false church can be readily and clearly distinguished from the true. It also has marks, external evidences and manifestations of the spirit which moves it, by which it can and should be recognized by all who confess Christ.

These marks are a direct contradiction of what is found in the true church.

The first deals with its attitude to God's word. The false church is said to *ascribe more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God.* At once we are reminded of Rome and its pretensions. Its patent failing has been a refusal to live by the Scriptures as the all-sufficient rule for faith and life. Traditions have so much crowded out the living preaching of the gospel, that obedience to ecclesiastical rules and regulations has turned men away from salvation by faith in Christ alone. To this is added that the false church *will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ,* which is nothing other than his royal and regulative word. In this light all Protestant church organizations must also test themselves. All churches which claim

descent from the Reformation must be zealously engaged in continually reforming and purifying themselves from all intrusions in their faith and order which are not squarely based upon the Scriptures.

To this is added the second mark of the false church. *Neither does it administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His word, but adds to and takes away from them, as it thinks proper.* Especially the Roman church has made itself guilty of this. Not only is its theology of the sacraments faulty; it has also perverted the Lord's Supper beyond recognition into an "accursed idolatry." Meanwhile it has removed the cup from its members and substituted a wafer for ordinary bread. Closely connected with this is its reliance *more upon men*, that is, the priests who officiate daily at the altar, *than upon Christ* who alone can feed and nourish our souls to life eternal.

The final characteristic of the false church is that it *persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness and idolatry.* Instead of seeking to unite true believers into a holy spiritual fellowship, it drives them from its bosom and offers a secure place only to such who will without question submit to its unauthorized and unscriptural demands. That this is still the case with Rome needs no further proof than mention of the disabilities and even physical death to which evangelical believers are exposed in such Catholic lands as Italy, Spain and especially Colombia. Nor does hiding behind the skirts of the civil magistrates absolve Rome from her responsibility. We may indeed appreciate that in several lands Roman Catholic theologians have begun to speak somewhat more appreciatively of the Reformation and its ideals than before. We rejoice also that Rome is increasingly active in some places to give the Bible in the hands of its people. But so long as that church seeks to wield the sword against true believers, she stands condemned as an organization which has forfeited its claim to be true church of Jesus Christ.

The situation in the visible church has become immeasurably more complicated since the days of the reformers. New en-

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emies of Christ and his cause have invaded the precincts of his congregation. The powers of sin and satan are hard at work to destroy the cause of our Lord. But in this changing scene the *Confession* still provides us with an admirable standard in the light of which men may know where is the true church of Christ. Against that church not even the gates of hell can and shall prevail.

1. How is the word **sect** used in Scripture? What connection is there between **sect** and **heresy**? 2. By which several characteristics can a **sect** generally be known? 3. Which heresies have invaded the Christian churches during the past four centuries? 4. Mention several modern sects. List their chief teachings. Evaluate them in the light of Scripture. 5. Why did the question of church union and reunion first appear on the mission fields? 6. Why did the Reformed fathers prefer to speak of "true" church instead of "pure" church? 7. When does the church cease to be church? Can you prove this from Scripture? 8. Who are **hypocrites**? Can man know who they are? Explain. 9. Why do we distinguish between the attributes and the marks of the church? What specifically is the distinction? 10. Since all churches fail to manifest the marks perfectly, how can there be a distinction between true and false church? 11. Is the Roman Catholic church false church? Can Roman Catholics be saved? Explain. 12. How must every believer help to maintain the marks of the true church? 13. Is it Scriptural to regard the pure preaching of the Word as the chief mark? Prove your point. 14. Which specific duties devolve upon a member who is convinced that the church to which he belongs is no longer true to Christ? 15. How have the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches perverted the administration of the sacraments? 16. Should our churches engage in discussions with Rome for the purpose of preparing the way for possible reunion? Explain your position.

Chapter 30

The Spiritual Polity of the Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church; that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also

that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities. By these means everything will be carried on in the Church with good order and decency, when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy.

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ORDER, so Pope once said, is heaven's first law. Judged by all that is being written today, this dictum seems to have the approval of the champions of church union.

Doctrinal differences have been increasingly camouflaged, while attention is directed to the various systems of church government which at present divide Christendom. To them it seems easier to get agreement on the matters of order than on the questions of faith. In this way they hope to attain the ideal of a united church, either ignoring or ignorant of the fact that faith and order are inextricably intertwined.

Not all church leaders, however, are ready to allow themselves to be deceived on this score. In a recent news release we are acquainted with the refusal of the Methodist Church of Ceylon to enter into a church union with other Protestant bodies on that island. By a unanimous decision it voted to reject the proposal which provided that all clergymen would "renew their ordination vows." This would commit them, in accordance with pattern set for the United Church of South India, to the episcopal system of church government in fact if not in theory.

Much more is at stake here than many people realize. Forms of church government are rooted in deep convictions concerning the nature of Christ's church. For that reason it is not surprising that our *Confession* devotes a few articles to this subject.

The Scriptural Basis of Church Polity

No church can long exist in this world, much less flourish, without some form of order or government. This, according to the Reformed faith, must be soundly based upon the Holy Scriptures as the all-sufficient rule for our faith and practice.

We believe that this true Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word.

The principles of Reformed church polity were first clearly enunciated by John Calvin. Much more frequently than either Luther or Zwingli and with far greater balance than the Anabaptists he set forth a system which is saturated with the Scriptural teaching. The Calvinistic churches could never have so successfully resisted in their struggle against prelates and princes, had not their leaders learned the lessons taught in Calvin's school.

From time to time the reformer of Geneva has been attacked for imposing on the churches a legalistic and Biblicistic rule by which believers have been brought again into ecclesiastical bondage. Many have protested against the institution of ruling elders. Not a few describe the supervision which these exercise, also by means of the annual visitation of all the members, as an infringement of personal liberties. The enforcement of creedal subscription and agreement is pictured as a heavy yoke. Those who speak in this vein often express their preference for Luther and his work, conveniently forgetting that also the German reformer gave directives to the congregations for their organization. That these were not so full and detailed may be ascribed not only to Calvin's greater administrative genius but also to Luther's preoccupation in the early years of the Reformation with the major doctrinal issues which separated the evangelicals from Rome. The two reformers actually shared the same conviction that the church ought to be governed according to the spiritual polity taught in God's word.

This insistence on order is characteristic of many of Calvin's writings. For him it followed from the nature of Christ's church. "For although he alone (i. e. Christ) ought to rule and reign in the Church, and to have all preeminence in it, and this government ought to be exercised and administered solely by his word—yet, as he dwells not among us by a visible presence, so as to make an audible declaration of his will to us, we have stated, that for this purpose he uses the ministry of men whom

he employs as his delegates, not to transfer his right and honour to them, but only that he may himself do his work by their lips; just as an artificer makes use of an instrument in the performance of his work."¹

Here the principles to which the Reformed churches have sought to adhere, are clearly set forth.

All government in the church belongs properly to the Lord Jesus Christ alone. No pope or bishop, no priest or pastor, no synod or church committee or even the congregation may rob him of his crown rights. "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ also is the head of the church," according to Paul, "being himself the Savior of the body." (Eph. 5:23) His rule in the church is rooted in and reflects his redemptive work on our behalf. This he exercises by his Holy Spirit in accordance with the teachings of the word. The Bible is the "magna charta" of all sound church government. It safeguards against all encroachments on the spiritual liberties of his people while at the same time safeguarding them against every fantastic and fanatic appeal to the Spirit apart from the written word. To be sure, it is a *spiritual polity*. Christ does not allow for physical pressures and penalties within his church. But this does not obviate the necessity of rules and regulations, "for God is not a God of confusion, but of peace." (I Cor. 14:33) Therefore the church of all ages is exhorted, "Let all things be done decently and in order." (I Cor. 14:40)

This order, so we believe and confess, *our Lord hath taught us in his Word.*

Agreement on whether the Scriptures speak clearly and authoritatively on matters of church order is sadly wanting in our day. Among the Quakers, Plymouth Brethren and certain mystical sects we find a strong aversion to all church polity, largely on the grounds that rules hamper the free movement of Christ's Spirit among his people. Especially during the last century many have protested that although the New Testament plainly indicates that there should be some kind of rule in the church, it nowhere indicates a preference for a specific kind

of church organization. Scholars claim to have discovered in the Bible the rudiments of the episcopal, the presbyterian and the congregational forms, so that churches ought to feel free to choose that which appeals to them in any given circumstance.

At this we who are Reformed demur. It is our conviction that Christ has not left his people in ignorance as to how they should be ruled. This position is admirably set forth by Berkhof, "Reformed Churches do not claim that their system of Church government is determined in every detail by the Word of God, but do assert that its fundamental principles are directly derived from Scripture. They do not claim a *jus divinum* for the details, but only for the general fundamental principles of the system, and are quite ready to admit that many of its particulars are determined by expediency and human wisdom. From this it follows that, while the general structure must be rigidly maintained, some of the details may be changed in the proper ecclesiastical manner for prudential reasons, such as the general profit of the churches."² With these basic principles our *Confession* is concerned at this point. Only by holding them inviolate are we faithful to the word of Christ and may we confidently expect the blessing of his Spirit in the church's life.

Divergent Systems of Church Government

Before discussing our confessional position on this subject, we ought to review the several systems of church government which have developed during the centuries. Against this background we can come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the heritage which is ours.

(1) *The Congregational or Independentistic polity.* In several respects this is the simplest form of church government which has been advocated. Often its advocates appeal to the New Testament, urging that in the apostolic churches we do not hear about councils and synods, an elaborate hierarchy and an ecclesiastical tradition binding upon all congregations. Today especially we are urged to remember that this form accords best with our democratic processes and safeguards the liberties of the Christian believers.

Here governing power rests not with the officers or clergy but the entire congregation. Membership is attained by the voluntary association of the individual, who should always be left completely free to belong or not to belong at will. Officers are representatives who derive their authority from the body of believers and are pledged to carry out their decisions. Although associating together in councils and assemblies, the churches are at liberty to accept or to reject the decisions made by such bodies. This system is widely championed by the Congregationalists, Baptists, Disciples of Christ and numerous fundamentalist and Pentecostal groups.

Several serious objections ought to be raised against this system. It clearly fails to root church authority in Christ as head and king of his church. Its emphasis on the voluntary choice of the individual believers obscures the gracious work of God who in Christ has chosen a people for himself and preserves them in communion with himself and each other. By emphasizing the autonomy of the local congregation, this system fails to do justice to the church's calling to manifest its unity in the world. Among most of these groups we find a devaluation of the visible church with the result that church membership is often reduced to a matter of personal preference. The doors have often been widely opened to arbitrary action, by which pastors are lightly dismissed from their position, as well as to heresy and theological imbalance, since a commonly accepted creed has no place in such a system. Here there seems to be little realization of the church's unity as those "that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours." (I Cor. 1:2)

(2) At the opposite end of the spectrum we discover the *Episcopal* system which insists that the unity of the church must come to expression in government by bishops as the legitimate successors of the apostles. The prelates are to be regarded as a separate and self-perpetuating order, with the result that the believers have no real share in the government of the church. Yet the Bible nowhere regards the clergy as such an

order. Nor do we find the apostolic office described in Scripture as administrative and self-perpetuating. Instead these leaders appointed by our Lord preached the gospel, established congregations, and then in cooperation with the believers ordained elders and deacons. In this system violence is done to the spiritual maturity of Christian believers.

(3) This rule of the church by bishops as successors to the apostles has been carried to its logical conclusion in the *Papal* system. Here the Roman pontiff is accorded honor as Christ's vicegerent and representative on earth. He is heir to all the supposed prerogatives of Peter as chief among the apostles and the one upon whom Christ builds his church. Thus the Roman church has become an absolute monarchy. To the pope is ascribed infallibility in all matters of faith and church government, when he speaks "ex cathedra" or in his official capacity. Under him is the hierarchy, to whom special graces are given and whose duty is to rule the church in strict obedience to its visible head. Nowhere is the voice of the congregation recognized. Its calling is to render unquestioning obedience to the hierarchy as spiritual superiors.

(4) In the early years of the Reformation a new system of church administration was devised by Erastus (1524-1583), who argued that the church as a visible society owed her existence and form to regulations enacted on her behalf by the civil authorities. It has been called the *Erastian* system and has from time to time been applied in various degrees to ecclesiastical life in Germany, England and Scotland. No other officers are recognized in the churches than ministers of the word. These have no power to decide or discipline. Church and state are to all practical purposes fused into one organization. Needless to say, the headship of Christ over his church is flagrantly violated by such a system.

(5) Of later date is the *Collegial* or National-Church system of government, first developed in Germany and later introduced into the Netherlands. The church is defined as an association of believers within a prescribed territory or nation. All congregations are regarded as subdivisions of the one national church

with no real existence, rights or powers apart from the national organization. To the state is ascribed the inherent right to supervise the life of the church. Both the crown rights of Christ and the spiritual independence of the church under Christ are disregarded. Under Hitler's regime the German churches were again forced into this pattern.

(6) The *Presbyterian* system, adopted by all Reformed or Calvinistic churches, differs markedly from the above not only in details but especially in its fundamental principles.

Here the kingship of Christ is zealously propounded and defended. The break-up of Reformed unity in such lands as Switzerland, the Netherlands and especially Scotland was occasioned in large measure by a desire to restore Christ to his rightful place as Lord of his church. In no way may the state interfere with the life and calling of the church. The basic unit of ecclesiastical life is not a provincial, national or international synod but the local congregation organized under its own consistory or session. Its officers, elected indeed with the approval of the congregation, derive their authority solely from Christ. Each local church, although recognized as independent and endowed with power to regulate its own life according to the Scriptures, ought to band together with other Christian congregations in a broader fellowship. Such assemblies possess a derived but nonetheless very real governing power. Their decisions when taken in harmony with God's word and the regulations officially adopted by the churches, are binding. The details of this system are spelled out in the *Church Order*.

The benefits of such a Scripturally-grounded system of church polity, when conscientiously pursued, are inestimable. Individual members and congregations have their proper rights safeguarded, while at the same time supervision of congregational life by other congregations through the broader assemblies serves as a check on both tyranny and heresy. Here liberty within the framework of ecclesiastical law always to be tested by the Scriptures gives the best assurance for the promotion of a vigorous and responsible and maturing spiritual life within all the churches.

The Men Whom Christ Employs

When the Reformation broke out, the state of the Christian church was exceedingly confused and corrupt. Not only did the congregation suffer from doctrinal deformations; it was also in bondage to a hierarchy which had grown to monstrous size by the innovation of offices and positions nowhere countenanced by God's word.

Calvin provides us with a graphic description of the subversion of the ancient form of church government under papal tyranny. Many unworthy men had been foisted upon the parishes, leaving even drunkards, fornicators and gamblers in positions of high trust. Presbyters were ordained not to feed and rule God's people with the sound gospel but to offer sacrifice as priests. Those who were ordained as deacons served as assistants at the sacrifice of the mass. Even worse was the practice of assigning to one person numerous official positions which he could not discharge. Thus Calvin mentions, "We may now see, in the courts of the princes, young men who held one archbishopric, two bishoprics, and three abbeys. It is a common thing for canons to be loaded with five, six or seven benefices, of which they take not the least care, except in receiving the revenues."³ Many distinctions were introduced to enable certain of the clergy to lord it over others. There were secular and regular priests; archdeacons and deacons and subdeacons; bishops and archbishops and cardinals and metropolitans. This pyramid of authority climaxed in the pope, who though claiming to be Peter's successor did not know the apostle's modesty who called himself "by no other appellation than that of *brother, or fellow bishop, or colleague*."⁴ A thorough reformation in church government was no less mandatory for those times than in doctrine and worship.

To Luther belongs the honor of having reinstated the preaching of the gospel to its rightful place in the church's life. This was of paramount importance according to him, since the church lives by God's word. In the congregation the chief officer was not a priest who officiates at an altar but a preacher who

declares to men the full counsel and will of God concerning their redemption. The congregation is called to submit to this doctrine and discipline of the Scriptures. In view of this marvellous beginning it is the more regrettable that the German reformer left the discipline of the church largely in the hands of the princes, thus providing an entering wedge for state interference in ecclesiastical matters.

Calvin provided the churches with a church polity more completely in harmony with the Bible. Ceaselessly he warned against usurpation of power within the church by the civil magistrates. Contrary to the accusations levelled against him, he did not tolerate a union of church and state, even though arguing that there ought to be close cooperation between the two spheres. It was his conviction that Christ provided the church with office-bearers by which the true religion might be preserved. Quoting from Ephesians 4 he insisted, "In this passage he (i.e. Paul) shows that the ministry of men, which God employs in the government of the Church is the principal bond which holds believers together in one body. He also indicates that the Church cannot be preserved in perfect safety, unless it is supported by these means which God has been pleased to appoint for its preservation."⁵

For three or possibly four offices within the churches Calvin finds ample warrant in God's word.

The first is that of *pastors*, whose duties in several respects parallel those of the apostles. "By means of his ministers, to whom he has committed this office, and on whom he has committed grace to discharge it, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the Church, and even affords some manifestation of his own presence, by exerting the power of his Spirit in this his institution, that it may not be vain or ineffectual."⁶ These pastors, however, are allocated to local congregations. This was in opposition to the practice prevalent among the Anabaptists and other sects, where men wandered from place to place to collect a few followers around themselves for a season.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Calvin distinguished between "pastors" and "teachers," a position followed in the

Church Order. Both he regarded as permanent offices within the church. "The difference between them I apprehend to be this—that the teachers have no official concern with the discipline, or the administration of the sacraments, or with admonitions and exhortations, but only with the interpretation of the Scripture, that pure and sound doctrine may be retained among believers; whereas the pastoral office includes all these things."⁷ Among the early Congregationalists, especially in New England, several local congregations for a time had both a pastor and a teacher. The practice in the sense envisioned by Calvin, however, never became current in most Reformed churches. The reformer took the position that "evangelists" as mentioned in the Bible constituted an "extraordinary" and thus temporary office in the apostolic churches. These men were "inferior to the apostles in dignity, but next to them in office, and who performed similar functions." He did admit that "God has sometimes raised up apostles or evangelists in their stead, as he has done in our own time." Study of this matter in recent years has led the Christian Reformed Church to judge that "it does not recognize the office of 'evangelist' as an office distinct from that of the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the established churches and an office inferior to it with respect to prerequisite scholastic training."

In addition to pastors and teachers the church, according to Calvin, needs elders and deacons. These offices are plainly indicated in the New Testament. The former are "governors" of the church; "persons of advanced years, selected from the people, to unite with the bishops in giving admonitions and exercising discipline. For no other interpretation can be given of that injunction, 'He that ruleth, let him do it with diligence.' (Rom. 12:8) Therefore, from the beginning, every Church has had its senate or council, composed of pious, grave and holy men, who were invested with that jurisdiction in the correction of vices, of which we shall now treat. Now, that this regulation was not of a single age, experience itself demonstrates. This office of government is necessary, therefore in every age."⁸ Likewise should every church have its own deacons. To them

is to be entrusted the care of the Lord's poor. From Romans 12:8 Calvin deduced that deacons ought to be of two kinds—some to administer alms and others to succor the poor, distressed and sick. This distinction also has not been pursued in the Reformed churches.

Occasionally we read in the Reformed churches of some who occupied quasi-official position. These were known as comforters of the sick, catechists, exhorters and in the London refugee congregation under John a Lasco prophets. As temporary assistants they performed useful services in unusual circumstances. None, however, were equated with the permanent offices which Christ has instituted. The propriety of recognizing deaconesses, mention of whom was made by Paul, has also received attention. The church has generally recognized the unique contributions which women can make in the work of Christian mercy without conferring upon them official status in the congregation. That they are excluded by the New Testament from the offices of teaching and government seems abundantly plain. In the light of all the above it is evident, thus, that the Reformed churches have generally recognized and confessed three permanent offices in Christ's church.

The Council of the Church

Now these three offices exist for the spiritual welfare of the congregation. This demands the closest possible cooperation, wherein the unique character and contributions of each may be preserved. On this basis the *Confession* declares that *elders and deacons . . . together with the pastors, form the council of the church.*

Concerning such a council several important issues have been raised.

It is necessary, first of all, to determine as precisely as possible what Calvin, who first used the term and from whom it was borrowed by de Bres, meant thereby. Here mention is made of something which had long since fallen into disuse in the Christian church. In the medieval church "councils" com-

posed of bishops and archbishops under the direction of the pope had been convened. In the local congregations, however, all authority was vested in the parish priest who was responsible to his bishop.

Now it has been argued, notably by Sohm, that Calvin by introducing the idea of local councils departed radically from the Biblical emphasis on the church as Christ's spiritual body. He is said to have fashioned an authoritarian instrument for the administration of the church in imitation of the city councils. As grounds for this contention are mentioned that he spoke of these assemblies as a "senate or council" and that he appealed to "experience" rather than to Scripture.

For some years this issue was heatedly debated in the early Reformed churches. This is evident also from the several editions of our *Confession*. The French speaks of this body "comme" (as) a council or consistory. Similarly the Latin introduces the preposition "quasi" and the Dutch "als." The English in conformity with de Bres' original edition simply mentions *the council of the Church*. By introducing the preposition the churches sought to escape the conclusion that such a council or consistory ruled with the same jurisdiction and power as the city councils of those days. Now Calvin himself is crystal clear on this point. He never allowed that consistories might use physical means. Repeatedly he warned against tyrannizing in the congregation. That he spoke of such a spiritual ruling body as "senate" was in imitation of Bucer, the reformer of Strasburg, who used the term to indicate that no ecclesiastical officer possessed such ruling authority as an individual. Jurisdiction in the church rests in the corporate body, called either a council or consistory. The latter term was first adopted by the synod of Nimes (1572) to prevent misunderstanding, as if rule within the church was similar to that within the state. Thus the church council is an instrument by which our liberties in Christ Jesus are not restricted or obstructed but rather established, guaranteed and promoted. No minister or elder or deacon exercises his office in the congregation as an individual. All decisions are taken by the group properly constituted and recognized in the church.

In the New Testament we do not specifically read of the organization of such church councils. Yet this does not invalidate the Reformed position. Always the Bible speaks of a plurality of offices and office-bearers within even the newest and smallest congregation of Christian believers. Titus is charged to "appoint elders in every city, as I gave thee charge." (Tit. 1:5) When calling on the new churches upon their return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas "appointed for them elders in every church." (Acts 14:23) In Jerusalem "the apostles and elders were gathered together to consider" the problem laid before them by the delegation from Antioch. (Acts 15:6) The church at Philippi had a plurality of both "bishops (elders) and deacons." (Phil. 1:1) That the task of ruling rested upon the elders corporately follows from what we read in Hebrews 13:17. Peter also addressed the elders in the church as a group in reminding them of their God-given calling (I Pet. 5:1, 2)

More involved seems to be the question which of these officers properly constitute the council or ruling body in the congregation.

That there is a difference between *Confession* and *Church Order* on this point is apparent. The former speaks of *elders and deacons . . . together with the pastors*. The latter defines the consistory as the body composed of pastors and elders.

The difference dates back to early Reformed history. Calvin conceived of the church council as consisting of ministers and elders. The French churches immediately included the deacons, even for a while assigning the task of catechizing members in their homes to the deacons. This decision was rescinded by the synod of Orleans (1562) The Scottish churches at first followed the pattern of the French but later excluded the deacons. In a Lasco's church in London weekly meetings of ministers and elders were held to govern the church in matters of doctrine and discipline, while monthly meetings of ministers and elders and deacons were introduced to regulate general administration and diaconal matters. From time to time this subject has been debated. Several eminent canonists insist that the Bible does not allow deacons a share in the direct spiritual government

THE CHURCH'S WITNESS TO THE WORLD

of the congregation. Others insist that equal fervor that the unity of the three offices, reflecting the triple office of our Lord and Savior, requires the presence of all three in the church council. It ought to be evident that the difference is largely one of emphasis. Even the *Church Order* plainly assigns a decisive position to deacons in the church council, when certain basic matters must be considered and decided. And where a consistory is small, deacons are always "added to" the pastor and elders.

Neither position, it would seem, ought to be pushed to an extreme. The underlying unity of all three offices in Christ may never be obscured. Yet the distinctive contribution of each office ought not to be forgotten either. Thus in larger congregations deacons will ordinarily have their own meetings, leaving the supervising of the doctrine and discipline of the congregation in the hands of the ministers of the word and the elders, except in those matters specifically assigned to them together with the others in the *Church Order*. This pattern, first introduced in the London refugee congregation, has much to commend it. Meanwhile, when correctly assessed in the light of the historical situation, neither *Confession* nor *Church Order* needs revision on this point. The differences in emphasis supplement each other beautifully, and we do well to preserve them.

The Church's Calling in the World

From this consideration of the offices established by Christ in his church, we may rightly deduce to what work his people are called. The congregation exists not for her own sake but to the praise of him who called her out of darkness into his marvellous light. (I Pet. 2:9)

Not everything may be undertaken by the church in this world. This needs emphasis today. Often we find the church expected to build schools, maintain nurseries, introduce recreational programs for the youth, plan programs in good citizenship and directly influence the course of politics. Whatever seems to go wrong in society is charged against Christ's church. In consequence, many church leaders find themselves over-

burdened with so many responsibilities in and for the community, that the proper calling of the church is forgotten.

What a well-regulated church life requires is outlined by the *Confession*: *that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities.*

The church's chief concern is with *the true religion*.

In this world everything seems to conspire against the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints. The aim of the enemy of God and his people is the destruction of the church. This is the background of the church's struggle in the world. In order to keep the faith inviolate believers are urged by Paul, "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12, 13) Thus the preservation of *the true religion* is not easily secured.

In such a struggle unity of command, of plan and of attack is essential. We dare not for a moment forget that in this present season the church is to be militant. Our strength, however, lies not in ourselves but in God who has provided us with the weapons which are called here *these means*. The doctrine which is according to godliness is intimately bound up with the proper organization of the church.

First of all, therefore, the church is called upon to use the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of the living God for our salvation; (Eph. 6:17) *The true doctrine* must be *everywhere propagated*. To be sure, the horizons of church leaders in the early days of the Reformation were largely limited to their own communities and countries. So much needed reformation in the life of Christ's church, that little attention could be given to missionary propagation. Yet to suppose that the reformers were totally oblivious of or indifferent to the needs of the pagan

peoples is hardly fair. When a Huguenot settlement under de Villegagnon was proposed for Brazil, Calvin urged that two preachers be sent along not only to strengthen believers in the Christian faith but also to proclaim the riches of the gospel to the heathen. In the days immediately after the synod of Dort (1618-19) much attention was paid by the Reformed churches of the Netherlands, in connection with the Dutch East India Company, to spreading the Gospel. Too little do modern students of the missionary enterprise seem to know about the work in Ceylon, Formosa, the Spice Islands and other Dutch possessions of that day carried on for more than a century. Foundations were laid in several places upon which later missionaries could build. All this belongs to the propagation of the true faith.

This missionary responsibility, however, is intimately bound up with the offices instituted by Christ in his church. It is not the calling of a few pious souls who organize themselves into a society for the propagation of the gospel. All mission work ought to be ecclesiastical. In this way Christian believers are bound together in a world-wide fellowship. Nor may *the true doctrine* be construed as anything less than the full round of Scriptural teaching. The question is not for Reformed believers: How little must a man know about Christ to be saved? Rather, the question is: How much is the church called to declare in God's name? The answer is clearly given by our Lord himself. "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe *all things* whatsoever I command you." (Matt. 28:19, 20) Neither at home nor abroad may the church rest satisfied, until *all things* revealed in the word are proclaimed.

Two other tasks rest upon the church in this world.

The first of these concerns the supervision of the congregation: *likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means*. By Reformed believers church discipline has always been regarded as one of the hall-marks of the true church. This is specifically assigned to the elders together with the min-

ister of the word. The details are not spelled out here, although we are reminded that this must be done *by spiritual means*, a public testimony to the difference between the Reformed and Romish conceptions of such discipline.

Finally, the true church will always be active in the work of *Christian mercy that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted*. Here the loving sympathy of Christ our good and faithful highpriest is reflected in the life of the congregation called by his name. In no other church has the diaconal office as instituted by Christ come to such rich and full expression as among the Reformed. In these days of social security and state relief the congregation ought to be reminded of her specific calling in this field, lest she be robbed of much of her peculiar glory.

By these means the people of God "may grow up in all things into him, who is the head, even Christ; from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love." (Eph. 4:15, 16)

The church is the community of new life in Christ Jesus. Here is revealed the secret of Christ's transforming power among men. By his word and Spirit he nourishes his people to everlasting life. It is a life of truth and obedience and love. Never may one aspect of this life crowd out the others, lest the lineaments of Christ within his body in its visible manifestation on earth be marred. This *good order and decency* must be maintained, for by such means the Savior is pleased to communicate his saving strength to the life of mankind. Any depreciation of "rules" for ecclesiastical life laid down in harmony with God's word will disturb and possibly even destroy the church's life. Christ has provided us with offices and order in order that our union and communion with him and each other may be preserved. Only here can be experienced that full and fragrant life of which believers sing,

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*"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love:
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."*

In the congregation which orders its ways according to the Scriptures we have a foretaste of the fellowship which shall be ours in heaven.

1. In what sense does Scripture seem to allow greater latitude to the church in matters of polity than doctrine? 2. Which are the basic principles of Reformed church government? 3. On what grounds do some Christian groups reject all church government? What are the results of such a policy? 4. Show how the true liberty of believers is better safeguarded by the Reformed system than by Erastian and by Congregational polities. 5. Can you prove from Scripture that congregations should unite in denominational fellowship? 6. Does the **Church Order** of Dort err in speaking of four offices? Explain. 7. Which duties are assigned by the Bible to ministers of the Word? On what grounds is the task of ruling also assigned them with the elders? 8. Is there still need for deacons today? Which office should administer finances in the church? 9. Why do Reformed churches insist on corporate action and responsibility by the officers rather than individual and personal? 10. What was the office and function of the New Testament evangelist? 11. Discuss the place and function of deaconesses in the New Testament church. 12. Which offices constitute the consistory? Give reasons for your answer. 13. Should we preach Reformed doctrine to the heathen? Is there a difference between the gospel and Reformed doctrine? 14. By which **spiritual means** are transgressors restrained and punished in the church?

Chapter 31

The Authority of the Church Officers

We believe that the ministers of God's Word, the elders, and the deacons ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the Church, with calling upon the name of the Lord, and in that order which the Word of God teaches. Therefore every one must take heed not to intrude himself by improper means, but is bound to wait till it shall please God to call him; that he may have testimony of his calling, and be certain and assured that it is of the Lord.

As for the ministers of God's Word, they have equally the same power and authority wheresoever they are, as they are all ministers of Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church.

Moreover, in order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or slighted, we say that every one ought to esteem the ministers of God's Word and the elders of the Church very highly for their work's sake, and be at peace with them without murmuring, strife, or contention, as much as possible.

ARTICLE XXXI

BY ITS critics Calvinism has been continuously condemned as inimical to true liberty. Often mention is made of the stern laws enforced upon the Genevan citizenry contrary to the will of many. Penalties are said to have been inflicted for "harmless pastimes." Outspoken religious dissent was severely dealt with. Belaboring the point of Calvin's intolerance, the critics recall the tragic tale of Servetus who was burned at the stake with the full approbation of the reformer.

Calvin's escutcheon, indeed, was not without stain. "That most Christian gentleman of Europe" was a child of his age, which does not excuse but will explain in a measure the position which he took. More than that, the Reformed in a later age have expressed public repentance and regret for Calvin's share in the Servetus episode, something which the Roman Catholics and even the Lutherans who executed Krel at Leipzig have never done.

In spite of whatever weaknesses cleaved to his work, Calvin has rightly been recognized as the chief champion of civil and religious liberty in his age.

The Anabaptists proclaimed loud and long the freedom of the Christian man. Their movement, however, repeatedly disturbed good order within the land and threatened the foundations of the state. Nor were their congregations free from inequities and intolerance. The ban was so rigidly applied in certain instances, that pious souls suffered under censures which could not be justified by God's word, Individuals and groups excommunicated each other with an abandon which ill accords with the love which they professed.

The glory of the Reformed faith is that it strove for liberty within the framework of law. This began within the church

as the assembly of God's people. From there it spread to influence the state, so that de Tocqueville called it upon observation "a democratic and republican religion." Here was no legitimate place for tyranny, as the present article of the *Confession* demonstrates.

The Election to Church Office

One of the cardinal principles of the Reformation was the spiritual freedom which Christians have in Christ. This to them was not merely an article of faith. It was to be applied to life in church fellowship.

This demanded developing a sound church polity against two extremes, both of them nefarious to the welfare of our life in Christ.

On the one hand were the Romanists who had robbed the believers of all their God-given rights. Even more than the believers in the Old Testament were church members in medieval times regarded as immature. All rights of governing were exclusively vested in the hierarchy. This created among the Romanists a passivity out of which the Reformation delivered them only with great difficulty. Not without reason did the reformers frequently appeal to Paul's words, "For freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage." (Gal. 5:1)

With equal insistence, however, they called to mind a further word of the apostle, "For ye, brethren, were called for freedom; only use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh, but through love be servants one to another." (Gal. 6:13) They were constrained to apply this also in their opposition to a prevalent practice of the Anabaptists among whom all Scriptural church organization tended to degenerate into sectarianism. Here anyone who felt called to preach went forth at will. Criticizing the work of Zwinglian, Lutheran and Reformed preachers as half-hearted and often little better than that of the Romish priests, they invaded Christian congregations, sowed the seeds of dissension and then went wandering on their

way to some other community. We need not question the sincerity of these self-styled preachers. Their work, however, was revolutionary and boded little good for the onward march of a sound reformation in doctrine and life among Christian believers. Often it was an appeal for liberty without any respect for law.

Both extremes, so the reformers insisted, were contrary to the genius of that Christian freedom which the New Testament proclaimed. In both instances men forced themselves upon the churches contrary to a lawful calling from God and his congregation. In this vein the *Confession* pleads for *lawful* elections of ministers and elders and deacons in Christ's church.

Luther was the first to proclaim without hesitation the office of all believers. What he failed to do was develop this as an integral part of the polity of the churches. To Calvin belongs that honor.

After having protested against the corruptions of office in the Roman church, where priests and prelates lorded it unlawfully over Christ's heritage, he urged that grievous disorders spring from a neglect of observing the church's constitution. "Therefore, that restless and turbulent persons may not presumptuously intrude themselves into the office of teaching or governing, it is expressly provided, that no one shall assume a public office in the Church without a call."¹ Here he calls to mind the example of Paul "who, when he wishes to prove his apostleship, almost always alleges his call, together with his fidelity to the execution of the office. If so eminent a minister of Christ dare not arrogate to himself an authority to require his being heard in the Church, but in consequence of his appointment to it by a Divine commission, and his faithful discharge of the duty assigned him—what extreme impudence must it be, if any man, destitute of both these characters should claim such an honour for himself." In view of this he addressed himself to four topics which are alluded to in this article: 1—what are the qualifications of ministers; 2—in what manner they are to be chosen; 3—by whom they ought to be appointed;

and 4—with what rite or ceremony they should be inducted into their office.

As a cardinal principle of sound church government, therefore, we believe *that the ministers of God's Word, the elders, and the deacons ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the Church.*

This is for the Reformed churches a most solemn matter.

No one may force himself and his teachings upon Christ's church. Nor may any individual (whether royal family or wealthy patron or influential member) or civil power (city council) arrogate to itself the right to choose for the church its officers. Yet this does not give unlimited power to the congregation. This is made clear here by the reference to *lawful election*. To this end rules and regulations conformable to God's word have been drawn up. Here all things must be done decently and in order. Believers should realize the weight of spiritual and moral responsibility which rests upon them. In choosing such officers they are not employing some person to render service for a longer or shorter time at the discretion of the congregation alone. Rather, they are confirming a call which comes from Christ himself who as head of the church is also the supreme bishop and shepherd of our souls. Thus the election is to take place *with calling upon the name of the Lord*. In not a few Reformed churches, notably that shepherded by a Lasco in London, a day of solemn fasting was proclaimed as proper preparation for the work of electing officers. As in all other aspects of the church's life God's people must adhere to *that order which the Word of God teaches*.

In this connection the Reformed churches have never claimed that Scripture prescribes the details of their church polity. In fact, these were regarded as secondary and subsidiary to sound doctrine. This does not reduce church government to an indifferent matter. The broad outlines are clearly revealed in the New Testament. Also, apostolic example provided them with several of the details. In this work of electing, the congregation works under the supervision and in close cooperation

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with the officers already appointed by Christ and his church in the past. Historical ties have always received their just due among the Reformed. Even new congregations are not organized by individual believers apart from ecclesiastical approval and supervision. For this position appeal is made to the apostles and their assistants who ordained elders in connection with an election by Christian believers.

Now the Bible plainly teaches, "If a man seeketh the office of a bishop he desireth a good work." (I Tim. 3:1) Ecclesiastical regulations were never intended by the Reformed churches to stifle the free movement of God's Spirit who calls and stirs men up to labor for Christ in this world. In this manner Christ himself always provides his church with a faithful ministry in all three essential offices. But, and this is apparent to anyone, not all who desire the good work are lawfully elected by the church. To many this seems to pose an insoluble problem. Must we suppose that these men err in their desire? Or is the congregation in error, when it fails to confirm their inward desire by its lawful election? Out of this seeming impasse Calvin may help us with his distinction between the internal and the external call. The former is the witness of a good conscience that one seeks office not from pride or the desire for prestige and power but rather for the honor of God and the advancement of his cause in this world. Now the church is in no position to judge these hidden motives of the heart. Rather, it is guided in its choice by public confession and conduct. Guided by the Holy Spirit and in prayerful dependence upon Christ, the church conducts her elections in the conviction that those whom God is pleased to use at that specific time will be chosen. The word of Scripture, "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of Jehovah" (Prov. 16:33), may with proper restrictions be applied to church elections which are conducted in the fear of the Lord. Such elections should be regarded as God's attestations to the validity of the internal call. Their necessity ought never be called into question. A believer may be misled into supposing that he is called of God to some office. He who feels that he is called of the Spirit to office should not

ignore the plain teaching of Scripture that the Spirit rests upon the whole congregation which lives by the word. Therefore are men *to wait until it shall please God to call them*. By the testimony of church election alone may they *be certain and assured that it is of the Lord*.

By observing this delicate and divinely ordained balance between internal desires and gifts and external approbation on the part of the believing church Christ provides his people with a continuing ministry for his glory and the salvation of souls.

The Equality of Ministers of the Word

During the long centuries between the ancient and reformatory churches Rome had developed a church polity which contradicted the spiritual freedom of believers. All congregations were regarded as merely parts of one world church. Its center and capital was Rome, where the chief bishop or pontiff had his seat. He alone was regarded as the true representative of Christ upon earth. Stressing visible organization as it did, Rome argued that the church needed besides Christ as the invisible and spiritual head of his people in heaven a visible head on earth. In the wake of increasing corruption and deformation, this system had ruinous consequences for the true church. Power to formulate doctrine and to levy assessments and to make multitudinous changes was largely in the hands of the Italian clergy headed by the pope. Even the Babylonian Captivity of the papacy (1307-1377), a result of this evil trend, did not successfully check the ambitions of Rome.

Against this the reformers protested vehemently. Their objections were not prompted by practical considerations, however, but by sound principle. They saw the evil results accruing from the primacy of the pope as an attack on the kingship of Christ over his church so plainly taught in Scripture. (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10; etc.) Calvin summarized this line of argument admirably. "Or if they wish me to speak in plainer terms, since the Scripture declares Christ to be the Head, and

ascribes this honour to him alone, it ought not to be transferred to any other, except to one whom Christ has appointed as his representative. But such an appointment is not only nowhere to be found, but may be abundantly refuted by various passages."² Appeal was made also to the fathers of the ancient church, whom Rome claimed to hold in high honor. Both Cyprian and Jerome are quoted by Calvin as contradicting the pretensions of the papacy by their stress on the place and power of local congregations and on their unity in Christ as the proper bond of church fellowship.

In unequivocal language the equality of all true ministers of God's word is announced here. It is basic to the Reformed conception of Christ's church on earth. *As for the ministers of God's Word, they have equally the same power and authority, wheresoever they are, as they are all ministers of Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church.*

What is at stake here involves more than meets the eye at first reading.

All power in the church to formulate doctrine and to govern the congregations and to care for the poor roots in Jesus Christ alone. This he bestows upon the officers of the local congregations; not to one man or a small group of men. If Christ indeed is the sole head, then no church may lord it over other churches and no minister may lord it over other ministers. The apostle Peter, whom the Romanists acclaim as the first pontiff, nowhere exercised direct personal authority over Paul or any other apostle. Rather, he addressed those charged with ruling the local congregations as his fellow-elders. (I Pet. 5:1) This sounds the death blow to all hierarchy within Christ's church.

How absolute power corrupts, also in Christ's church, is evident in the Roman church. There the conscience is bound by unwarranted accretions in doctrine. Under pain of excommunication the Roman Catholic must believe in the infallibility of the pope when speaking "ex cathedra." He likewise must subscribe to the immaculate conception of Mary as well as her

bodily assumption into heaven. Nor is the process halted in our day. A member of the Roman hierarchy confidently predicts that within the next century the pope will decree three more doctrines concerning Mary, declaring her co-redemptrix of the human race and mediatrix of all graces and Queen of Heaven participating with her Son in his rule over the world. Furthermore under the aegis of the pope Christian worship has been grossly deformed. No one can approach God in Christ rightly except by the mediation of the hierarchy. Rules for fasting and feast days as well as auricular confession to the priest are made mandatory. These are some of the sad fruits of concentrating ecclesiastical power within the hands of one man.

This emphasis on the equality of all ministers of the word must be zealously guarded against another form of attack. The modern emphasis on efficiency has also invaded the precincts of Christ's church. In its interest numerous executive and administrative posts have been created and assigned to ministers ordained to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. Not infrequently such men, be it with the best of intentions, exert an influence in church assemblies which in time may undermine the principle of equality to which Reformed believers have always subscribed. Here we do well to be warned before it is too late.

With church union so vigorously propagated in these times, we find again how relevant is this matter of church organization. Doctrinal differences are usually tolerated when churches get together, but in every proposal involving the Anglicans concessions are made to the episcopal system of government. Meanwhile this is presented as a relatively minor matter. It would seem that some of the most significant lessons which the Reformation taught are too lightly dismissed. No road leads more surely to tyranny in Christ's church than that of concentrating power in the hands of a few. Meanwhile under such a system the local congregation is left withering on the vine. Only a *spiritual polity* under the lordship of Christ who rules us by his word and Spirit safeguards true liberty under law.

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The Responsibilities of the Members

Reformed church polity seeks above all things to agree with the teachings of God's word. In proportion to its faithfulness to this basic commitment it has been able to preserve an admirable and beneficial balance. Both those who lead and those who are led have received from Christ rights and responsibilities. Where these are mutually recognized, the church lives in peace and prospers.

Although the followers of Calvin have spoken freely and frequently of office, this receives an emphasis among them quite contrary to that found in churches which champion a hierarchy. Office, according to Scriptures, is not so much a position of prestige as of trust. This demands a readiness on the part of those appointed by Christ to render service for his sake. Paul does not hesitate to speak of himself and his colleagues "as your servants for Jesus' sake." (II Cor. 4:5) The Savior himself has set this pattern when rebuking his disciples who were again disputing about who should have preeminence. "Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:25-28) Always the stress falls on service. In this respect those who clothe office in the church are to follow in the footsteps of the Savior, whose office they are privileged to reflect.

This does not imply, however, as so many Protestants seem to suppose, that officers in the church are bound by the wishes of the congregation. Both call and commission come from Christ, to whom they are always fully responsible. Paul never wearies of reminding his readers of this, when his apostleship was called into question. "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? or am I striving to please men? if I were still pleasing men, I should not be a servant of Christ." (Gal. 1:10)

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In this way the Bible plainly circumscribes the rights and responsibilities of all who are members of the church. No sharp line of cleavage may be drawn between clergy and laity. The Greek words from which these terms derive are applied to the whole congregation. The distinction, therefore, between those who hold office and those who do not is primarily one of calling and function.

What is required in the offices is faithfulness to Christ in the assigned tasks. Of all ministers of the word should be required the faithful proclamation of God's truth and administration of the sacraments. In this they are "ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." (I Cor. 4:1) Likewise, the elders are to rule in Christ's name with all diligence. They do well to remember Peter's admonition, "Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, . . . according to the will of God, . . . neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock." (I Pet. 5:2, 3)

In this light we understand why the *Confession* now comments briefly but pointedly on the respect which all church members owe to their lawfully elected officers. *Everyone ought to esteem them very highly for their work's sake.* They are to be measured not first of all by their abilities or disabilities but rather by the high calling which they have received from Christ. Paul goes so far as to say that he will account it a small thing to be judged by the congregation at Corinth, knowing how easily they transferred their affections from one leader to another. (I Cor. 4:3-5) He also counsels Timothy, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses." (I Tim. 5:19) Rather, the esteem which God requires of his people for his servants must come to expression chiefly in seeking *to be at peace with them.* In three ways such peace may be seriously disturbed to the dishonor of God and the disgrace of the church. Those who engage in *murmuring* against them, complaining and grumbling usually for petty reasons or without any just cause, violate Christ's command "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:3) Serious

results arise from such murmuring. These are *strife* and *contention*. In such troubled waters the devil has a hey-day. No one ought to take sharp issue with those who rule in the congregation except on substantial Scriptural grounds. This requirement should be clearly understood and appreciated by all members of Christ's church. It does not demand that everyone must praise the decisions which are taken as always wise and advantageous. Yet so long as these do not plainly conflict with God's word, believers are to abide by them readily and cheerfully.

This duty to maintain peace in the Lord's house, however, is by no means unlimited. By their ordination vows all officers are pledged to direct the life of the congregation according to the holy word of God. Thus the *Confession* inserts a restrictive phrase: *as much as possible*. Never may Christian believers submit to ministers of the word who teach false doctrine and to elders who fail to rule according to the plain teachings of Scripture. The rights of protest and appeal, as well as the possibility of dismissing unfaithful officers, are outlined in the *Church Order*. The course of many a Reformed congregation undoubtedly would have been radically different during the past few centuries, if believers had discharged their responsibilities in accordance with the spirit of the *Confession* to which they claimed to subscribe. In certain instances greater peace and unity would have been preserved and some serious schisms possibly averted. On the other hand churches which have defected from the historic Christian faith might have remained loyal to the faith once-for-all delivered to the saints.

To be a living member within the living church of Christ is no sinecure. The foes are many and multiplying. The call comes therefore to everyone to be faithful to him who rules us from heaven by his word and Spirit. This loyalty must be above all and always prompted by a deep and devoted love for the Savior whose

*"Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."*

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1. Against which two extremes did the reformers have to warn?
2. What do the terms "clergy" and "laity" mean according to the Bible? Do we use them correctly today?
3. What is the relation between the "office of all believers" and the special offices in the church?
4. What differences obtain in the status of believers in the New Testament compared with that of Old Testament believers? Mention the rights and responsibilities which are greater now than before Christ's coming.
5. What procedures are followed to insure a lawful election in the church?
6. What is the relation between consistory and congregational meetings? Does the latter have independent power? Is the Reformed position Biblical?
7. Should women take part in congregational meetings? Give your reasons.
8. Should elders and deacons be chosen for a limited term or for life? Why?
9. Wherein does a call to office from God consist? How may a person be sure he has that call?
10. Do you think all our congregations have the same power? Do you think all our ministers have the same power? Explain.
11. How should church members show esteem for their officers?
12. On which grounds may officers be deposed? What provisions are given for this in the **Church Order**?

Chapter 32

The Ordinances of Christ's Church

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into

the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God.

ARTICLE XXXII

WHEN CALVIN first arrived in Geneva, he found it a cess-pool of every vice which flourished in those days. When he passed away, he left a city of peace and prosperity which was the envy of all Europe.

What the reformer found at the time of his coming is summarized in the statement of Philip Schaff, that outstanding church historian of the last century. "The Genevese were a lighthearted, joyous people, fond of public amusement, dancing, singing masquerades, and revelries. Recklessness, gambling, drunkenness, adultery, blasphemy, and all sorts of vice abounded. Prostitution was sanctioned by the authority of the State, and superintended by a woman called the *Reine du bordel*. The people were ignorant. The priest had taken no pains to instruct them, and had set them a bad example." Within some twenty-five years the character of the city so changed, that John Knox affirmed it to be "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the Apostles."¹

This reformation sprang from the pure preaching of the Christian gospel. It was manifested in the reorganization of the life of the church according to the Scriptures. And because ecclesiastical life was purified from its former chaos and corruption, the results of Calvin's labors lingered long. The orderly lives of the Genevan citizenry were in large measure the fruits of the order which came to prevail in the church. This is the order to which the *Confession* commits us in this article.

The Propriety of Church Regulations

Christ has conferred power upon his chosen ministers to rule the church which he has purchased with his own blood.

This is done in his name. This calling must be discharged in accordance with his will. In order that the Savior may have the preeminence in his congregation, the *Confession* at this point directs attention to the thorny question of ecclesiastical rules and regulations.

In the days of de Bres this was a burning issue. Many abuses had crept into the church since the days of the apostles. Some had become so deep-rooted and far-reaching that only a radical reformation according to Biblical principles could restore a measure of spiritual health. Everywhere men clamored for liberty which had so long been denied them. In not a few instances this desire ran riot, with the result that men were in danger of confusing liberty with license. Seemingly there was a measure of justification in the Romanist charge, that the evangelicals were revolutionaries. They had rejected many conciliar decisions as well as rules laid down by the hierarchy for worship and conduct.

That the Romanists insisted on a servile and unquestioning obedience is plain. This authority to regulate the believers' lives was supposed to extend to the minutest detail. Furthermore, it was a power of ascending order, by which the lower clergy submitted to the higher and the higher to the pope as Christ's vicar. In support of their theory they appealed to the supposed transfer of the power of the keys to Peter. (Matt. 16:19) Here as well as in John 20 mention is made of retaining and remitting sins. In this way salvation depended upon the hierarchy which pronounced absolution only for those who submitted to its rules. That this is still the position of Rome is evident from a comparatively recent papal pronouncement. "The Church is the mystical Body of Christ, a Body ruled by Pastors and Teachers, a society of men headed by rulers having full and perfect powers of governing, instructing and judging. It follows that this Church is essentially an unequal society, that is to say, a society comprising two categories of persons; pastors and the flock; those who hold rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful . . .

As for the multitude, it has no other right than that of allowing itself to be led and, as a docile flock, to follow its shepherds."²

Now the reformers also insisted on order and discipline within Christ's church. Thus the *Confession* does not hesitate to speak of *those who are rulers in the Church*. Their authority, however, was to be exercised only in harmony with the Bible. This did not preclude the propriety of church ordinances but did prevent them from developing beyond those bounds which accord with the welfare of God's people.

Calvin chose his position in this respect carefully, avoiding the pitfalls of both tyranny and anarchy. In opposition to the Romanists he wrote, "For their supposition, that no truth remains in the Church, unless as it be found among the pastors, and that the Church itself stands no longer than it appears in general councils, is very far from having been always correct."³ He called attention to the decay and deformation found in Israel (Isa. 56:10, 11; Hos. 9:9; Jer. 6:13; 14:14; Ezek. 22:25-27) and in some of the apostolic congregations. (II Pet. 2:1; II Thess. 2:4; Matt. 24:11, 24) Meanwhile he also warned, "Let no person conclude from what I have said, that I am inclined on all occasions, and without any discrimination, to weaken the authority of pastors and bring it into contempt. I only mean to suggest the necessity of discriminating between some pastors and others, that we may not immediately consider persons as pastors because they bear that title."⁴ Neither the majority vote of the believers nor the authority of the pastors safeguards the true liberties of the Christian church. This is attained only when all learn to submit themselves to the rule of Christ by his word.

In the New Testament, as we have remarked earlier, by no means all the details for ecclesiastical life are spelled out. In harmony with the spiritual maturity of those who are Christ's a large measure of latitude is allowed. Only thus would the gospel take root among peoples of all lands and all times. But lest unsound doctrine and undisciplined living corrupt the church, certain regulations are necessary. Only in this way are good order and decency preserved. The principles of God's word for

our faith and life must speak effectively to people within their historical situation. Out of this need to address her contemporaries relevantly the church has fashioned not only her creeds but also her ordinances. Such is both *useful and beneficial* for our life in Christ.

This calling belongs properly to *those who are rulers in the Church.*

Theirs is a high and holy calling. Christ has charged them with responsibility for the church which he loves. Repeatedly, therefore, the apostles warned church leaders in their days against those who spread false doctrine or sowed the seeds of ungodliness in the church. These must be rebuked and restrained and, should such preliminary measures fail, banished from the body of true believers. To this end certain explicit rules and regulations are required, in order that all may know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of the Lord. (I Tim. 3:15) This regulative power includes authority to explicate and enforce the laws by which Christ would have his people live. All ecclesiastical ordinances must be in harmony with the Scriptures. They ought not be regarded as new and strange regulations but rather applications of Biblical principles to the life of the congregation. Included will be rules for public worship, election of officers, reception and dismissal of members, administration of properties, and church discipline. The one great aim must be *the maintaining of the body of the Church.*

With this aim in mind the *Confession* clearly defines the limits within which this power to establish ordinances ought to move. Those who bear rule in the church *ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted.* Once again we are reminded that the Savior alone is lord and king of his church.

On the Binding of the Conscience

Closely connected with the matter of church ordinances is that of the liberty of the Christian conscience. Already Luther had called attention to this in his *Treatise on Christian Liberty,*

The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, and On the Councils and the Churches. In the church spiritual freedom to serve God according to his word must be maintained at all costs. To this end the *Confession* lays upon the lips of Reformed believers the testimony, *And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever.*

On this basis the fathers justified their rejection of much of Roman Catholic worship. The whole system of auricular confession together with the penances which it imposed was an intolerable burden. Nor did they hesitate to brand the Mass as "an accursed idolatry." Any appeal on the part of the Romanists to conciliar decisions was refuted with the contention that those who ruled in Christ's church were bound by the written word. The Scriptures were the true and only charter of Christian liberty. Yet none of these reformers tolerated the notion that therefore church ordinances were worse than useless and could be disobeyed with impunity. Liberty in Christ's church might never be confused with the right on the part of either the rulers or the people to do as they pleased.

Here we must learn to distinguish carefully.

We live in a climate radically different from that of the early days of the Reformation. Instead of insisting on rule upon rule in the churches, men are fond of registering complaint against and heaping ridicule upon every ordinance which is laid down. Much of this is defended as liberty of conscience.

Only Scripture can make plain what is true liberty of conscience. It is under all circumstances to be bound by the will of God which is declared in his word. Hence the question is never what the individual likes or dislikes. Any move in this direction opens the church to the tyranny of a few fanatic spirits. All who in the name of good conscience object to certain church ordinances are under obligation before God and man to defend their position Biblically. This alone will preserve the church from the excesses of both tyranny and anarchy.

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Let us listen to the manner in which Calvin speaks on the subject. He was well aware that in the churches some agitated against church ordinances which had been introduced as a restriction on their freedom in Christ. By way of example he addresses himself to "the kneeling practised during solemn prayers." This he claimed could be argued as both of God and of man. That it has the approbation of God's word and was followed by the apostles is plain. When then church rulers preserve this ancient custom, all men in the congregation ought to submit. Nevertheless some will argue, "What liberty of conscience can be retained amidst so much attention and caution?" To this he gives a pointed reply. "It will be very well supported, when we consider, that these are not fixed and perpetual laws by which we are bound, but external aids for human infirmity, which though we do not need, yet we all use, because we are under obligations to each other to cherish mutual charity between us . . . For what a source of contentions would be produced by the confusion of these things, if every man were permitted to change, at his pleasure, what relates to the general order, for it would never happen that the same thing would be agreeable to all, if things were undetermined and left to the choice of every individual. If any one object, and resolve to be wiser on this subject than is necessary, let him examine by what reason he can justify his obstinacy to the Lord."⁵ Here then he warns against that rank individualism which has so often destroyed the peace and concord of Christ's church. No appeal to conscience is allowed, except it be soundly based on God's word.

But Calvin proceeds even farther. He is not unaware of the dangers of importing all kinds of usages into the church without warrant. At the same time he fails not to warn that Christians may not destroy the unity of the church by their insistence upon personal opinions. "Now, it is necessary to exert the greatest diligence to prevent the intrusion of any error which may corrupt or obscure this pure use of ecclesiastical regulations. This end will be secured, if all the forms, whatever they may be, carry the appearance of manifest utility, if very few are admitted, and principally if they are accompanied with the instructions of a faithful pastor, to shut the door against all

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corrupt opinions. The consequence of this knowledge is, that every person will retain his liberty in all these things, and yet will voluntarily impose some restraint upon his liberty, so far as the decorum we have mentioned, or the dictates of charity, shall require."⁶

These words of pastoral counsel deserve to be remembered by the whole Christian congregation.

Time and again decisions must be made by the rulers of Christ's churches. Some of these concern such matters as the time of worship, the language which shall be employed, the frequency with which the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper shall be administered. Others deal with introducing choir singing into the services, placing flowers on or near the pulpit, and making use of Christian symbols. Not a few congregations have been sadly torn by dissension on such and similar matters. Calvin urges us in these indifferent matters to walk a middle way. Only that which is truly *useful and beneficial* for the congregation as a whole ought to receive a place. Meanwhile those who are not immediately persuaded should impose some restraint upon their liberty and refuse to disturb the peace of the church by agitating about non-essentials.

The Defense of Church Discipline

On one subject, however, the reformers and their disciples were adamant. This was the restoration of the divinely-ordained discipline within all Christian congregations.

In his earlier period Luther was a staunch defender of church discipline. He spoke out against all those who defected from sound doctrine or walked in open ungodliness. Yet in the churches which took his name this could not be carried out consistently. The reformer himself did declare, "Therefore, according to the command of God, all men are under obligation to shun them and withdraw from them." But without ecclesiastical courts there remained to the Lutheran preachers only the first key of the kingdom, that of gospel preaching. Soon their churches were wedded in many places to the states in which

they existed. To these was entrusted the task of keeping the church of Christ pure.

Calvin insisted on a clear distinction between temporal and spiritual power. Never might the church arrogate to itself power to interfere with the calling of the civil magistrates. In like manner the state was not to infringe upon the true liberties of the church. All citizens were subject to the laws of the state and should be punished when guilty of transgressing its laws. The church alone had the right, bestowed upon it by Christ as head and king, to determine who might and who might not belong to its spiritual fellowship. Believers, therefore, had the obligation of placing themselves under the supervision and discipline of those who were charged by Christ with ruling his church. No one might compel men to belong to the body of believers, but those who did belong were subject to the ecclesiastical ordinances. These plainly included excommunication according to the word of God in the case of the unbelieving and impenitent.

In several respects this was an innovation. Although the early Christian churches recognized and maintained a rather stringent discipline of doctrine and life, much of this had fallen into disuse during the centuries. In certain instances the papacy made use of the ban and the interdict. This practice, so the reformers argued cogently, was a far cry from the discipline ordained by Christ and outlined in his word. Whole provinces and countries were at times robbed of spiritual care, especially when the Roman pontiff deemed it necessary to humble a proud ruler. For the rest the common people were left at peace in their ignorance. Little care was exercised to promote a wholesome piety among the masses and to maintain the holiness of the sacraments. People who lived in open wickedness, even known fornicators and blasphemers and atheists, could partake of the sacred ordinances. In such chaotic conditions it was not easy to institute anew the order and discipline framed in the New Testament.

Among the Reformed the necessity and profit of church censures were universally recognized. In our *Confession* we

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acknowledge that it *tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.*

Since church discipline has largely fallen into disuse today, a few words about its necessity and nature may be in order. Some churches revise their rolls by simply erasing from them the names of those who are no longer active members. In no sense can this be equated with the supervision of doctrine and life which Christ requires of church officers. Where discipline is still practiced, more attention seems to be given to conduct than to doctrine with the result that the church is in danger of losing her character as "pillar and ground of the truth." The apostle Paul insisted on the former when commanding the Corinthian congregation "not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat." (I Cor. 5:11) He likewise insisted, "A factious man (heretic) after a first or second admonition refuse; knowing that such a one is perverted, and sinneth, being self-condemned." (Tit. 3:10, 11)

Calvin, who discusses the subject thoroughly, says several pointed things which we do well to remember.

All true discipline roots in and springs from the royal word of Christ. "Thus we see, that the power of the keys, in these passages, is no other than the preaching of the gospel." What he means by this becomes abundantly clear. Here no external and physical penalties may be applied. One of the chief concerns will always be the welfare of the sinner yet never to the obscuring of serving Christ in this matter. "Considered with regard to men, it is not so much authoritative as ministerial; for, strictly speaking, Christ has not given this power to men, but to his word, of which he has appointed men to be the ministers."⁷

Such discipline which serves Christ in ministering his word to men is a most serious matter, however. "The Church binds him whom it excommunicates; not that it consigns him to perpetual ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and

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manners, and already warns him of his final condemnation, unless he repent. The Church looses him whom it receives into its communion; because it makes him, as it were, a partaker of the unity which it has in Christ Jesus. That no man, therefore, may condemn the judgment of the Church, or consider it as of little consequence that he is condemned by the voice of believers, the Lord testifies that such judgment of believers is none other than the promulgation of his sentence, and that what they do on earth shall be ratified in heaven. For they have the word of God, by which they condemn the perverse; they have the same word, by which they receive the penitents into favour; and they cannot err or dissent from the judgment of God, because they judge only by the Divine law, which is not an uncertain or earthly opinion, but the holy will and heavenly oracle of God.”⁸

This is strong language. Yet it passes the test of God's own word to us. The manner in which such discipline which ends in excommunication must be pursued is outlined in the *Church Order* rather than in the *Confession*. That it is *requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God* we here affirm. With that principle no one who is self-consciously Reformed would disagree.

1. What did Calvin accomplish in Geneva?
2. Mention several unscriptural ordinances imposed by the Roman church.
3. What is meant by traditions? Does our Lord condemn all traditions in the church?
4. Prove from Scripture that the church may and should make ordinances for her life upon earth.
5. How would you explain that some church members have no respect for officers and ordinances in Christ's church? How serious is their sin?
6. How should we deal with persons who refuse to obey a church ordinance on the grounds of conscientious scruples, even though they cannot prove that the ordinance is unscriptural?
7. Mention several reasons why discipline is essential to the church's life.
8. Which procedures does Scripture require for lawful church discipline?
9. Can people lawfully excommunicated from Christ's church be saved?
10. What steps are involved in having the disciplined member reconciled? How should we regard those who leave the church to escape discipline?
11. How must members of the congregation cooperate in the disciplining of the unfaithful?
12. Doesn't discipline disturb peace and concord in the church rather than promote it? Explain.

Chapter 33

The Signs and Seals of God's Grace

We believe that our gracious God, taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us, thereby to seal unto us His promises, and to be pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us, and also to nourish and strengthen our faith; which He has joined to the Word of the gospel, the better to present to our senses both that which He declares to us by His Word and that which He works inwardly in our hearts, thereby confirming in us the salvation which He

imparts to us. For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment.

Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Lord has instituted, which are two only, namely, the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ.

ARTICLE XXXIII

IN THIS ARTICLE we are introduced to one of the most significant and controversial doctrines of the church. It concerns the sacraments. These consist of short and simple actions which on the surface seem self-explanatory. Yet nowhere has debate and dissension so dimmed the grace and glory of our Savior's gifts to his church as here.

Possibly our "knowing in part and seeing in part" at this point may be attributed in large part, as Calvin has suggested, to satan's attempt to turn our eyes away from Christ who "is the true object presented by them." Into this snare many may have stumbled and caused others to stumble by the heat which was generated in acrimonious arguments. Yet few, we would believe, did so wilfully and maliciously. The concern of all true Christians is to magnify the crucified and glorified Savior who is the guarantee of our salvation. To this end we need more than a penetrating mind; we need a believing heart filled with love.

In the sacraments we deal with the mysteries of the Christian faith. Here God's grace is symbolized and sealed in connection with certain rites ordained by our Lord. Only in faith should we undertake to speak about them. Such faith does well to voice the prayer of Edmund Spenser in *An Hymne to Heavenly Beautie*,

*"Love, lift me up upon thy golden wings
From this base world unto thy heavens hight,
Where I may see these admirable things
Which there thou workest by thy sovaine might,
Far above the feeble reach of earthly might,
That I thereof an heavenly Hymne may sing
Unto the God of love, high heavens King."*

For in these holy ordinances bequeathed to the church our gracious God proclaims the wonder-working power of his love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Sacraments as an Article of Faith

The only language which once again we may employ is that of faith. Of this we are reminded, when taking upon our lips the introductory words: *We believe that our gracious God . . .*

Such a reminder is not unnecessary. Much has been spoken and written about these solemn rites which constitute an important part of our life as Christ's church. Often the words were stained too much with vain reasoning which sought to solve the mysteries of our salvation as these were visibly set forth in the sacraments. Not without good cause does G. W. Bromiley say, "Indeed, the more we study the matter, the more we see that these simple signs instituted and used by God involve depths which cannot be easily plumbed and thus give rise to problems which are not easily solved."¹ They are intimately bound up with every aspect of Christian truth. The historical circumstances wherein God wrought our salvation in Christ Jesus is the framework wherein alone we can assess the sacraments rightly. And being what they are, these ordinances speak directly to our spiritual condition and need in the present. Yet so wide is the range of divine redemption herein reflected, that the sacraments lift our eyes to the future when God shall finalize his work for us in the return of the Savior and the ushering in of the eternal kingdom. Bavinck thus correctly appraises them as "the touchstone of every theological system."

We shall find ourselves, therefore, occupied with almost every aspect of Christian doctrine. This causes a large measure of heartache. What should join God's people together is too often yet a stone of stumbling on the road to Christian brotherhood. The symbols of our unity still speak of our dividedness. But there is a credit as well as debit side to this ledger. By means of many discussions and debates the teachings of God's word have come into sharper focus. In consequence of this, we may believe that the lives of many believers have been deepened and enriched. Because of church history it has become virtually impossible to take the sacraments for granted and employ them as external and empty ceremonies.

There are those who speak disparagingly not only of the sacramental debates but also of the sacraments themselves. Some who would be wiser than God cannot see why we should have such ordinances in the church. Others in their violent reaction to Rome have championed notions which rob the sacraments of their essential nature and purpose. Not infrequently disorder in administration became the order of the day. Individuals unrecognized by any congregation baptized not only others but even themselves. Some separated themselves from every table properly spread in Christ's church to set up their own. This sowing of the wind in many places reaped the whirlwind. New tests for church membership, not warranted by Scripture, were set up. And when the tests were set so stiff and high, the sacraments frequently fell into disuse. Even now we hear voices which announce that we do well to dispense with water-baptism and seek Spirit-baptism, as if the Bible tolerates such a distinction and divorce.

A more hopeful sign is the renewed interest in the sacraments in recent decades. It has even become fashionable to regard the created order as "a sacramental universe." In a certain sense this may be said. Did not the highly esteemed Augustine call the created world the garment of the invisible God? Yet J. S. Whale sounds the needed warning. Gospel sacraments do not arise out of nature's fitness to proclaim spiritual realities. They root in God's saving work in Christ. The elements in baptism and the Lord's Supper were not arbitrarily chosen and ought not so be regarded. Then any gilded cloud or fair flower might preach man's communion with God. Some moderns, indeed, wish this were so. They insist that better worship may be offered on the golf links or beside some clear stream than in the stuffy church. With a pretense to godliness they claim to read "sermons in stone." But all these forget the heart of the Christian faith, that God is reconciled to the world in Christ Jesus alone. In so far as this sound is heard in the recent sacramental discussions, we rejoice and take heart.

What is needed above all in considering these ordinances is belief-ful listening to God's word. It alone can make us wise

unto salvation. Also here we will realize again that it is always sufficient and perspicuous. Much as we appreciate what men have said about the sacraments, their teachings are to be tested by the Bible. No words which fail to grasp what God has said will tell us rightly how he is pleased to work among and within us.

Approaches to Sacramental Theory

The beautiful and balanced statements of de Bres were the ripened fruit of reformatory reflection on this doctrine. For almost forty years the nature, purpose and efficacy of the sacraments had been discussed by the theologians and teachers of the church in that time.

Now Christian theology has never felt obligated to reduplicate the very words of Scripture when describing and defining doctrine. We fail to find in the Bible such words as "trinity" and "aseity" or such phrases as "deity of Christ" and "means of grace." Yet what is therein expressed clearly and correctly reflects what God would have us believe. To object, therefore, to the term "sacraments" on the grounds that it is not found on the sacred page is to miss the point and purpose of the church's calling to proclaim meaningfully to men in every age what God would have them believe.

It is plain that the word "sacrament" refers to something special, sacred, set aside for the worship of God. The original Latin term designated a sum of money deposited by two parties involved in litigation. As soon as the court decided the case, the money of the winner was returned. That of the loser was declared forfeited and usually offered to the gods as a kind of propitiary sacrifice. The same word was also employed in the Roman army. There it denoted the oath by which a soldier pledged fidelity to his superior. When the New Testament was translated from Greek into Latin, the term "mystery" (musterion) was rendered "sacrament." (Eph. 1:9; 3:2f; Col. 1:26f; I Tim. 3:16; Rev. 1:20; 17:7) In none of these texts did it refer to what we commonly call sacraments today.

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We ought not be surprised, therefore, that in the ancient church the term was used in a variety of ways. Often it designated several religious doctrines and ceremonies. Not until the Middle ages was its use restricted somewhat to ecclesiastical ceremonies and rites which were performed or participated in by the members. Even then there was wide latitude. Abelard, for example, counted but five sacraments, while Hugo of St. Victor spoke of no less than thirty. Before the Reformation two definitions of sacraments were quite generally accepted. Augustine had once written, "The Word is added to the element, and it becomes a sacrament." In his *Sentences* Peter Lombard taught, "A sacrament is the sign of a sacred thing." Later this was formulated more precisely as, "A sacrament is the visible form or expression of an invisible grace." With these definitions the reformers took issue, since they lacked the required precision. What the Reformed churches have commonly held is reflected in the definition given by Berkhof, "A sacrament is a holy ordinance of God instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these in turn give expression to their faith and allegiance in God."²

Against this background of the development of sacramental doctrine we should review the five basic approaches which have become current in Christendom, noting as well something of their underlying agreement as their sharp differences.

The first position is that taken by the Roman Catholic Church, in the main also subscribed to by the Orthodox churches of eastern Europe and Asia. It appeals to Augustine who defined these ordinances as "visible signs and seals of an invisible grace." Gradually this was so conceived of, that the grace was regarded as inherent in the elements. Many influential theologians of the Middle Ages, such as Peter Lombard, Hugo of St. Victor and Thomas Aquinas, helped to elaborate the Roman view. Sacraments came to be regarded as means which actually conferred grace upon all who partook, so long as they did not

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consciously impede their efficacy by willful unbelief or sin. Since the sacraments were so significant and effective, the preaching of the word fell into neglect. It served only a preparatory purpose of instructing men how to use the sacred ordinances properly. By seven sacraments, three of which left indelible marks and were not to be repeated, the church dispensed God's grace through its clergy. Hence outside of the church there was no salvation.

Against this position Luther protested. He also took his point of departure in Augustine's definition but stressed that the sacraments were intended only for believers. By means of them God confirmed the promises of the word, which was determinative for all Christian faith and life. The Romanists soon accused him of subjectivizing the grace of God, making it dependent entirely upon the personal faith-response of the individual. Certain sectarians accused him of stressing physical ordinances at the expense of the work of the Spirit. This induced him to develop his ideas more fully, wherein the grace of God was more directly connected with the elements. This paved the way for the Lutheran conceptions of baptismal regeneration and the physical presence of Christ in the Supper, a view commonly called consubstantiation.

Zwingli uttered a much more radical protest against Rome than Luther. Here the Roman view of the sacrament as a divine mystery and an objective means of grace was rejected. To him the sacraments were badges of initiation into and fellowship with Christ's church. By their use believers pledged themselves to a life of Christian discipleship and warfare. Nowhere does he admit that by such means God himself works to strengthen faith. They are necessary for faith only in order that the Christian may see more clearly what grace is needed in his struggle against sin. Thus for Zwingli they actually remained "bare signs" or representations of what God has done in Christ. With this position, which robbed the sacraments of their essential character as means of grace, Luther took sharp issue. Here lie the roots of the bitter tensions between the German and Swiss churches in the first years of the Reformation.

The Anabaptists took yet another approach. Although many differences divided them, the view of Menno Simons may be regarded as the most dominant. Quite exclusively the emphasis falls again on the believer's action. Sacraments are not signs and seals of God's grace to us, but rather pledges which we give to God of our faith and obedience. Preachers deceive people, so Menno argued, when they teach that God works powerfully but invisibly in our hearts by the sacraments. In several respects this conception was like Zwingli's. Yet the Swiss reformer stressed the social and corporate character of the sacraments as church ordinances, an approach which never appealed to the individualistic Anabaptists.

Certain sectarian spirits also separated themselves from Rome and gathered some disciples. These included Sebastian Franck and Caspar von Schwenkfeld. They deprecated or rejected all sacraments, insisting that the Holy Spirit works grace apart from any and all means. Schwenkfeld went so far as to condemn Luther, Calvin and the other reformers as false prophets who failed to esteem Christ as the only Savior, since they placed next to him the preaching of the word and sacraments.

The Reformed developed their view of the sacraments. This was much more than a compromise between the views of Luther and Zwingli, between the objectivism of Rome and the subjectivism of the Anabaptists. With Rome and the Lutherans Calvin and those who followed him agree that in connection with the sacraments God bestows saving grace. While distinguishing between the externals (water, wine and bread) and the internal mystery (God's grace in Christ applied by the Spirit), they argue that both belong properly to the sacrament. Yet here the believers also pledge their love and loyalty to the God of their salvation. Nor may these ordinances be separated from the life of the whole congregation. They are church ordinances. In this light we can better understand the concise but clear statements of the *Confession* on the sacraments.

The Institution of the Sacraments

One of the critical questions concerning the sacraments involves their origin and institution. Are they of God or of man?

This is a burning issue today. During the last century, especially under the influence of those scholars who made the history and psychology and philosophy of religion their hobby, the uniqueness of the Christian faith was called into question. Parallels between Christianity and other religions were supposed to be discoverable everywhere. Even the Christian sacraments differed only in detail from ceremonies and rites common to the cults of Egypt, Greece and Asia Minor. On such a view, of course, the redemptive character of the gospel is rejected. Our sacraments are reduced either to an acknowledgment of universal religious beliefs that men need cleansing and communion with their gods or a remembrance of Jesus as a great religious teacher.

This was a burning issue also in the days of the reformers. They insisted that only such ordinances may be rightly considered sacraments which were inaugurated by our Lord for his people. Much more was involved than quibbling about a term. Rome held that there were seven sacraments. In addition, it defended almost innumerable ceremonies which they called "sacramentalia," all of which were in some sense connected with receiving the gracious gifts of God. These include holy water, the sign of the cross, crucifixes, and the ritual blessing of churches, sick animals, fountains, fields, ships, homes and automobiles. Also today the Roman church attaches great significance to these, even though none were instituted by Christ or taught in his word. To be sure, it is said that they "do not of themselves possess any supernatural power" but nonetheless do convey grace "only through the suffrages and the merits of the Church."³ Here, then, the church instead of our Lord determines the nature, number and efficacy of the means of grace. Against such a construction of sacramental doctrine the reformers never wearied of protesting, realizing that it was a source of innumerable superstitions which closed men's eyes to the fulness of grace in Christ Jesus.

Among Bible critics there are still those who deny that our Lord instituted the sacraments of baptism and holy supper. The argument is presented without any real proof that the conclud-

ing words of Mark 16 and even Matthew 28 were not spoken by the Savior. Even the institution of the Lord's Supper is called into question. With all this we need not concern ourselves here. The evidence is too overwhelming that early Christians without exception viewed the two sacraments as part of the legacy which our Lord himself left to his church.

This article does not explicitly mention Christ at this point. Instead, the sacraments are attributed to *our gracious God*. In the next two articles it is affirmed that both sacraments are dominical, that is, that they were instituted by Christ. De Bres likely mentions God here to remind us that the work of our Savior is that through which the triune God alone bestows salvation.

The Necessity and Purpose of the Sacraments

Without a right understanding and use of the sacraments the Christian faith loses much of its real depth. In so far, then, as Paul Tillich more than thirty years ago could speak with some show of right of "the death of the sacraments," he was sounding a much needed warning. Too often throughout the history of the church have there been those who fail to discern the relation of the faith to creation and history. An outstanding Jewish leader correctly appraised this, when he said, "Judaism is the religion of one idea; Christianity is the religion of one person." This we affirm, when confessing with the apostle John, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) Here there is no room for a speculative idealism or mysticism which despises the material creation and seeks deliverance from that which belongs properly to man's constitutional nature. At the same time we seek our salvation not through any natural form or force. "For the creation was subjected to vanity," Paul affirms, "not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it." (Rom. 8:20) Our help and hope must come from out of another world, from God who in Christ enters history and assumes our flesh and blood to identify himself with us in our need. We therefore repudiate any pantheistic attempt to equate God with his world in any sense. At a very specific time and

place in our history and in a very definite person God has met us with his saving power. This John Donne sensed so well, when he sang,

*"God cloth'd himself in vile man's flesh, that so
He might be weak enough to suffer woe."*

Through that woe of blood and sweat and tears unto death Christ has wrought the redemption and renewal of our lives.

All this is proclaimed in clear summary by the sacraments. It is not contrary to our spiritual salvation, that God is pleased to make use of material elements thereby to declare his grace in Christ to us. Rather, we are reminded that his is the material world, and he alone can unveil its true meaning and use. Thus water, bread and wine preach eloquently, when he binds them by and to his word, the cleansing and refreshment of our lives. But these sacraments are not a purely physical phenomenon. This is excluded precisely by the presence of the word, the speaking and saving Christ who came into the world for us.

For us, therefore, there is nothing degrading in God's use of physical signs to seal unto us his saving grace in Christ. We rejoice rather in their proper use, for they again remind us that the Creator of all things is become our God and Father for Christ his Son's sake. To despise the sacraments because of their corporeity is to rank ourselves as wiser than God who alone knows and can meet our need. Therefore the *Confession* glories in the condescending grace of God who, *taking account of our weakness and infirmities, has ordained the sacraments for us.*

This is an echo of Calvin's teaching. The necessity of these ordinances he finds not within God or in any deficiency of his word of promise to us. "For the truth of God is sufficiently solid and certain of itself, and can receive no better confirmation from any other quarter than from itself."⁴ It is our faith which needs these ordinances. It so quickly fluctuates and falls, "unless it be supported on every side, and sustained by every assistance." To this Calvin does not hesitate to add that "we are corporeal, always creeping on the ground, cleaving to terrestrial and carnal objects, and incapable of understanding or conceiving anything

of a spiritual nature." Thus by these earthly elements as "a mirror of spiritual blessings" God accommodates himself to our capacity. Being what we are, we need the sacraments.

Three reasons are now given, why God has been pleased to make use of these ordinances.

First of all, God engages himself *thereby to seal unto us his promises*. This already announces the indissoluble connection between word and sacrament. We are reminded that God's people live always by his promises. Some would contend that either we know God's grace towards us from his word or else we do not know it at all. On this basis they consider the sacraments superfluous. But Calvin and with him the Reformed churches refuse to be driven into this dilemma. "Let it be concisely replied, that the seals applied to charters, patents, and other public instruments, are nothing taken by themselves; because they would be appended to no purpose, if the parchment had nothing written on it; and yet they nevertheless confirm and authenticate what is written on the instruments to which they are annexed."⁵ This is proved by what Paul writes concerning the sacrament which God gave to Abraham, "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision." (Rom. 4:11) Such sealing is not man's action but God's, by which the promises of God are confirmed and our faith consequently strengthened by him.

To this is added that such ordinances are *pledges of the good will and grace of God towards us*. The Christian religion is covenantal. Calvin insists that "the Lord calls his promises covenants, and the sacraments seals of the covenants." He speaks words of everlasting life to us in Christ Jesus. "For this reason," to quote Calvin yet again, "Augustine calls a sacrament 'a visible word'; because it represents the promises of God portrayed as in a picture and places before our eyes an image of them, in which every lineament is strikingly expressed."⁶ Such a representation, then, is no idle and empty picture but a confirmation of his saving concern for us.

Pursuing the purpose of the sacraments still further, the *Confession* says that they are provided *also to nourish and strengthen our faith*. In this sense they may even be termed "pillars of our faith." We learn to rest upon them because and in so far as they support the foundation of our faith which is the immutable promise of God in Christ. Likewise are they "mirrors," for therein we see reflected his unswerving love and faithfulness.

It is therefore a rash thing for men to neglect the sacraments or account them as a small thing. Although the Reformed churches have always allowed that in a certain sense they are not essential to our salvation, since the thief on the cross entered glory without their use, yet they have repeatedly warned that those who fail to use them do so to their injury and peril. For all true believers they are, indeed, "blessed" sacraments.

The Word and the Sacraments

Of signal importance for the correct understanding of these ordinances is what the *Confession* now affirms about their relation to the word.

They have no legitimate place and purpose and efficacy apart from the word. In the days of the reformers this emphasis was needed in view of Rome's insistence upon their inherent sufficiency. We also do well to remember this in our time of so-called sacramental renewal and revival. From Scripture we conclude that God *has joined* these ordinances to *the Word of the gospel*.

There are basic similarities. Both word and sacraments are ordained by *our gracious God*. Both have the same central content, Jesus Christ in the fulness of his person and work. Both are completely dependent upon the work of the Spirit for their efficacy.

Yet there are points of difference. This concerns first of all their necessity. While the hearing of the word is regarded as indispensable to salvation (Rom. 10:13-15), this is nowhere af-

firmed of the sacraments. They possess rather what Pierre Marcel chooses to call "a necessity of precept." This he describes, "It is not the privation but the contempt of the sacraments which renders us culpable before God . . . No one can neglect the use of the sacraments deliberately without exposing himself to grave spiritual consequences. The believer has no right to rely upon the operation of grace apart from the conditions upon which the promise of help is made, and these conditions are: the hearing of the Word and the participation of the sacraments."⁷

Likewise, they differ in their intended extent. The gospel must be preached by divine command to all men everywhere. (Matt. 28:19, 20) The sacraments, on the other hand, are restricted to believers whom God gathers into his church. They presuppose the presence of covenantal bonds between the gracious God in Christ and his people. Therefore they are always connected with the response of faith.

They differ also in their admitted aim. The proclamation of his word is intended by God both to create (engender and elicit) and to strengthen faith. The sacraments aim at the strengthening of such faith.

Although the same Christ is presented in both word and sacraments, these differ in the external form or mode by which God makes himself savingly known to us. To be sure, the word is also both a sign and a seal of that grace. The point of difference lies in the approach. In the word God appeals to our hearing. In the sacraments God appeals more directly to our seeing and less directly to our senses of taste and touch and smell. All our bodily senses are brought into play, a factor which ought not to be despised since the psalmist exhorts us, "Oh taste and see that Jehovah is good: blessed is the man that taketh refuge in him." (Ps. 34:8) Since the Savior supplies our every need for body and soul, for this life and the life to come, we should embrace him with our whole being. Also in this respect the sacraments challenge us to make a personal and pervasive faith-response. "Through the sacraments God lays His hand on each one," Marcel affirms, "so that it is impossible

to escape and impossible to say that the Word is addressed to others. The visible Word besieges the man who receives it, that very man at that very time."

The Efficacy of the Sacraments

But how do such physical ordinances, connected with the word, work in our lives? What, we may well ask, do they work?

These questions introduce us to the heart of the sacramental conflicts which so deeply disturbed the Christian churches in the days of the Reformation and ever since. Not a few of our theological insights and ideas will come to expression here. Many thorny questions are involved. What is the relation between God and his people? How must we construe the grace of God in Christ as it is objectively proclaimed in these ordinances and subjectively applied by the Spirit? Does redemption raise the created order to a higher, supernatural level, as the Orthodox and Roman Catholics maintain; or should we regard it as reforming and restoring what sin has ruined in us? Is there a special kind of grace conferred in the sacraments which the preaching of the word does not provide? Is the grace of God offered to all who partake of these ordinances, irrespective of the presence or absence of faith? May we ever make the reality of the sacraments dependent on man's response? Does this violate the sovereignty of God's grace in the work of salvation? All these and many other matters are involved in the correct understanding of this doctrine. To a few of them we must refer now.

The *Confession* declares, *For they are visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Never may we reduce the sacraments to mere signs which represent or describe or picture for us the glorious work of redemption in Christ. This is indeed included. Yet a true view of the sacraments must speak of much more. They are *seals*, pledges or guarantees of a faithful covenant God who never breaks his word that he is gracious towards us. So glorious is this grace, that it cannot be completely and exhaustively represented to us

even by these means which God has been pleased to use. Therein lies the true mystery of the sacraments. Included in these ordinances is that *by means whereof God works in us*. It is called *an inward and invisible thing*. This is no less than the rich grace of our covenant God who manifests himself to us as Father and Son and Holy Spirit. It is this emphasis on our covenantal relationship to the triune God which uniquely characterizes the Reformed view of the sacraments. More than a pretty phrase is intended, when we esteem them as signs and seals of his gracious covenant towards us. To repudiate this would lead us in the direction of reducing these ordinances to *empty and meaningless signs*. For this reason the Reformed churches have rejected the Zwinglian and Anabaptist constructions, maintaining that although much of what they said was true, they failed to perceive and proclaim the whole truth which God has revealed about these ordinances.

Yet the Reformed have been equally interested in their rejection of any inherent power in the elements to work saving grace within the hearts of the believing church. They are made fruitful only *by the power of the Holy Spirit*, who produces and sustains our life in Christ Jesus. We are not washed by the water in baptism nor fed and nourished by the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper as such. Rather, the Holy Spirit is pleased to bind his blessed operations to the administration of the sacraments in the name and upon the authority of Christ. Because this is the work of God's Spirit whose work is like the wind which may be heard and felt but cannot be precisely measured and defined (John 3:8), its manner remains mysterious. Yet he so works in connection with the sacraments, which are appendages to the word of life, that the faith of believers is thereby strengthened and their souls refreshed to life eternal by Jesus Christ who *is the true object presented by them*.

None more than the Reformed stressed the working of the Spirit in this connection. Even the Anabaptists, who argued that the reformatory churches were "unspiritual," failed to appreciate the Spirit's operation in connection with the means. Many of them openly espoused Pelagian and Semi-Pelagian

views of man's inherent ability to accept the gospel promises. Several of the principles which their early leaders championed led to a deprecation of the means of grace. Some dared to speak even of Scripture as a "dead letter," supposing that this is what Paul meant when he said, "For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." (II Cor. 3:6b) In consequence a variety of sects and heresies was spawned, the evil results of which are with us even today. Although talking much about the Spirit, they failed to discern from Scripture the method by which the Spirit ordinarily works among God's people.

The Reformed emphasis on the Spirit's work at the same prevented any movement in the direction of Romish theory. From this the Lutherans did not entirely escape in their efforts to safeguard what they thought was the true objectivity of the sacraments. We prefer at this point, therefore, to speak of the Spirit's work *in connection with* rather than *through* the word and sacraments.

Calvin discusses the efficacy of the sacraments in this light, "But they only perform their office aright when they are accompanied by the Spirit, that internal Teacher, by whose energy alone our hearts are penetrated, our affections moved, and an entrance is opened for the sacraments into our souls. If he be absent, the sacraments can produce no more effect upon our minds than the splendour of the sun on blind eyes, or the sound of a voice on deaf ears."⁸

But do unbelievers, then, receive anything of the sacrament? This problem has been much discussed in the Reformed churches, sometimes with tragic results because those who debated did not understand each other. The opponents have even tried "to make each other say what plainly was never intended. The reality and integrity of the sacraments as objective means of grace has never been repudiated by those who are Reformed. This is plainly taught also in the *Confession*. *Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us*. How could this possibly be, since *Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them*? All partake of the elements and thus share in the administration. But this partaking is not efficacious unto

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salvation in communion with Christ for those who do not believe. And here again all Reformed believers will agree. The situation of those who reject the gospel presented in the sacraments is perilous. Far better were it for them never to have received these ordinances. Like Uzzah they have reached out with unconsecrated hands and hearts to lay hold on the holy things of God. Therefore Paul also urges self-examination on the part of all who would partake. For those who are devoid of faith the sacraments are stones of stumbling and rocks of offense, precisely because Jesus Christ is presented by these ordinances. This is clearly taught by the *Confession* in Article XXXV, *Further, though the sacraments are connected with the thing signified nevertheless both are not received by all men. The ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of sacrament, even as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament but not Christ who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers.*

The Romanists and Lutherans here accuse us repeatedly of making the sacraments dependent on man's faith. Such is far from true. For man's faith is wrought solely by the Spirit of God. At the same time we teach that man's faith plays a very real part in his union and communion with Christ. Apart from it we do not receive Christ and all the gifts which he so freely and fully bestows on his people. Thus the sacraments are never meaningless, not even to the unbelievers for whom they are a solemn warning of the condemnation which comes upon them so long as they refuse Christ. But the mystery of receiving grace we shall leave precisely where it belongs, in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who works in and through the sacraments as well as the word.

The Number of the Sacraments

A few words are in order on the number of the sacraments, an issue which still sharply divides Orthodox and Roman Catholicism from the evangelical faith.

Time and again Calvin was compelled to discuss this matter in his day. He argued that he was loathe to consider the subject which had often degenerated into a quibbling about terms. Christians "have power over names as well as things." What he protested was that Rome gave to the seven sacraments "all the same definition—that they are visible forms of invisible grace." By so doing "they make them all alike vessels of the Holy Spirit, instruments of communicating righteousness, causes of obtaining grace."⁹

The position of Rome had already been clearly outlined by the pope in his decree for the Armenians, issued in 1439. Therein was affirmed the view which became fixed at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) "In *baptism* we are spiritually regenerated; in *confirmation* grace is increased within us and we are strengthened in the faith; we are reborn and nourished by the spiritual food of the *eucharist*; and since we contract a sickness of the soul by sin we are spiritually healed by *penance*; spiritually and physically in so far as it serves the soul we are healed by *extreme unction*; by means of *ordination* the church is governed and increased in a spiritual fashion; by means of *marriage* it grows physically (in numbers)." Thus the seven sacraments work divine grace within the members of the true church from the cradle to the grave. In accordance with this conviction Trent declared that "by means of the sacraments the true righteousness is begun or, if it has already been begun, is increased, or, if it has been lost, is restored."¹⁰

All this, so the reformers taught, was contrary to the simple and sober institution of the Lord Jesus Christ. Only God's word and not the speculations of the church may determine how many of these ordinances God has been pleased to employ to signify and seal his grace to us and thereby strengthen our faith. The power to institute such ordinances belongs to God alone. No human imagination or invention can guarantee the presence and power of God's grace in Christ. All appeal of the Roman church to the ancient fathers is fruitless. None of them ever spoke of the seven sacraments. Therefore the evangelical churches in obedience to their Lord recognize only two—baptism and the holy supper. With these two they *are satisfied*.

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1. Show in detail how the sacraments are connected with every aspect of Christian faith. 2. Evaluate the position that this is "a sacramental universe." 3. What is meaning of the term **sacrament**? How did it come to be used? 4. What is meant by the sacrament as a **sign**? as a **seal**? Prove both aspects of the doctrine of the sacrament from Scripture. 5. What is meant by "subjectivizing the grace of God"? Why is this a serious error? 6. What is the Zwinglian view of the sacraments? Wherein does it differ from the Anabaptist position? 7. What is included in the Reformed view of the sacraments? 8. What is meant by **our weakness** (rudesse; grovigheid) and **infirmities** (infirmite; zwakheid)? 9. How is the sovereignty of God's grace safeguarded in the Reformed and not in the Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Anabaptist conceptions of the sacraments? 10. What does it mean that the visible signs become sacraments through the word? Does the word possess magical or consecratory powers? Explain. 11. How do the sacraments present to our senses that **which God works inwardly in our hearts**? 12. What is the true **mystery** of the sacraments? 13. How can the Reformed churches insist that the sacraments bestow God's grace without falling into the Roman Catholic error? 14. Do unbelievers actually receive the sacraments? Explain. 15. Show how the Reformed view of the sacraments alone magnifies the operation of the Holy Spirit. 16. On which grounds do we insist on careful supervision of the sacraments? What is meant by "open" and by "close" communion?

Chapter 34

The Sacrament of Holy Baptism

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has made an end, by the shedding of His blood, of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin; and that He, having abolished circumcision, which was done with blood, has instituted the sacrament of baptism instead thereof; by which we are received into the Church of God, and separated from all other people and strange religions, that we may wholly belong

to Him whose mark and ensign we bear; and which serves as a testimony to us that He will forever be our gracious God and Father.

Therefore He has commanded all those who are His to be baptized with pure water, "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," thereby signifying to us, that as water washes away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so does the blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit internally sprinkle the soul, cleanse it from its sins, and regenerate us from children of wrath unto children of God. Not that this is effected by the external water, but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God; who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.

The ministers, therefore, on their part administer the sacrament and that which is visible, but our Lord gives that which is signified by the sacrament, namely, the gifts and invisible grace; washing, cleansing, and purging our souls of all filth and unrighteousness; renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort; giving unto us a true assurance of His fatherly goodness; putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds.

We believe, therefore, that every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized but once with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice. Neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.

Therefore we detest the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received, and moreover condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who we believe ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. And indeed Christ shed His blood no less for the washing of the children of believers than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of

that which Christ has done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, baptism is to our children. And for this reason St. Paul calls baptism the "circumcision of Christ."

ARTICLE XXXIV

AMONG THE KINGS known for their goodness and godliness none was greater than Louis IX of France, surnamed Pious.

His comparatively uneventful reign lasted from 1226 to 1270. It was a time of turbulence throughout much of the world. Yet Louis was able to impose peace between the warring factions of his nobility by moral force. He stands out as the ideal king of the middle ages—an accomplished knight, fearless in battle, heroic in adversity, unyielding when assured of the justice of his cause, and sympathetic to all who suffered. His devotions would have worn out a less robust man. He fasted much, loved sermons, and often joined the priests as they chanted their hours. We read of hospitals which he built, of the loving care with which he tended the sick, and of the charity which fed more than a hundred of the poor each day.

Once he was asked which he considered the greatest day of his life. Possibly his courtiers expected him to mention that of his coronation at the age of twelve or his marriage to Margaret, the daughter of the count of Provence. Instead he mentioned the day of his baptism. For on that day, so he affirmed, God had granted him salvation. We may question the soundness of the king's theology on this point; we cannot help but feel ashamed that too often our baptismal day is ignored by us. Even among Reformed believers the doctrine of holy baptism is not appreciated as it should be. This is the more lamentable, since the *Confession* speaks so comprehensively and comfortingly on this matter.

A Renewed Interest in Baptism

Although for years many Christian churches practiced baptism faithfully, little attention seemed to be directed to its sig-

nificance for the church's faith and practice. This was especially true in those European lands where pietism prevailed for a season and in the United States where revivalism came to be widely recognized as the proper means for maintaining the church's place in the community. Treatises were still written on baptism, and especially on infant baptism. But these seemed to make little impact upon the believing people. Not God's revelation of grace in Christ Jesus but man's response was stressed.

In this respect a change which may for the good has come. Already in the middle of the previous century Wormser called the believing community in the Netherlands back to its baptism. For decades its challenge and comfort were avidly discussed with salutary results for church and nation. Today in ever-widening circles of influence Barth's approach to baptism has demanded attention.

To review all that is being said and written at this time hardly seems necessary. Many of the old debates have been revived. To these some new problems concerning baptism have been raised. D. M. Baillie mentions especially three. (1) Has it really been instituted by our Lord? Modern critical study of the New Testament contends that this has not been proven. Nowhere in Acts do we find the Trinitarian formula used by the apostles, which would seem to have been mandatory, had Christ actually spoken the words of Matthew 28:18-20. (2) Does baptism really mean the same to us as it did to the early Christians? This was seemingly connected intimately with Christ's death and resurrection and symbolized by immersion, a mode now widely replaced by effusion or sprinkling. (3) How can baptism be bound up with faith, when the majority who receive the sacrament are infants and not mature men and women?

That baptism was everywhere recognized in the New Testament as the gate by which men entered the Christian community is acknowledged. Nor should it be seriously questioned that our Lord intended baptism for his people, even if he perhaps did not institute it. Karl Barth goes so far as to say that Christ actually instituted this sacrament for his people, when he was

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baptized by John in the Jordan. Much attention has been given by scholars to those texts in which our Lord connected baptism with his coming death. (Mk. 10:38; Luke 12:50) As to immersion even Karl Barth, who regards infant baptism as a theological Judaism which ignores the difference between Old and New Testament dispensations, opines that very likely it was not universally practiced by the apostles. Christ's death and resurrection is not the only motif emphasized in connection with this sacrament. Christ's people need cleansing, the symbol for which in the Old Testament was clearly sprinkling. (Ezek. 26:35) And in so far as baptism is connected with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, effusion would seem a much more appropriate symbol than immersion.

Christian theologians are opposing with vigor the rank individualism which pervaded and polluted the churches for so long. The corporate character of Christ's church is receiving new emphasis. Men are beginning to realize anew that God places his people in covenant with himself and in the church as the "new community" which is to leaven the lump of a lost world. Even among many Baptists there is a hesitation to consider children of believers as outside of Christ's church. The growing number of child-dedications may evidence a deep-seated uneasiness of which the Baptists themselves are not yet fully aware.

All this demonstrates that the church is by no means done with baptism. The questions surrounding this sacrament are perennial. They arise whenever men begin to take the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ seriously. To Reformed believers it is heartening, therefore, that their *Confession* has not yet been outdistanced or become outmoded.

The Mark of a Separated People

In penning his instructive and illuminating words Guido de Bres thrusts through to the very heart of the Biblical doctrine of baptism. Here we find no lengthy argumentation. Rather, in simple and striking phrases the Christian gospel of salvation by sovereign grace is again brought into focus.

Our *Confession* acknowledges that baptism is an institution of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not to be understood as merely a fact to be filed away in our minds. We acknowledge him as our Savior and Lord. Thus instead of mentioning at this point the historical circumstances which surrounded its institution, the churches profess their faith in what Christ has done for them. He who provides us with this sacrament is our gracious and all-sufficient Savior. For us he is *the end of the law*. By the shedding of his blood he *has made an end . . . of all other sheddings of blood which men could or would make as a propitiation or satisfaction for sin*. The Savior has paid the penalty which our sins deserve and fulfilled for us the whole law of God, so that salvation is a free gift of grace. Nothing can or may be added to his finished work. In baptism we receive the Savior's testimony that our life is complete in him.

Now we can understand why Paul's words to the Colossian Christians are immediately brought into play. Without them our understanding of Christian baptism will hardly be complete. "And in him ye are made full, who is the head of all principality and power: in whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead." (Col. 2:10-12) This striking parallel which the apostle makes between baptism and circumcision is determinative for the New Testament view of baptism. In his day the enemies of the Christian gospel were those Judaizers who sought to impose on believers the ordinance of circumcision. This and other demands of the Mosaic law were to be conditions for covenantal fellowship with God in Christ. By these words Paul silenced all who would obscure the gospel of grace, as if human cooperation in any sense is requisite to our acceptance by God. In Christ alone is found our complete redemption, for in him God has separated us from sin and freed us from the penalties of the law. Our union with Christ is the guarantee, that in God's sight we are dead unto sin and alive unto righteousness. All who receive the promises of God have the right to this sacrament which is the sign and seal of our ingrafting into Christ.

Therefore baptism is not a vehicle of grace. That grace is already declared to us as our possession in faith.

On this basis the *Confession* insists that circumcision, because it *was done with blood*, has been replaced by Christ with baptism. After the accomplished atonement of Christ on the cross there remains no room any longer for "bloody tokens." This is not merely a superficial and external change. What is involved is God's declaration that believers may and must rejoice in their complete salvation, to which nothing may be added and from which nothing can be subtracted. Hence Paul's vehement denunciation of the Judaizers sprang not from personal pique but a deep desire that God in Christ should be magnified. This has been so eloquently preserved for us in the *Confession*. Nor was this a completely new insight gleaned by Reformed teachers and preachers. That circumcision so foreshadowed baptism as a seal for God's people was recognized by the ancient church. Lampe cites from Barnabas, Justin, Lactantius, Augustine and others to demonstrate this point. It is therefore regrettable that some Reformed treatises on baptism have too much ignored this aspect of the New Testament teaching on baptism.

What, then, is the message of baptism to those who have received the sacrament? It declares first of all that by means thereof *we are received into the Church of God*. God himself welcomes us into the corporate fellowship of the body of his Son, Jesus Christ. The underlying emphasis is clear and comforting. We do not take the first step towards church membership. God opens the way for all whom he recognizes as his people. Baptism therefore is not a guarantee of membership in the invisible church as such. Much rather, because we belong to Christ as the people of God's promise, he unites us with the visible church. As such members we have great spiritual responsibilities and obligations. Yet our membership does not spring from or rest upon our fulfilment of these. It roots in God's gracious disposition to us.

To belong to the church is therefore a most solemn and serious affair. The *Confession* has already made clear that the

church is not to be regarded as a human institution, an organization of people who manifest some religious interest and concern. Our membership is the proclamation of the God-ordained relationship which we sustain to both him and the world. Thus we acknowledge that by means of baptism we are also *separated from all other people and strange religions*. Here the covenantal idea, so dear to all who understand how God works with the sons of men according to the Scriptures, is implied. His people are a separated people by virtue of his gracious disposition towards them. In the church he seeks to instruct us, so *that we may wholly belong to him whose mark and ensign we bear*. Baptism is the badge of our fellowship with God through the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. On this basis we dare affirm that this sacrament also *serves as a testimony that He will forever be our gracious God and Father*. This encourages all who take their baptism seriously in the struggles of our earthly life. It challenges us to live in communion with Christ, who commands us to separate ourselves from everything and everyone who would draw us away from the service of our God. It comforts us with the blessed assurance that God will supply all our needs according to the riches of grace in Christ Jesus.

Here we pause to reflect on the uniqueness of the Reformed position on baptism. It is not primarily a pledge of our faith and readiness to serve God but rather a declaration of God's grace to us. Yet it does not convey grace "ex opere operato" as the Roman Catholics teach, since God reserves the power of communicating salvation to his Holy Spirit. Hence it does not effect our spiritual regeneration in the sense in which some Lutherans and Anglicans affirm. At the same time the Reformed churches refuse to reduce baptism to an external badge of our incorporation into the visible church, as the Zwinglians argued, or a testimony to our faith and repentance, as the Anabaptists taught. Only the Reformed have fully sensed what is at stake in the Biblical view of the sacraments. Here the sovereignty of God's grace is proclaimed without doing violence to the true faith-response of his people.

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The Significance of Holy Baptism

While the first paragraph of this article was written to oppose the teachings of the Anabaptists, who made the sacrament too dependent upon man's faith, the second paragraph is a direct attack on the theories of the Romanists.

Here we confess first of all that baptism is not an indifferent matter, to be received or rejected at will by the individual. Christ has *commanded all those who are His to be baptized*. It is a divine order which cannot be disregarded with impunity. All who reject the use of this visible ordinance plainly disobey the Lord whom they confess with their lips. With equal emphasis, however, the Reformed teach that baptism does not make us Christians. Rather, it is the public ratification and recognition that by virtue of God's grace we already belong to Christ. It may not be regarded as a "christening" ceremony. Baptism also must be administered *with pure water* only. The true church feels no need to add to the ceremony which Christ has instituted, lest its essential significance be overshadowed by human inventions. On this basis the reformers rejected what they considered the foolish and futile practices of the Roman Catholic Church which ordered breathing three times upon the face of those receiving the sacrament, making the sign of the cross upon the forehead and breast, touching the ears and nostrils with spittle, putting consecrated salt into the mouth, and exorcising the devil.

What is insisted upon, however, is the use of the Scriptural formula, *into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. More is signified by the use of this phrase than baptism upon divine authority. It is generally conceded that this formula implies baptism "with reference to" or "in relation to" the triune God. No magical significance is attached to these words. The church concedes that Christ possibly did not intend here a formula mandatory upon the church of all ages. According to the book of Acts it appears that the apostles baptized "into the name of Christ." Since the days of Tertullian, however, it was regarded as the appropriate formula and has been used in Christian churches ever since. Calvin argues for

it, since "there is no other way in which the efficacy of baptism can be experienced than when we begin with the unmerited mercy of the Father, who reconciles us to himself by the only begotten Son; next Christ comes forward with the sacrifice of his death; and at length, the Holy Spirit is likewise added, by whom he washes and regenerates us (Titus iii, 5) and, in short, makes us partakers of his benefits."² Even as early as the *Didache* (The Teaching of the Twelve), written some time after 100, this practice became current. To depart from it would be tantamount to disregarding a most ancient, honorable and defensible practice and bring confusion among Christian believers.

An eloquent message is proclaimed to all who participate in the administration of this sacrament.

To us it declares not only our sin and miseries but also the efficacy of Christ's blood. This emphasis of the *Confession* is elaborated in the beautiful liturgical *Form for the Administration of Baptism*.

The key idea is that of cleansing. *As water washes away the filth of the body when poured upon it, and is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled upon him, so does the blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit internally sprinkle the soul.* The centrality of this motif is of utmost importance in the Christian doctrine of baptism. Berkouwer insists that "the sign, both in the Johannine and in Christian baptism, is the sign of the water of washing."³ All other aspects of the Christian faith which are illustrated in baptism proceed from and are dependent upon it. When this is correctly understood, the church finds little difficulty with the mode of sprinkling as fully appropriate. Likewise this emphasis refuses to restrict baptism to an illustration of personal regeneration, the basis upon which the Anabaptists and others withheld the sacrament from children of the covenant. Baptism symbolizes the complete work of our Lord Jesus Christ to whom his people are joined. He has died for our sins and on the basis of this accomplished atonement also bestows his Spirit who makes us partakers of his grace. To limit the significance of this rite to an illustration of the subjective application of Christ's merits

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by the Holy Spirit does injustice to many passages in the New Testament.

Here the Reformed churches place baptism within the framework of redemptive history. God has wrought salvation for his people. Already the Old Testament clearly foreshadowed how this salvation was to be accomplished. Israel's deliverance out of Egypt prefigured *the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God; who is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and to enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.*

Too little have these historically redemptive relationships received their due in Christian discussions about baptism. The Scripture quality of this emphasis is patent. To the Corinthians Paul wrote, "For I would not, brethren, have you ignorant, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual food; and did all drink the same spiritual drink; for they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them: and the rock was Christ." (I Cor. 10:1-4) On the basis of this and similar texts the Reformed refused to stumble into the Anabaptist snare, which radically divorced the New from the Old Testament and consequently denied the reality of God's covenantal relation to the church and the baptism of children of believers.

The message of the sacrament, however, is not exhausted by the idea of cleansing. Not the water but only Christ's blood saves us. This is efficaciously applied *by the power of the Holy Spirit internally*. His gracious work is intimately connected with Christ's, being called "the spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9), "the Spirit of the Lord" (II Cor. 3:17), and "the Spirit of his Son." (Gal. 4:6) In the light of the conviction that salvation is of God alone, we reject the error of those who attribute an inherent power to the sacrament. Also baptism prompts us to confess with the church of all ages,

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*"Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak;
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
No other work save Thine,
No other blood will do;
No strength save that which is divine
Can bear me safely through."*

The Blessings of Our Baptism

A superficial reading of this article might cause us to conclude that in connection with baptism the Reformed fathers were somewhat hesitant to confess it as a sealing ordinance. Their chief concern seemed to be with making an avowed rejection of Rome's errors wherein grace was identified with the external sign. In the third paragraph we are again cautioned that *the ministers, therefore, on their part administer the sacrament and that which is visible, but our Lord gives that which is signified by the sacrament*. This caution has tempted some to think of baptism as little more than an external ordinance.

Yet such an interpretation is wide of the mark. The Reformed churches with one accord confessed the gracious operation of God in connection with the sacrament. The relation between the sign and that which is signified may not be construed as one of identity. Yet we may not ignore what was acknowledged previously that these sacramental ordinances are *visible signs and seals of an inward and invisible thing, by means whereof God works in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not empty or meaningless, so as to deceive us*. In commenting on the sacramental union between the sign and that which is signified, Berkhof explains, "This is usually called the *forma sacramenti* (*forma* here meaning essence), because it is exactly the relation between the sign and the thing signified that constitutes the essence of the sacrament. According to the Reformed view this is: (a) not *physical*, as the Roman Catholics claim, . . . (b) nor *local*, as the Lutherans represent it, . . . (c) but *spiritual*, or as Turretin expresses

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it, relative and moral, so that where the sacrament is received in faith, the grace of God accompanies it. According to this view the external sign becomes a means employed by the Holy Spirit in the communication of divine grace."⁴

The Christian believers, therefore, may be fully assured that in connection with the sacrament our Lord actually bestows on us that which is signified, *namely, the gifts and invisible grace.*

These are inestimably rich and replete with consolation for all who take God's promises seriously.

By this visible token we are persuaded of the *washing, cleansing, and purging of our souls of all filth and unrighteousness.* By God's arrangement we receive standing before him in the righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ and therefore are entitled by him to a place in the new community, which is his redeemed and reconciled church. Daily we may rejoice that all our sins are forgiven us.

In addition, we may rejoice in the work of the Holy Spirit who engages *himself in renewing our hearts and filling them with all comfort.* No one who pleads on his baptism calls upon the Lord in vain. Even "if we sometimes through weakness fall into sins, we must not therefore despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin, since baptism is a seal and indubitable testimony that we have an eternal covenant with God."

Baptism is also spoken of as *giving unto us a true assurance of his fatherly goodness.* All the trials of life cannot really rob us of this gracious gift. When Luther was tormented with doubts and temptations, he would frequently write two words on his table with chalk, *Baptizatus sum* (I have been baptized). This is the foundation of all Christian certainty of the Father's faithfulness and favor towards his people, whom he has sealed with the sign of his covenant.

In consequence of this, we may affirm that baptism assures us of the power unto a new and holy life in God's service. By that grace which the Spirit communicates in connection with

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baptism, we are persuaded of God's *putting on us the new man, and putting off the old man with all his deeds*. Sanctification, though involving the believer's response to God in faith and obedience, is a gift of grace worked in us by God. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:12b, 13)

Filled with such awe and adoration of the all-sufficient grace of the covenant God in Christ, the Reformed rejected *the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with the one only baptism they have once received*. Repudiating the baptism which they had received at the hands of the Romish priests and later rejecting also infant baptism, they insisted that all who would affiliate with them needed rebaptism. This all evangelicals regarded as a most serious and flagrant violation. It was a repetition of the heresy of the Donatists who championed the "pure church" ideal. More was at stake, however, than good order in Christ's church. *Every man who is earnestly studious of obtaining life eternal ought to be baptized but once with this only baptism, without ever repeating the same, since we cannot be born twice*. This has nothing to do with the "ex opere operato" view of the efficacy of the water. Rather, the conviction that true baptism is the work of Christ, who joins his people to himself once-for-all in his substitutionary death and resurrection, precludes the possibility of its repetition. As G. W. Bromiley correctly states, "It is something which has been done, and can neither be done again nor undone. It is something which has been genuinely done, more solidly and validly and definitively than any response that can ever take place in us."⁵ Thus it is a sign valid in its attestation for the whole life of the believer. To repeat it obscures God's initiative in uniting us with Christ Jesus who "is able to save to the uttermost them that draw near unto God through him." (Hebr. 7:25) If baptism, like the gracious gospel promises of which it is a sure and substantial sign, tells us that we are dead in Christ and raised with him by the power of his resurrection, then it follows that by this means we are also assured of his Spirit who alone can enable us to repent and believe. By their

insistence on rebaptism the Anabaptists completely shifted the emphasis from God to man, thus robbing baptism of its sacramental character. To be rebaptized was rightly regarded by the Reformed as a denial of the efficacy and abiding character of the Spirit's work within the believers. It was a reflection on God's promises in Christ which are "not yea and nay . . . For how many soever be the promises of God, in him is the yea: wherefore also through him is the Amen, unto the glory of God through us." (II Cor. 1:18, 20)

But then—so the argument of the Anabaptists ran—how about people who received a baptism replete with superstitious and idolatrous practices? Or, how about those who received baptism from unspiritual motives? Or again, how about infants and little children who receive the sacrament without even being aware of what is going on? Here the Reformed fathers rested their case with the sovereign command and overruling providence of God. We receive baptism not so much from the church, its priests or ministers, as from the triune God who by the operation of his Spirit makes baptism efficacious by producing faith and repentance within us in his time. Nor does adult baptism, administered upon a personal confession of faith, offer a greater guarantee against apostasy than the baptism of infants. Moreover, *neither does this baptism avail us only at the time when the water is poured upon us and received by us, but also through the whole course of our life.*

In this sacrament God speaks to us in eloquent terms of his all-sufficient, saving grace. What greater assurance does any believer need, that the heavenly Father will watch over him to avert all evil or turn it to his profit? To rest our case in the certain promises of the covenant God is far safer and more satisfying to the soul than to depend on the testimony of men, no matter how sincere they may seem to be.

This, indeed, does not cancel our responsibility. The effect of the baptism is clearly linked with our response of faith and repentance. We are to pledge ourselves to walk in newness of life by a daily dying unto self and sin and a living unto God in all good works. Because of this the evangelicals, both Lutheran

and Reformed, have required a public profession on the part of all those who have been baptized. Both repudiated the Romish notion of a sacramental confirmation. "Confirmation is not a confirmation of Baptism nor a sacrament which supplements and perfects Baptism, but only a public profession of loyalty to the true God, who in Baptism establishes His covenant of grace with man."⁶ With this the Reformed wholeheartedly agree, although preferring to call it profession of faith rather than confirmation. Here we acknowledge the triune God in whose name we were baptized to be our God and Father for Christ's sake. Such faith in the God of our baptism enables us to rejoice, "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, no angels, nor principalities, not things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38, 39)

The Defense of Infant Baptism

Since the days of the Reformation those who broke with Rome seem to be irreconcilably divided into two camps. All debates and discussions on the subject have failed to heal the breach. Nor has much progress been made. Even the most recent literature does little more than repeat the arguments on both sides which have been used so long.

To those who have followed Luther and Calvin this difference is no minor matter. Our insight into the fundamental teachings of Scripture will in large measure determine whether we accept or reject as legitimate the baptism of children of believers. Those who stress that salvation is accomplished by some cooperation of man with God's grace will always be much more inclined to reduce infant baptism to a mere ceremony or reject it altogether. The stronger our conviction on the sovereignty of divine grace, the more readily we will see the propriety and legitimacy of such baptism. Yet no preconceived construction of God's gracious work determines the matter. We cannot afford to neglect those New Testament texts which have a more or less direct bearing on the subject. And these are far more

numerous and weighty than the Anabaptists have allowed. Also here we will rest our case with the word of God alone.

Christianity has always regarded baptism as the sign of entrance into the covenantal community or church of God. This should be the determinative question in connection with infant baptism. Are the children of believers to be regarded as belonging to God and his church? Or may we, in the light of what the Bible has to say about them and their position, consider them "outsiders?"

Now in the debate with the Anabaptists mention is always made by them of the words of our Lord, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." (Mark 16:15, 16) This text seems to be always the beginning and middle and end of their refrain. De Bres on this basis called Menno Simons "a cuckoo who can sing but one song." Consistently he and the other Anabaptists forgot its real thrust. At the time of his ascension Christ entrusted to his apostles a world-wide mission, lest Christianity become a relatively small and obscure Jewish sect. The days of Old Testament isolation were passed. The Savior came to fulfill the promise to Abraham, "And in these shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 12:3) Therefore Paul could write, "That upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (Gal. 3:14) To reap the benefits of this covenant, now extended to all peoples, a profession of faith was indeed required of all adults as evidence that God had also called them into his covenant. But the promise thereupon came also to the children of these believing adults. The weight of this and similar texts is simply dismissed or distorted by all who refuse to extend baptism to children of the promise.

In order to demonstrate that infant baptism is proper and prescribed by God, the *Confession* pursues three lines of argumentation.

First of all, we believe and confess that *the infants of believers . . . ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of*

the covenant, as the children of Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children. The Reformed always opposed an indiscriminate baptism. Only those whose parents professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ were entitled to the sacrament. Baptism does not work grace by any inherent power in the water. To repudiate the right of such children to the sign and seal of God's gracious covenant, however, has serious consequences. To all practical purposes they are counted as outsiders. Cullmann rightly insists that the early church approached the matter in the light of the question, "Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized . . . ?" (Acts 10:47) To refuse the sacrament in such instances is to deny God's sovereign claim on these children. It does injustice to the wide scope of the Christian gospel for families, households and nations. These little ones, if the opponents of infant baptism are consistent, should be regarded as belonging to the realm of unbelief, the world and the devil. In such circumstances sincere Christian parents will be tempted to urge upon their little ones an experience of repentance and faith far beyond the ordinary comprehension of their tender years, thus violating every sound Scriptural principle concerning their nurture in the fear and admonition of the Lord. We ought not be shocked, then, that nearly all Baptists have sought refuge in denying original sin and minimizing the ravages of sin in human life.

The second line of argument carries forward the first. *And indeed Christ shed his blood no less for the washing of children of believers than for adult persons; and therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of that which Christ has done for them; as the Lord commanded in the law that they should be made partakers of the sacrament of Christ's suffering and death shortly after they were born, by offering for them a lamb, which was a sacrament of Jesus Christ.*

Here the issue is stated pointedly.

The unity of God's work of grace in both dispensations is affirmed. What children of the covenant received in types and shadows among the Israelites, that is now fully assured them

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in the perfect sacrifice of our Savior. All who reject infant baptism must make a painful choice. Either our children belong to Christ or to the devil. And if the former is true, then by what show of right may the sign and seal of their incorporation in Christ be withheld? Only by mutilating the New Testament doctrine of the sacraments can those who oppose the baptism of children of believers escape the unhappy dilemma which their position forces upon them. Nor is this obviated by a recourse to the ceremony of dedication. This is completely without Scriptural warrant. How dare we dedicate our children, conceived and born in sin and thus unworthy of God's saving grace in Christ, unless we believe that they are sanctified in Christ? If Paul's words "Else were your children unclean; but now are they holy" (I Cor. 7:14) mean anything, then they have been received unto grace in Christ and therefore are to be baptized.

The last argument appeals to the same Scriptural passages alluded to at the beginning of the article. (Col. 2:10-12) *Moreover, what circumcision was to the Jews, baptism is to our children. And for this reason St. Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ.* To view circumcision exclusively as an external and national rite does violence to its profound significance taught by God. Essentially the covenant in the New Testament is identical with that of the Old, even though in several particulars its administration differs. This is patently taught in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 as well as in Colossians 2. All the spiritual promises given to Abraham and his seed belong to them who walk in the faith of Abraham. They and their children are counted by God as a seed unto him. Baptism is actually the "circumcision of Christ," for in connection with its administration Christ by his Holy Spirit ingrafts us into his church, separates us from the world which lies under condemnation, and imparts to us the grace to repent and believe and live for him. This makes the baptism of the children of promise so rich and rewarding. Without hesitation we as believing church profess and plead,

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*"O God, great Father, Lord and King!
Our children unto Thee we bring;
And strong in faith and hope and love,
We dare Thy stedfast Word to prove.*

*"Thy covenant kindness did of old
Our fathers and their seed enfold;
That ancient promise standeth sure,
And shall while heaven and earth endure.*

*"They now the outward sign receive;
Wilt Thou Thy Holy Spirit give,
And keep and help them by Thy power
In every hard and trying hour."*

This we do in the assurance that Christian baptism signifies and seals the same grace of God to children as to their believing parents.

1. What reasons would you give why theologians today are attacking individualism in the church and again stressing the covenant?
2. Explain what it means that Christ is **the end of the law**. What perverted explanations are often given of this?
3. How does Colossians 2:10-12 stress that we are saved by grace only?
4. Show both the similarities and the differences between circumcision and baptism.
5. Who were the Judaizers who opposed Paul? What did they teach? Which sects champion similar notions today?
6. What is meant by our separation from the world?
7. In which sense do we join the church? In which sense are we joined to the church?
8. What is the central message of baptism?
9. Since not all baptized persons are saved, of what value is this sacrament? Does it merely signify and seal external church membership?
10. Do the Reformed hold that all unbaptized persons are lost? Prove that your position is Scriptural.
11. Explain the meaning of Christ as **our Red Sea**? Is there a Biblical basis for this phrase?
12. What is the meaning of the ceremonies which Rome has added to baptism? Why do we regard them as dangerous and objectionable?
13. Which baptisms were found in other religions in New Testament times? What were the mystery religions? What was their relationship to early Christianity?
14. What comfort may we derive from our baptism?
15. Why did the Reformed regard rebaptism as a flagrant insult and violation of God's ordinance?
16. In what several ways does baptism avail us all the days of our life?
17. On which grounds do we reject confirmation and penance as sacraments?
18. Discuss the grounds for infant baptism.

Chapter 35

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ did ordain and institute the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and support those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church.

Now those who are regenerated have in them a twofold life, the one corporal and temporal, which they have from the first birth and is common to all men; the other spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth, which is

effected by the Word of the gospel, in the communion of the body of Christ; and this life is not common, but is peculiar to God's elect. In like manner God has given us, for the support of the bodily and earthly life, earthly and common bread, which is subservient thereto and is common to all men, even as life itself. But for the support of the spiritual and heavenly life which believers have He has sent a living bread, which descended from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ who nourishes and strengthens the spiritual life of believers when they eat Him, that is to say, when they appropriate and receive Him by faith in the spirit.

In order that He might represent unto us this spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body, and wine as a sacrament of His blood, to testify by them unto us that, as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterwards nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith (which is the hand and mouth of our soul) the true body and blood of Christ our only Savior in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.

Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ has not enjoined to us the use of His sacraments in vain, so He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs, though the manner surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Spirit are hidden and incomprehensible. In the meantime we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ. But the manner of our partaking of the same is not by the mouth, but by the spirit through faith. Thus, then, though Christ always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens, yet does He not therefore cease to make us partakers of Himself by faith. This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates Himself with all His benefits to us, and gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death: nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening, and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood.

Further, though the sacraments are connected with the thing signified nevertheless both are not received by all men. The ungodly indeed receives the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament, even as Judas and Simon the sorcerer both indeed received the sacrament but not Christ who was signified by it, of whom believers only are made partakers.

Lastly, we receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God, with humility and reverence, keeping up among us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior, with thanksgiving, making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion. Therefore no one ought to come to this table without having previously rightly examined himself, lest by eating of this bread and drinking of this cup he eat and drink judgment to himself. In a word, we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love towards God and our neighbor.

Therefore we reject all mixtures and damnable inventions which men have added unto and blended with the sacraments, as profanations of them; and affirm that we ought to rest satisfied with the ordinance which Christ and His apostles have taught us, and that we must speak of them in the same manner as they have spoken.

ARTICLE XXXV

CHRISTMAS DAY had come to Tournay. Bertrand le Blas, the velvet manufacturer, hurried to the cathedral after asking his wife and child to pray that God might bless what he had planned to undertake. In the church he found a place near the altar. At the moment when the priest held high the consecrated host, le Blas snatched it out of his hand, broke it into bits, and exclaimed in the hearing of all, "Misguided men, do ye take this thing to be Jesus Christ, your Lord and Master?" With these words he threw the fragments on the ground and trampled them underfoot. Although escape was possible because of the amazement of both priests and people, le Blas chose to stay and face the consequences of his deed.

For so much wickedness a painful and prolonged penalty was inflicted.

On a hurdle le Blas was dragged to the market-place. Here his right hand and foot were twisted off between two red-hot irons. Because he still called upon the name of God, his tongue was torn out by the roots. Thereupon with arms and legs fastened behind his back, he was hooked about the middle of his body with an iron chain and swung back and forth across a slow fire. But his fortitude, writes Motley in *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, lasted as long as his life.

We cannot approve of le Blas' method of protesting Rome's perversion of the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can wish, however, that his reformatory insight were not dimmed in the churches today. For much more is at stake here than a difference of opinion about ceremonies. Too many in our time seem so impressed by the magnificence of the Mass, that they fail to realize that it is a defamation of our Savior and the complete salvation which he accomplished for us on the cross. Un-

less this conviction remains sharp within the churches, the glory of the Lord's Supper will be muted and its blessed benefits missed.

Food for God's Family

Among Christian believers the sacrament of the Lord's Supper has always been highly esteemed as one of the means of grace. Almost universally it is acknowledged as a fitting symbol of our union with Christ and thus the guarantee of our fellowship with God and his people. Because of this we lament that the table which the Savior spreads has occasioned some of the sharpest debates and divisions in Christendom.

Many have attempted to dissolve the pain and problem of these separations by ignoring the doctrinal differences which surround this sacrament. Scripture hardly seems to commend such an approach. We stand on solid ground, when affirming that growth in grace by the use of this means necessitates some spiritual understanding of its nature, operation and efficacy. We do not solve our painful difficulties and divisions by running away from them. The church is Christ's witness in and to the world. Her testimony therefore should always be clear, concise and convincing.

In this light we can understand why the *Confession* speaks so eloquently of this sacrament as a supper and not a sacrifice.

This it does without sharp polemics. Indeed, both Romish and Lutheran deviations are opposed. Yet the names of these parties are not mentioned. Various historical circumstances seem to suggest themselves as reasons for this approach. Likely de Bres did not wish to give undue offense to the king and his councillors to whom this *Confession* was first presented in the hope that the persecutions of the Reformed would be mitigated. We also know that the author held the Lutheran brethren in high esteem and sought by every possible means to promote unity between them and the Calvinists, whose position on the Lord's Supper many misunderstood. But may it not also be a deeply spiritual intuition on de Bres' part which prompt-

ed him to speak so charitably and yet clearly when discussing this mystery?

Once again the author follows the pattern set by his inspiring teacher, John Calvin. In beginning his consideration of the Lord's Supper, the reformer of Geneva penned a remarkable passage on its chief design. "After God has once received us into his family, and not only so as to admit us among his servants, but to number us with his children, in order to fulfill the part of a most excellent father, solicitous for his offspring, he also undertakes to sustain and nourish us as long as we live; and not content with this, he has been pleased to give us a pledge, as a further assurance of this never-ceasing liberality. For this purpose, therefore, by the hand of his only-begotten Son, he has favoured his Church with another sacrament, a spiritual banquet, in which Christ testifies himself to be the bread of life, to feed our souls for a true and blessed immortality."¹

Were all Christians able to agree with these words, little more would have to be said about the Lord's Supper. Almost from ancient times within the church, however, opinions were divided. Some spoke in terms which seem to foreshadow the Romish doctrine of transubstantiation. Others insisted on a real but spiritual presence of the Lord in the sacrament. Even Ambrose and Augustine, two of the most renown church fathers, disagreed on this point. During the middle ages tensions arose. In the ninth century a Benedictine monk, Paschasius Radbertus, advocated a literal and materialistic view of Christ's presence, which suited the widespread belief in miracles as a daily occurrence and enhanced the power of the church in the minds of the people. Against this theory Ratramnus protested vehemently, drawing his arguments from the arsenal of Augustine. Yet he remained unmolested in the church. When two centuries later the pious Berengar of Tours espoused the position of Augustine and Ratramnus, he was taken roundly to task and twice forced to recant in Rome. This shows how swiftly the church had swung to literalism. By 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council transubstantiation was declared official church doc-

trine. "At that moment in history," writes Harold E. Frey, "considerations of political and ecclesiastical power converged with a situation of spiritual demoralization which was the outcome of centuries of deepening ignorance, superstition and false doctrine to produce a result catastrophic for Christianity."² The scholastic theologians went to work in an effort to bolster the doctrine with their involved argumentations. The sacrament had become a sacrifice. Seldom did the people communicate. To see Mass performed was often regarded as sufficient.

Yet voices of protest were far from silenced. These were harbingers of a crisis which would come upon the church in full force in the days of the reformers. The schisms were not the fruit of reformatory work; they were present in embryo long before Luther and Calvin appeared on the scene. Wycliffe denied transubstantiation and charged all who participated in the Mass with idolatry. John Hus protested the innovation which denied the cup to the people. The Waldensians arose to urge a return to the simplicity of the New Testament. But with ever increasing bitterness and repressive measures the lords of the church replied. Now Mass was declared a repetition of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. The surest protection against the penalties of sin was a multiplying of these masses. The sale of indulgences on the open market only completed the corruption of the Lord's Supper. Coming out of such a background steeped in false doctrine and evil practices, the reformers found it difficult to understand each other at times. Painful and persistent as these differences were, their presence ought not shock us overmuch.

In Calvin's day these differences were sharply accentuated. Luther had insisted on the physical presence of our Lord in his supper. To him no other presence seemed real and Scriptural. Zwingli, on the other hand, denied any real presence and largely reduced the sacraments to a memorial meal. Calvin suggested that Satan was gaining great advantage over God's people by obscuring the sound doctrine and undermining the unity of Christian believers. Thus he felt constrained to add this defense for a more thorough consideration of the subject. "Now, as the knowledge of so great a mystery is highly necessary, and on

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account of its importance, requires an adequate explication; and, on the other hand, as Satan, in order to deprive the Church of this inestimable treasure, long ago endeavoured, first by mists, and afterwards by thicker shades, to obscure its lustre, and then raised disputes and contentions to alienate the minds of the simple from a relish for this sacred food, and in our time also has attempted the same artifice; after having exhibited a summary of what relates to the subject, adapted to the capacity of the unlearned, I will disentangle it from those sophistries with which Satan has been labouring to deceive the world."³ This, then, is the practical setting of the subject, which in all its parts speaks most comfortingly to those who yearn to know what Scripture says. Of this treatise we have an admirable and appropriate summary in the *Confession*.

We are reminded that this sacrament, too, was an institution of our Lord. And who would affirm that such a simple statement is useless? The true church will have no desire to add to or subtract from what the Savior has provided for his people.

The aim of the Lord's Supper is to *nourish and support those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church*. The implications are plain. Indeed, we are not concerned first of all with the doctrines of the church and the regenerated life as such. These were discussed earlier. Yet they are also involved at this point. Implied is the position that the Lord's Supper does not create faith. Hence it is not a "converting ordinance." Rather has it been provided by our Lord for those who seek the strengthening of that faith which they confess has been awakened in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Now in a practical way and with pastoral solicitude the *Confession* reminds us of God's rich mercies. The *regenerated have in them a twofold life, the one corporal and temporal, which they have from the first birth and is common to all men; the other spiritual and heavenly, which is given to them in their second birth*. Here is no dualism between body and soul, matter and spirit in the sense advocated by the Anabaptists. The new life, which primarily affects the spiritual aspects of

man's being, has profound consequences for the body which becomes by grace an instrument of righteousness. Hence the figure of speech used here by de Bres must not be pressed to unwarranted conclusions. But as the body is sustained by the bounties of a loving God who provides *earthly and common bread*, so the regenerated life needs for its maintenance and growth *a living bread, which descended from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ*. In clear accents we are reminded of our dependence on God's grace. There is no room for the notion that salvation is a joint enterprise of God and man. God grants all we need in Christ Jesus.

In order to partake of Christ as *a living bread*, we confess that we are to *eat Him, that is to say, when they* (i.e. all true partakers) *appropriate and receive him by faith in the spirit*. This simple and sober statement at once announces that the Reformed churches lay strong stress on the mystery of the Lord's Supper. Solid ground for their convictions concerning the reality of Christ's presence and our partaking of him they found in the discourse of our Lord at Capernaum. (John 6:47-51) Although this does not introduce the Lord's Supper directly, it does insist on what is requisite to being received of God in grace and restored to a true communion with him. Without a true union with the Savior we enjoy no fruition of our knowledge of God. To partake of the fulness of Christ includes fellowship with his person as well as sharing in the benefits of his work. Thus we may say that we *eat Him*, which is defined as an action of faith which leaves no room for any carnal notions of our response in the sacrament. Faith is the organ of our spiritual participation in Christ, described so aptly as *the hand and mouth of our soul*. In this sense our hearts lift up themselves to sing at the time of the celebration of the sacrament,

*"We taste Thee, O Thou living bread,
 And long to feast upon Thee still;
 We drink of Thee, the fountain-head,
 And thirst our souls from Thee to fill."*

This makes the Lord's Supper a high point in our life upon earth.

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The Witness of Christ in the Sacrament

With the Scriptures we affirm that our partaking of the sacrament is an appropriate and active witness to the world of the infinite value of our Redeemer's sufferings and death. On this basis Calvin pleaded all his life for more frequent communion. He as did the other reformers warned ceaselessly against the deformation present in the Roman churches, where so frequently the priests would celebrate Mass without any spectators or participants. All evangelical Christians are united in the conviction that without active participation on the part of the congregation, the Lord's Supper loses its unique character and purpose. To this end Paul admonished the Corinthians to make faithful use of this divine institution. "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink the cup, ye proclaim the Lord's death till he come." (I Cor. 11:26)

Our witness, however, is entirely dependent upon and proceeds from the prior and powerful witness of our Lord himself. This was too much ignored by Zwingli and the Anabaptists, who reduced the sacrament largely to an act of remembrance. In this supper the Savior declares what he is for all them that trust in him.

Now this in no way invalidates the position that in the Lord's Supper we are confronted with a symbolical representation of the Savior's suffering and death. On this score the Zwinglians and Anabaptists could rightly appeal to God's Word. We are plainly commanded to remember our Lord thereby. Such commemoration on our part is an integral part of every proper celebration. This follows also from the purpose for which Christ has instituted it. We affirm therefore, *In order that He (Christ) might represent unto us this spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted an earthly and visible bread as the sacrament of His body, and the wine as a sacrament of His blood.*

Yet according to the Reformed this by no means expresses, much less exhausts, the significance of the Lord's Supper.

We differ sharply from all who would reduce the sacrament to a meal of commemoration, wherein we witness to our

faith in the sufferings and death of our Lord as the only ground of our salvation. Such a view fails to do justice to the nature of this supper as a sacrament.

Therefore the *Confession* continues with an elaboration of what Christ actually does here, namely *to testify by them* (i.e. bread and wine) *unto us that, as certainly as we receive and hold this sacrament in our hands and eat and drink the same with our mouths, by which our life is afterwards nourished, we also do as certainly receive by faith . . . the true body and blood of Christ our only Savior in our souls, for the support of our spiritual life.* Only by such a formulation does the sacrament remain for the believer truly a means of grace, a valid organ in connection with which our covenant God through his Holy Spirit communicates saving grace to his people. By means of this ordinance not the believers but God first of all does something. It is powerful act on his part by which our lives are kept in communion with him through Jesus Christ. Without such divine activity the sacrament would be robbed of the divine intent and efficacy with which our Lord has endowed it.

Here again our view of the sacraments comes into sharp focus. Earlier we testified that these means were ordained by God in grace, *taking account of our weakness and infirmities.* We declare not so much the presence and power of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which throughout our earthly life remains so weak and imperfect, but rather the riches of his condescending love to us. Now the proper perspectives are opened. So many, tossed to and fro by fears within of partaking unworthily and fightings against sin without, have shunned the sacrament in the hope of thereby escaping the displeasure of God against unworthy participation. Their failing lies in trying to find some worthiness in themselves rather than following the God-appointed way of confessing their sins and seeking the strength to grow in faith and obedience in Christ alone, who is pleased to work through the sacrament. By staying away they disobey God's command and despoil their souls by refusing that medicine which our Lord has provided for their healing. In the supper the accent falls on God's sovereign saving

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grace which so wondrously meets the needs of them that trust in him for a complete redemption from sin and all its consequences. In the sacrament we listen to the words of divine love, inviting us to eat and drink Christ by faith and thus participate more clearly and consciously in that eternal life which he has purchased for and promises to us in his gospel. Therefore our Lord said, "He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he that eateth me, he also shall live because of me." (John 6:56, 57) In such eating and drinking our souls may delight themselves, as we come to the holy banquet spread before our eyes.

The Presence of Christ in the Supper

All this brings us face to face with the major issue in the sacramental controversy—the presence of our Lord in the supper which he instituted.

Throughout the years the historic positions which have been adopted are so well known that a detailed consideration seems superfluous. Yet a few comments are not out of place to remind us how thoroughly imbedded these views are in the structure of the several Christian theologies.

On one end of the scale is the Romanist doctrine of the actual physical presence of our Lord's body and blood. This, according to the definition of the church, is accomplished by the miracle of transubstantiation, at which time the elements of bread and wine are changed into Christ's body and blood while their properties, such as appearance, texture, taste, etc., remain unchanged. Rome has never been able to escape the impact of the argument that it virtually makes Christ's words, "This is my body," read "This becomes my body." Here we can no longer speak of a sacramental union, since the sign has been transformed into the thing signified. Nor is the argument to the point that with God all things are possible, since Scripture forbids speculating on possibilities and probabilities. We may confidently expect only that which God promises to do.

Calvin has several sharp things to say in condemning the papal mass. It "offers blasphemy and insult to Christ" in allowing that he is manipulated by mere mortal men. It also "suppresses and conceals the cross and passion of Christ" by erecting next to it an altar. Furthermore "it obliterates and expunges from the memory of mankind the true and alone death of Jesus Christ" by insisting that "it is necessary for Christ to be sacrificed every day, in order to be of advantage to us." In this manner believers are prevented "from perceiving and reflecting on the death of the cross." Attention is transferred from Christ to the church.⁴

To do full justice to the Lutheran teaching is difficult. Their position, which maintains that "in, with and under the bread and wine Christ presents His true body and blood to be truly and substantially eaten and drunk by us," is usually called consubstantiation, although today not a few of its adherents balk at the use of this term. They accuse the Romanists of making the bread a "sham bread," while insisting that the Calvinists make the body a "sham body." To explain the union between Christ's body and blood and the elements they affirm, "This union is neither personal, as is the union of the two natures in Christ, nor mystical, as it is between Christ and the believer, but sacramental, that is to say, the *unio sacramentalis* takes place only in the Lord's Supper. It is neither local nor natural, but illocal, supernatural, and incomprehensible, yet real."⁵ To secure the omnipresence of Christ's body, the Lutherans resort to the theory of "communicatio idiomatum," a communication of certain divine attributes to Christ's human nature. Yet this is not "a local extension of Christ's body" but rather "a personal and supernatural ubiquity." Thus Quenstedt taught, "We say that only the body of Christ is united with the bread, and only the blood is united with the wine, and (both are) sacramentally received by the mouth of the body. But the whole Christ is received spiritually, by the mouth of faith."⁶ Strange as it may seem, the Lutherans actually come out precisely where the Reformed do: the eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood is always "in a supernatural and incomprehen-

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sible way." Yet the differences are exceedingly real. Christ's body and blood belong to his human nature. The Reformed insist that this may not be confused with his divine nature; the Lutherans that it may never be separated therefrom.

On the other end of the scale is the reduction of the sacrament to a memorial meal at which Christ himself is not sacramentally present. This view has generally been adopted also by liberals of every stripe. Zwingli's position is more difficult to state adequately. Some passages indicate that he regarded the Lord's Supper as little more than a bare symbol by which spiritual truths and blessings are represented to us. In a few places he seems to admit that it is also a pledge of what God does for those who partake. Yet the emphasis falls largely on what the believer does. Eating and drinking is identified with a trustful reliance on the Savior's death.

The Reformed have followed the course outlined by Calvin. Here an attempt is made to do justice to all facets of Biblical doctrine on the sacraments while escaping the defects of the positions stated above. The emphasis falls on the sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified. Calvin sets this in bold relief, "Now, as it is certain and beyond all doubt that Jesus Christ has not enjoined us the use of the sacraments in vain, so He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs."

Indeed, Christ is not physically present upon or at the table, contrary to what the Romanists and Lutherans teach, since he "always sits at the right hand of His Father in the heavens." In opposition to the Zwinglian view we confess Christ's activity in the state of exaltation by which through the Spirit's operation believers are preserved in their saving union with him. Thus we affirm an actual and real presence of the Savior in the supper. This is not to be construed physically but spiritually. Yet this presence may not be reduced to a presence in our spirit, that is, in our apprehension of him by faith. This would make the reality depend on man's response. Rather, it consists in the efficacious and effective working of the Holy

Spirit who is the life-giving and life-sustaining bond between the Savior and his own. We are not left as orphans on earth who gaze wistfully into heaven where Christ reigns in glory. By giving his Spirit "as an earnest" of our complete redemption, Christ works the grace of our union and communion with him.

By this means we enjoy fellowship with the entire person as well as with the work of our Redeemer. This is what the *Confession* means, when it teaches, *Yet does He not cease to make us partakers of Himself by faith.* To safeguard the reality of this work we acknowledge, *In the meantime we err not when we say that what is eaten and drunk by us is the proper and natural body and the proper blood of Christ.*

To some these words have been a stumblingblock, supposing that they are a concession to the Romanists. It must be admitted that even Calvin, the master theologian, is not as crystal-clear in his expressions at this point as we might desire and expect him to be. This is not the result of any lack of precision on his part. It follows rather from the nature of the subject itself. He refused to be led astray by speculation and reading into the Scriptures more than the words themselves warranted. Yet he would not be beguiled into saying less than the Bible itself commends. By virtue of his mystical union with Christ the believer receives the fulness of Christ, which includes the human nature wherein he wrought our redemption. To say anything less would reduce the words of the Savior to empty and meaningless figures of speech. "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves . . . This is the bread which came down out of heaven." (John 6:53, 58) But as Berkouwer correctly points out, Calvin was concerned with maintaining "the real presence according to the mode of his (i.e. Christ's) exaltation."⁷ To say that he substituted the Spirit's operation for Christ's presence is unjust. Meanwhile he resisted both the Romanist and Lutheran positions on the grounds that they emphasized the "substance of Christ's body and blood" in isolation from his person, his death for us on the cross and his effective working in the church.

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Calvin already acknowledged that this union with Christ in the supper can be better experienced than described. This position the *Confession* does not hesitate to adopt, *though the manner* (i.e. by which Christ presents himself to us) *surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Spirit are hidden and incomprehensible*. This concession ought not be dismissed as unworthy of the church. Who can properly comprehend the Spirit's work of creating new life within us? And if this second birth cannot be adequately circumscribed, need we be surprised that the church feels incompetent to describe in detail how that life is nourished and supported by Christ?

Precisely in the Reformed construction of the sacraments the glorious ministry of the Holy Spirit comes into full view. Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans make it rather non-essential, since they have identified Christ's presence and power with the physical elements. Also those who stress the subjective response of the believers fail to do justice to the ministry of the Spirit. Only by him are we *made partakers of Christ by faith* also at the time of the Lord's Supper.

The Benefits of the Lord's Supper

Since Christ is really present at the holy table, believers are assured of their participation in the inexhaustible and inexpressible benefits of his work on their behalf.

That there is a direct activity of grace at the time of the sacrament is clearly affirmed by the Reformed. *This feast is a spiritual table, at which Christ communicates himself with all his benefits to us*. Indeed, the partaking from our side is by faith alone. There is no room for a carnal eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood. This would not merely be unworthy of the Biblical view of our salvation in Christ but also constitutes a rejection of his incarnation at which time he assumed our flesh and blood with all its temporal and spatial limitations. All the benefits of his accomplished work are dependent upon fellowship with his person. Nor is there room for anything which smacks of the Roman Catholic corruption

of the table into an altar, at which Calvary's sacrifice is repeated in unbloody fashion. The day of altars on earth is done, for "we have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat that serve the tabernacle." (Hebr. 13:10) This is our Lord's human nature wherein he sacrificed himself once-for-all unto the complete redemption and reconciliation of his people with the Father.

The specific benefits which we receive in connection with the sacrament are summarized. Christ *gives us there to enjoy both Himself and the merits of His sufferings and death*. Apparently the *Confession* feels no need to rehearse what has already been stated in detail in articles 20 and 24. By these means the souls of his people are said to live. For in bestowing himself, our Lord is confessed as actively and actually *nourishing, strengthening, and comforting our poor comfortless souls by the eating of His flesh, quickening and refreshing them by the drinking of His blood*.

Such blessings, however, are not received by all who sit down at the Lord's table. In unmistakably clear language this is affirmed. For while on the one hand the sacramental union between the sign and the thing signified is explicitly maintained, the *Confession* adds that *both are not received by all men*. In a sense the ungodly do partake of the sacrament, since they reach out to take and eat the bread and drink the wine. But this is plainly to their condemnation as was participation in the case of *Judas and Simon the sorcerer*. The unbelieving and impenitent do *not receive the truth of the sacrament*.

A summary of this position is admirably expressed by Calvin. "Now, as we perceive this sacred bread of the Lord's Supper to be spiritual food, grateful and delicious as well as salutary to the sincere worshippers of God, who, in the participation of it, experience Christ to be their life, whom it stimulates to thanksgiving, whom it exhorts to mutual charity among themselves; so, on the contrary, it is changed into a most noxious poison to all whose faith it does not nourish and confirm, and whom it does not excite to thanksgiving and charity. For as corporeal food, when it offends a diseased stomach, becoming

itself corrupted, is found noxious rather than nutritious, so this spiritual food, when it meets with a soul polluted by iniquity, only precipitates it into a more dreadful ruin; not, indeed, from any fault in the food, but because 'unto them that are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure,' however it may be otherwise sanctified by the blessing of the Lord."⁸ These, then, eat and drink at the holy table to their condemnation. For this reason the Reformed have always urged upon all communicants a true self-examination in obedience to the apostolic command. (I Cor. 11:28)

The Church's Response to the Sacrament

Having set forth what Christ pledges to do in the Lord's Supper, the *Confession* explains its proper celebration, in order that thereby those who participate may be benefited.

As to the time and place of its administration, this is to be *in the assembly of the people of God*. The heavenly Father has provided this nourishment not for individuals in isolation but for a covenant people who have fellowship not only with Christ but through him also with each other. To secure the promised blessings, we may never divorce the sacrament from the pure preaching of the gospel. The congregation ought to be well instructed in its nature, operation and efficacy. To be content with anything less would subvert the gospel and open wide the door to the superstitions of Rome.

The frequency is not mentioned at this point. This was a thorny subject in the days of the Reformation, since the people had been accustomed under Rome's guidance to be satisfied with merely looking on at Mass and partaking very infrequently. Calvin urged an administration "very frequently, and at least once in every week."⁹ Many questions arise at this point. Is there perhaps a unique presence of Christ at the table not conferred elsewhere? This hardly seems likely, since he has promised never to depart from his church. (Matt. 28:20) Moreover by faith he dwells in our hearts richly. (Eph. 3:17) Nothing can ever separate the true believer from the love of Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:35) We may not think of the Lord's Supper as an "oasis"

in our wilderness wanderings, as if our lives remain barren and uncomforted apart from this means. Communion is not an isolated fellowship of believers with their Lord in contrast with the poverty of daily life. Always our Savior is with us to cheer and comfort. In this sacrament he does not give himself in richer abundance. Rather, the gospel promises are assured and communicated in a somewhat different form. Its necessity arises not out of any lack in Christ's bestowal of himself in the gospel. The need arises out of man's *weakness and infirmities*. And usually the ones who suppose their faith strong enough to do without these sensible means are the ones who seem to need them most.

We are further admonished to attend upon this ordinance in the proper frame of mind and heart. Believers are exhorted to receive the sacrament with *humility and reverence*. True humility springs from a proper regard of ourselves in the light of God's word which teaches our sinfulness and unworthiness. No sincere Christian partakes because he deems himself worthy of the precious benefits which Christ imparts. Because in the sacrament we partake of holy food and drink, that is of Christ himself by faith, we are prompted to reverence. To take the Lord's Supper for granted by placing it on a level with common food and drink is to "be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord." (I Cor. 11:27b)

Three duties are incumbent upon all who would partake worthily. First of all, they will be engaged in *keeping up among themselves a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior*. Without such commemoration we do injustice to the intent of the sacrament, wherein is represented to us the mystery of God's salvation of the world. From this follows the second obligation which is a remembering *with thanksgiving*. By the sacrifice of praise we offer up ourselves as thank offerings to God. In this restricted sense sacrifice is an essential aspect of the sacrament. Our thanksgiving is stimulated and increased by the solemn remembrance of Christ's most bitter passion and death. From this proceeds our praise of him who is the author of salvation. Only then are we capable of *making there confession of our faith and of the Christian religion*.

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To this end we also examine ourselves before approaching the table. This the Reformed churches have always regarded as a constitutive part of the celebration. The liturgy for the administration of the Lord's Supper admonishes all who would receive the sacrament to consider their sins and accursedness in the light of God's wrath revealed against sin in Christ's sufferings, as well as consequently to believe God's sure promise that for Christ's sake all their sins are forgiven and to pledge themselves by grace to live thankfully, sincerely and obediently in the sight of God and men. At this holy table, therefore, we need nothing in addition to what has been expressly taught us in Scripture. *Therefore we reject all mixtures and damnable inventions which men have added unto and blended with the sacraments, as profanations of them; and affirm that we ought to rest satisfied with the ordinances which Christ and His apostles have taught us.* Approaching the holy table in such faith and obedience we sing with Johann Franck,

*“Jesus, bread of life, I pray Thee,
Let me gladly here obey Thee;
I am by Thy grace invited,
Be Thy love with love requited.
From this banquet let me measure,
Lord, how vast and deep its treasure;
Through the gifts Thou here dost give me
As Thy guest in heaven receive me.”*

1. Why is it both dangerous and sinful to ignore doctrinal differences on the Lord's Supper? 2. Must all doctrinal differences be settled before we can commune together at the Lord's table? Give reasons for your answer. 3. What is the Mass? How did it develop in the Roman church? 4. What did Calvin have in mind with *mists* and *thicker shades*? 5. What is the specific relation between John 6:41-59 and the doctrine of the Lord's Supper? 6. What is the Biblical teaching on the source, nature, manifestation and efficacy of our mystical union with Christ? How is this related to the sacrament? 7. What is meant by the Lord's Supper as a *sign* of God's grace? as a *seal* of that grace? 8. How do both Zwinglians and Anabaptists on the one hand and Roman Catholics on the other deny the sacramental character of the Lord's Supper? 9. Why do the Reformed prefer the formulation that the Spirit works "in connection with" to the formulation that he works "through" the sacraments? Is there an essential difference? 10. How is faith actually nourished and strengthened by this sacrament? Why is it wrong to stay away? 11. With what difficulties is the Lutheran view burdened? Are these serious? 12. Show how Calvin's view was a marked improvement over both the Zwinglian and Lutheran views without being a compromise between them. 13. What is meant by the Holy Spirit as "an earnest" of our salvation? 14. Why do the Reformed so strongly stress communion with Christ's person as well as his benefits? 15. Show how the Reformed view alone fully magnifies the work of the Spirit in our salvation, also in connection with the place and purpose of the Lord's Supper. 16. How can something so good and wholesome as the sacrament be changed into "a most noxious poison?" 17. How often should we celebrate the Lord's Supper? 18. How is the bond between Christ and believers strengthened by this sacrament? Explain in the light of relevant passages in the **Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper**. 19. Which penalties does God mete out to those who are "guilty of the body and the blood of our Lord?" 20. What *mixtures* and *damnable inventions* has Rome added to this sacrament?

Chapter 36

The Church and the Civil Authorities

We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, has appointed kings, princes, and magistrates; willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency. For this purpose He has invested the magistracy with "the sword for the punishment of evil-doers and for the protection of them that do well."

Their office is not only to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also to protect the sacred ministry, that the kingdom of Christ may thus be promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by every one, as He commands in His Word.

Moreover, it is the bounden duty of every one, of whatever state, quality, or condition he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God; to supplicate for them in their prayers that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and "that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity."

Wherefore we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men.

ARTICLE XXXVI

THE RELATIONSHIP of the church to the orders and organizations of society is a perennial problem. Although it confronts the Christian most pointedly and painfully when conflicts arise between church and state, no age ever completely escapes its impact.

In the early years of Christianity it disturbed many minds. Some were tempted to compromise. Others took refuge in world flight. Only a few seemed to realize that the believer can never give an unqualified "yes" or "no" to the political order as it exists. The writer of the *Epistle to Diognetus* sensed this, however, when he wrote, "They (i.e. believers) dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners . . . What the soul is in the body, that Christians are in the world . . . The soul loves the flesh which hates it, and it loves the members; so Christians love those who hate them. The soul is enclosed in the body, yet itself holds the body together; so Christians are kept in the world as in a prison-house, yet they themselves hold the world together . . . In so great an office has God appointed them, which it is not lawful for them to decline."¹

Once again this office of the Christians in the world is being ardently discussed. In penetrating articles and books such writers as Barth, Brunner, Cullmann, Tillich and Niebuhr—to mention only those best-known to American readers—remind us of the tension which troubles those who are in the world but not of the world. (John 17:11, 14) How rich and rewarding is their assurance that the Savior prays for them, "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one . . . Sanctify them in

the truth: thy word is truth." (John 17:16, 18) This lays upon us the responsibility of discerning and declaring that truth concerning our relation to this present age, including the state. To this task de Bres addressed himself here for his day. How well his words speak to our situation should now be investigated.

The Riddle of the State

Questions concerning the nature, function and purpose of the state, including its relation to Christ's church, rank high on the agenda of many ecclesiastical conferences. Time and again the subject was referred to in *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, a volume containing materials prepared for the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held at Amsterdam in 1948.

This occasions no surprise, when we remember the radical changes which have come upon our world. In recent years the Christian faith has registered some of its greatest triumphs and defeats. Our generation is witnessing both the most intransigent forms of state absolutism and the most undisciplined attacks on political authority. Seldom has the tension between liberty and law been so pronounced as now. Brunner speaks appropriately of "a crisis of the institution of the State."² Something has happened in this sphere which never happened before and indeed never could have happened before. "This crisis is not due to outward events, but is something which has happened inwardly; at the same time, it certainly becomes manifest in outward events, as, for instance, in the dominance of the power of economic interests over the authority of the State."³ The cry today is for security from the cradle to the grave.

Here believers are continuously confronted with the task of finding their way in faith-obedience amid changing scenes.

The governments of our day are being increasingly embroiled in all the problems which plague a complex society. So much are we part of one world, that what happens in Africa or Asia today affects the smallest hamlet in America tomorrow. Political tensions between east and west have estranged the

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churches on both sides of the iron and bamboo curtains. Scientific advancements, promoted by the states, produced bombs which in the twinkling of an eye can wipe out whole nations. This places the Christian's attitude to war and its justification in a totally new perspective. Meanwhile civil power is being centralized and concentrated. Education, labor, medicine, housing and race relations have come under the aegis of the state.

How pleasant it would be for us to dismiss all these problems from our minds and contemplate the imminent return of our blessed Lord. This is the way out suggested by many evangelicals. We should not be shocked at the proliferation of chiliastic sects in our time. This has characterized every disturbed age since the Christian gospel was first proclaimed among the nations. Much of this interest seems to stem more from a deep-seated psychological yearning for security than from a responsible faith-reflection upon God's word. Nor may we passively acquiesce in the changes which impinge upon us daily. This failing characterized too many German believers during Hitler's swift rise to power. Thereby the church was pushed into a corner where, estranged from society, she could only protest too little and too late as the calamity of the century drew nigh.

While still a measure of free speech is ours, the church must speak. "It has also become the duty of the theologian to reflect upon this question," wrote Brunner in the darkening days before World War II, "for the church, the community of believers, cannot understand itself and its task in the world without having its own view of the meaning and functions of the State."⁴

In view of the confusing changes this will not be easy.

Many sincere Christians seem to be content with living on an uncritical level. Unreflectively they adjust to every political and social crisis which comes upon them. Others suffer from a fearful myopia. They approve or disapprove of changes in the light of social and economic effects upon themselves, their families and their community. Those more sensitive to the urgen-

cies of the Christian message for all of life discover little more than threats to personal liberty. As a result they are quick to condemn the political orders under which they live as manifestations of the demonic. Many seem to forget that the state is not the nation, and the nation not the state. However closely intertwined these are in daily experience, they should at all times be distinguished.⁶ Complex factors, such as geographical, historical, cultural, social and religious conditioning, are at work. These must be understood and evaluated. But in the ordering of its communal life every people has its responsibility to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, "who is over all, and through all, and in all." (Eph. 4:6) To witness to this task each day anew is the calling of every Christian believer. No one is excused from his God-given assignment to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city set upon a hill. (Matt. 5:13, 14) There will be a time to say "yes" to the state. There will also be a time to say "no." And to assist the individual in saying the right word at the right time this article can still do service today.

Calvin's Teaching on the State

To some Christians it comes as a surprise that the church speaks about the state in one of her creeds. Under the subtle spell of mysticism, pietism and fundamentalism many have closed their eyes to the relevance of the Christian faith for all of life. Despite sincere beliefs and good intentions they have helped to restrict the gospel to the domain of private opinion and practice. As a result they have contributed to the progressive secularization of life.

For Reformed believers this is not merely an indefensible position; it is irresponsible in view of our calling to be salt and light and a city set on a hill.

To speak officially on the state seems to belong to the unique genius of the Reformed faith. Aside from Roman Catholicism, this voice is seldom heard in the churches. Yet what is written in our *Confession* at this point was not a novelty intro-

duced by de Bres. He followed in the footsteps of his teacher, Calvin. Now the reformer of Geneva never developed a theory of state and statecraft. He did enunciate basic Biblical principles, however, which influenced the political order in many lands. Even that otherwise unsympathetic appraiser of Calvin's teachings, Jean Jacques Rousseau, does not hesitate to pay this high tribute, "Those who consider Calvin only as a theologian fail to recognize the breadth of his genius. The editing of our wise laws, in which he had a large share, does him as much honor as his *Institutes*. Whatever revolution time may bring in our religion, so long as the love of country and liberty is not extinct among us, the memory of this great man will be had in reverence."⁶

What, then, did Calvin have to say about the civil magistrates? Here we must judge cautiously. He spoke primarily to his times, wherein many of his compatriots and co-religionists were persecuted. He addressed himself in large measure to Christian ideals and confessed that many of these could not be applied fully and at once. That he has been much misunderstood and maligned is evident. Often his deeds rather than his doctrine have been pushed to the foreground, with the result that the real Calvin is largely wrapped in thick mists. It cannot be denied that in his writings he spoke with a large measure of consistency on the nature, functions and purpose of the state, as well as on its relation to the church.

Calvin admitted that the subject of the civil magistracy "seems to have no connection with the spiritual doctrine of faith."⁷ Yet he felt constrained to write about it, since some engaged in subverting the ordinance established by God while others extolled its power beyond all just bounds. It is no less than ingratitude to and rebellion against God, when we ignore our responsibilities to the civil authorities. To be sure, our deepest concern is not whether we live under a monarchy, an aristocracy or a democracy. The kingdom of God, though never divorced from this present life, always transcends the boundaries of custom, language and nationality. Strongly he opposed the view of those who regard "the whole system of civil gov-

ernment as a polluted thing." This should serve notice on all who suppose politics is a dirty business which Christians do well to shun.

Of signal importance is the careful line which he drew between spiritual and civil power. Yet these two may not be divorced. "This civil government is designed, as long as we live in this world, to cherish and support the external worship of God, to preserve the pure doctrine of religion, to defend the constitution of the Church, to regulate our lives in a manner requisite for the society of men, to form our manner to civil justice, to promote our concord with each other, and to establish general peace and tranquility."⁸ At once he recognized that some will think it strange that the magistrates are charged to preserve the true religion. Therefore he outlined his position on "the magistrate, who is the guardian and conservator of the laws; the laws according to which he governs; the people who are governed by the laws and obey the magistrate."⁹

From the Bible it is plain that God not only approves but eminently commends the political office. (Ps. 82:1, 6; John 10:35) This adequately refutes the Anabaptist notion "that servile kind of government is quite incompatible with the perfection which accompanies the gospel of Christ." Such a dualism between nature and grace, creation and recreation is totally foreign to Calvin's thought. It roots in ignorance, pride and a boasting of perfection which Christians do not possess in this life. When criticized unjustly magistrates should console themselves with the knowledge of "having been constituted ministers of the Divine justice." Thus they stand "in a most sacred function."

The duty of the magistrates extends "to both tables of the law." Even the heathen recognize the principle underlying this truth. "No government can be happily constituted, unless its first objective is the promotion of piety, and that all laws are preposterous which neglect the claims of God." This is elaborated at great length.¹⁰

To discharge their office the authorities are clothed with the power of the sword. Here Calvin pleaded against both ex-

cessive severity and a clemency or "mistaken humanity, which is the worst kind of cruelty."¹¹ Wars are regarded as the "infliction of public vengeance." In addition, the magistrates ought to promote peace in their own borders, suppress all sedition, succor the distressed and punish crimes. To this end we need laws which "are the strong nerves of civil polity." In the development of good and just laws, we ought not neglect the civil polity of Moses. Full well Calvin recognized the distinction between the Old and New Testaments but insisted that "even the ceremonial and judicial precepts are included in the moral" law. The law of love to God and fellow-men "is the true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed to men of all ages and nations, who wish to conform their lives to the will of God."¹² In Israel's judicial ordinances are abiding truths for all nations. "Certainly all nations are left at liberty to enact such laws as they shall find to be respectively expedient for them; provided they be framed according to that perpetual rule of love, so that, though they vary in form, they may have the same end."¹³

Finally Calvin addressed himself to the advantage derived from the presence and power of the magistrates. All judicial procedures are lawful to them who employ them rightly. For God's sake the Christian must know himself bound to obey the laws, pay taxes and honor those in authority. For private parties it is not permissible to raise tumults or take the business of governing into their own hands. Even when kings fail in their duties, the citizens have no right to rebel. This, however, does not leave Christians without hope of deliverance. God "in his wonderful goodness and power and providence" at times "raises up some of his servants as public avengers, and arms them with his commission to punish unrighteous domination, and to deliver from their distressing calamities a people who have been unjustly oppressed; sometimes he accomplishes this end by the fury of men who meditate and attempt something altogether different."¹⁴ These positions were widely adopted by the Calvinists. Beza wrote at great length about this subject. The unknown author of *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, a book widely circulated in France and the Netherlands, presented a well-de-

veloped theory of the state on this basis. De Bres, because of the tumults occasioned by many Anabaptists, was constrained to speak on the subject in his two chief works.

Polman in his definitive work on this *Confession* has summarized the position of Calvin and his earliest followers in four statements. (1) All creatures are under obligation to promote the honor of God; also the state which God himself instituted. (2) In the exercise of its authority the state is bound by God's word, especially his law in the two tables. (3) The distinction between church and state, as well as the sovereignty of each within its own sphere, must be consistently maintained. (4) Continual cooperation between church and state is required by Scripture.¹⁵

Now we can begin to appreciate and evaluate what the Reformed churches confessed in this article of their creed. They did not advocate a state church as this later developed in certain Reformed lands. Certain religious liberties were curtailed, however, in a manner with which the Reformed today would not agree. What Calvin and his disciples propounded was the ideal relation between church and state. Even in the more homogeneous social structures of their day this proved quite unattainable. In view of the progressive dechristianization of the western world with its religious pluralism, this goal in so far as it is Scripturally defensible seems completely out of reach.

The Institution of Civil Authority

The *Confession* directs our attention at once to the source of all power from which civil governments spring.

Before listening to what the creed has to say on this point, we do well to note that in the Netherlands some Reformed leaders have questioned the right of the church to speak officially on this subject in a binding confession. Since this matter does not deal directly with the redemption of the world in Christ, it is not an essential ingredient of the church's witness to the world. Some have argued that the church here exceeds her

prophetic calling and competence. Rather than treating the subject as a matter of faith, it deserves a place in social ethics. What ought not be ignored, however, is that Scripture itself speaks clearly on certain aspects of civil government. Fundamental principles concerning the relationship of church and state are enunciated. God's word plainly has relevance for all spheres of life. Although the church is in no position to develop a theory of the state and the explicit form which it ought to assume among men, she must remind men of what God has to say about the necessity and nature of civil authority.

All authority springs from God who is sovereign of the universe. We confess that *our gracious God . . . has appointed kings, princes and magistrates*. Government does not spring from the sinful domination of the strong over the weak. Nor is it the fruit of a long evolutionary process which roots in man's experimentation with a political order. We reject the theory propounded by Rousseau some two hundred years ago and much alive today, that government derives from the consent of the governed given either directly or indirectly. All these teachings neglect what God has to say about civil authority. "By me kings reign and princes decree justice." (Prov. 8:15, 16) To the Athenians Paul declared, "The God that made the world and all things therein, . . . made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitations." He further instructed the church, "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God . . . for he is a minister to thee of good." (Rom. 13:1, 4)

The circumstances which necessitated this clear confession ought not escape our attention. The Reformed were being slandered especially by the Roman Catholic authorities as guilty of sedition, rebellion and treason. They were accused of subverting all authority, in the state as well as in the church. On the basis of these supposed anarchistic tendencies, they were judged worthy of death. To these charges the Reformed replied by confessing that they recognized the civil power as a gift which

God provided for the welfare of men. Here they were on solid Scriptural ground. Indeed, the Bible does not indicate at what time such power first took shape. Undoubtedly it arose out of patriarchal authority within the larger family unit. An early indication of civil authority of some over others is found in Genesis 9:6. God provided Israel with detailed civil ordinances at Sinai. These have been abrogated as obligatory upon his people with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet in these provisions all governments should discover wise and judicious and beneficial principles for the ordering of their own existence. In the New Testament, when believers were confronted with a pagan and often hostile political power, the authority of the civil magistrates is spelled out in some detail. In our days of increasing lawlessness and civil disorder in many lands this teaching must be ceaselessly affirmed by Christ's church. All who resist lawful authority are guilty of resisting God who is pleased to rule men by these means.

It is interesting to note that the *Confession* connects this gift with God's grace rather than his sovereign will. Civil authority derives from *our gracious God*, a position first clearly defined by Calvin in his *Institutes*. "Besides, it is of no small importance for us to know what benevolent provision God has made for mankind in this instance, that we may be stimulated by a greater degree of pious zeal to testify our gratitude." To this is added, "And here is displayed his wonderful goodness, power and providence; for sometimes he raises up some of his servants as public avengers . . . sometimes he accomplishes this end by the fury of men who meditate and attempt something altogether different."¹⁶ In every event he recognizes the hand of the almighty God who controls human history and directs it to his glory. The temporal blessings accrue not only to his elect but to the whole commonwealth. Thus God deserves to be thanked and praised by all men.

The necessity of such regulation of our lives results from *the depravity of mankind*. Had sin not entered the world, the use of the sword to preserve order and peace would be unknown. This affirmation has evident implications for many

problems which vex us today. Only in the light of the present circumstances which obtain in a sinful world can we properly evaluate the difficulties which arise in connection with police protection, capital punishment and war. Nor are all agreed in what connection political power should be discussed, even though the majority admit that God appoints such rulers *willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies*. Some would consider it in relation to divine providence, others in connection with God's common grace, by means of which sin is restrained and men enabled to perform civic good, and still others in the context of Christ's exaltation at the right hand of God. The *Confession* approaches the subject largely from the aspect of the church's witness in this world and hence deals at some length with the relation of church and state. In consequence we find no exhaustive treatment of the place of the state in human society. Only a few salient features are outlined.

The Place and Task of the Civil Magistrates

With the institution of this office among men God according to the *Confession* had a high and holy purpose in mind, which he has also made known through his word.

By such authorities God determined *that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained*. Calvin argued this point with uncommon sense, "For they (i.e. the magistrates) all agree in denouncing punishment against those crimes which are condemned by the eternal law of God; such as murders, thefts, adulteries, false testimonies, though there is not a uniformity in the mode of punishment; and, indeed, this is neither necessary nor even expedient."¹⁷ He based his contention on Paul's insistence that the magistrate bears not the sword in vain. (Rom. 13:4) In this sense "they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing." (Rom. 13:6) The use of force, far from being condemned by Scripture, is recognized as legitimate and mandatory. No government is engaged in its duty, so long as it fails to take firm measures against transgressions of God's laws.

THE CHURCH'S WITNESS TO THE WORLD

Some interesting observations may be made here. Certain problems at once present themselves. The Anabaptists and many of their spiritual descendants today insist that because Christians must always live by the law of love, they may not assume political office or engage in military service. Large numbers also ardently oppose capital punishment for even the most heinous crimes. As a consequence of the horrors of modern wars, not a few have espoused the cause of pacifism. These positions have been widely rejected by Reformed believers as inconsonant with the Scriptures. Capital punishment and war, fearful as may be some of their consequences, are rather regarded as permissible and even mandatory in some instances.

God has further ordained magistrates so that *all things* may be *carried on among them with good order and decency*. Believers as well as unbelievers need this supervisory, regulatory and disciplinary power of the higher powers. The lofty goal which Paul envisaged with our prayers on behalf of the state and its officers is "that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." (I Tim. 2:2, 3) That obedience may be compelled by them is affirmed, *For this purpose he* (i.e. God) *hath invested the magistrates with the power of the sword, for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the protection of them that do well.*

Calvinists refuse to recognize a contradiction between the demands of law and the duties of love. This roots in some of their basic insights. In God love and justice are one. Man, who has been created in the divine image, requires both for his own spiritual development and must reflect these two qualities in his life. Parental authority received from God, when properly exercised according to his revealed will, does not detract from but rather enhances and exemplifies the love which they have for their children. Even more, the redemption of the world by God in Christ Jesus is in its profoundest sense a manifestation of both divine love and divine justice. In the Christian life love is grounded in God's command that we love him above all and our neighbors as ourselves. Law defines the boundaries within

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which and in accordance with which love can operate effectively. That force, which on the surface seems to annihilate love and its pervasive spiritual power, is required in our world results from the presence of sin. Any approach to the political order which denounces or minimizes law in the interest of maintaining love is unrealistic and forbidden by the teachings of God's word. Those who champion such notions fail to take seriously man's rebellion against God and his ordinances. The Reformed believers, therefore, confess that by entrusting the sword to the magistrates God displays his goodness to mankind.

The Relation of Church and State

Now we come to the most tangled and thorny subject in the *Confession*. It deals with the "office" or calling of the government in its relation to the worship and service of the true God. No Reformed Christian can in good conscience subscribe to the notion of a "neutral" state, as if the matter of respect for God, his law and his service ought to be excluded from the concern of the magistrates. On the matter how this must be specifically construed and confessed there is no unanimity.

In its original form this article read, "And their office is, not only to have regard unto, and watch for the welfare of the civil state; but also that they protect the sacred ministry; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by every one, as he commands in his Word."

Without apparently intending to do so, since they firmly confessed that state and church were distinct and relatively independent of each other, the early Reformed believers opened the door to the notion of a state-church, one denomination of Christians within the land which would enjoy governmental approval and support. In 1896 objections were officially raised against these phrases. After careful study the synod of the Dutch churches decided to delete them. This position was also

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adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1910. For many years an explanatory note was added to this article. Several objections were raised against such a procedure. A more satisfactory revision was later endorsed, so that the article now reads, "And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, while completely refraining from every tendency towards exercising absolute authority, and while functioning in the sphere entrusted to them and with the means belonging to them, to remove every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship, in order that the Word of God may have free course, the kingdom of Jesus Christ may make progress, and every anti-christian power may be resisted."¹⁸

The chief problem, of course, arises in connection with the relation of the civil magistrates to the first table of the law.

Calvin argued that no state can afford to neglect the honor of God. He will not commend his needed blessings upon those authorities who refuse to reckon with his self-revelation in the Scriptures. All are under obligation to remember that they receive authority only from the God of heaven and earth and remain always responsible to him. This according to the Reformed churches is the only safeguard for liberty. In our day of increasing state absolutism this ought to be accentuated. Not the will of the rulers nor the will of the ruled but the righteous will of God remains the norm for all political power.

On the surface this position seems to be a reversion to the civil polity which was laid down for Israel. Yet this view rests entirely upon misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Calvin, Beza, de Bres and those who followed them were well aware of the profound differences between the Old and New Testament dispensations. To claim that they wanted a reinstatement of the Mosaic law slanders them. Yet Calvin, for example, did not hesitate to advocate capital punishment for certain whom he considered blasphemers, notably Servetus. Although recognizing that no government may or can compel the conscience, they were unanimous in requiring rigid restrictions upon the exercise of what they regarded as a false religion, especially

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Roman Catholicism. Here they pleaded for a more relaxed application of the rules in certain areas, but only as a practical and humane concession. With many of their detailed applications, therefore, Reformed believers today generally do not hesitate to disagree.

The present reading of the article emphatically endorses the chief contention that no state may be religiously "neutral." To be indifferent to God, who is the source and guarantee of all liberties as well as of civil power, is tantamount to rejecting him. In view of the decisions handed down by courts in several lands in recent years it should be plain to all that the conception of a "neutral" state always works to the disadvantage of the Christian citizens and to the detriment of the entire population. Liberty under law will be maintained only when the laws of a land are conformable to God's law, and when those who administer them recognize that their office is derived from and maintained by a higher will than that of rulers or ruled. To base laws upon "certain inalienable rights" is confusing and futile, unless such rights are grounded in man's relation to God as image-bearer. This the story of such nations as Germany and Russia in recent decades demonstrates conclusively. Because it is neither within the confines nor the competence of a church confession to declare precisely how the basic truth of a God-honoring state must be applied in detail, this problem is still very much with us today.

The Duties of Christian Citizens

Reformed Christians, no matter where and when they live, desire to be in all things law-abiding and peaceful citizens. In clear language they acknowledged their obligations to the civil magistrates. *It is the bounden duty of every one, of whatever state, quality, or condition he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates.* No one, whether rich or poor, strong or weak, may refuse to render them the reverence and obedience which is their due.

Four aspects of this comprehensive principle are mentioned in the *Confession*.

First of all, everyone is obligated *to pay tribute*, in order that the civil powers may discharge their work regularly and responsibly. Without funds a government finds it impossible to carry on its God-given assignment. All forms of fraud in this area are denounced by believers who should "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." (Luke 20:25) Likewise, they show *due honor and respect to them*. This follows from the fact that God has established and maintains political authority for the welfare of mankind. The Reformed never frowned on such acts as saluting the flag at appropriate times, so long as such respect does not approximate the offering up of veneration and worship which is due to God alone.

A third duty is *to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God*. Scripture is the charter of all true law as well as liberty. No magistrate may demand that a citizen violate the will of God as revealed in the Bible. Thus there is an objective standard in the light of which lawful and unlawful obedience are to be determined. Certain sects refuse some kinds of obedience on the grounds that such would violate their conscience. To indulge the conscientious scruples of every citizen would place any government in an impossible position. Evidence for this may be found in abundance in the painful dealings which the Canadian government has had with the Doukhobors during the past sixty years. Conscience may not be considered the final court of appeal. This is God's word, which gives adequate and accurate instruction for all who will believe. In every case where the laws of the land do not plainly violate Scripture a Christian citizen must obey even those regulations which he may deem unpleasant, unwise and possibly detrimental to the land and its citizenry.

This introduces the question of whether Christians have the right to resist their rulers. Such resistance was offered by the Calvinists in the days of William of Orange against their Spanish overlords and again in America in the time of the revolt against the English crown. In both instances, and this may not be ignored, political authorities were engaged in robbing them of

those rights which had been guaranteed them by law. Nor was open resistance offered until the lawful means of protest and appeal had been employed and exhausted. Meanwhile, what resistance was offered was largely directed by the lower magistrates whose office under God implied a duty to safeguard justice for the people over whom they had been placed. During the second World War Calvinists offered some of the strongest resistance to Nazi tyranny, largely on the grounds that these authorities were not God's designated rulers but invaders and usurpers. Yet even when resistance may be regarded as legitimate, the Reformed have customarily argued that such action ought to be employed only as a last resort because of the innumerable calamities which are usually consequent upon civil disobedience.

The last duty incumbent upon Christians at this point is prayer. The Bible requires that all believers *supplicate for the authorities in their prayers that God may rule and guide them in all their ways, and that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity*. Once again our dependence upon the civil rulers for peace and order as well as their dependence upon God is clearly affirmed. Only God, who is their sovereign as well as ours, can grant those qualities needed to rule wisely and well.

All who champion and have been influenced by neo-orthodox theology have busied themselves upon many an occasion with the relation of Christians to the political order. Strange as it may seem, as these men have moved to the right in their theology, they seem to turn to the left in politics. Barth, who spoke out vigorously against Nazi oppression, has refused to do so against Communist usurpation of power in eastern Europe. From this we ought not conclude that he is more Communistic in his sympathies than National-Socialist. Rather, in the present circumstances he claims he is not free to advocate a civil disobedience. Reinhold Niebuhr in such works as *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* and *Human Destiny* pleads for what he regards a realistic compromise on the part of believers with the political powers. He is pessimistic about the

present but optimistic concerning the future on the grounds that love will in the long run triumph. "The new world must be built by resolute men who 'when hope is dead will hope by faith;' who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints their achievements, good. There is no escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the kingdom of God. History moves towards the realization of the kingdom, but yet the judgment of God is upon every new realization."¹⁹

Such men have attempted to witness actively in the concrete historical situations wherein Christians find themselves today. They have dared to face many problems of magnitude without flinching. With much in their pronouncements we may even agree. Frequently they have put to shame our passive acquiescence in the status quo. Quite unanimously, however, they eschew any type of Christian political organization as a form of Phariseism. They insist that believers should work as individuals within the given order of political parties and pressure groups and then hope for the best. Dutch Calvinists, on the other hand, have not hesitated to organize themselves politically. For this they have been sharply criticized once and again by Barth. On this question of the legitimacy of specific Christian organizations the *Confession* does not express itself, since the question could hardly arise in the situation to which de Bres addressed himself.

The Christian Rejection of Anarchy

Recognizing how significant are civil authorities both for the welfare of the state and the peace of the churches, the *Confession* in strong language denounces those who would subvert political order.

Mention is made specifically of the Anabaptists. To this statement objections have been raised, on the grounds that the Anabaptists had a much more Biblically defensible position on the separation of church and state than the Reformed. While fully acknowledging that some statements in the original read-

ing of this article were open to serious misunderstanding and misconstruction, we repudiate the charge. The Bible insists that believers have a direct obligation to promote good government. They are citizens of two worlds. Their loyalty to Christ and his kingdom in no wise cancels out their duties to the kingdoms of this world wherein they live. Nor is it justifiable to ignore the facts of history. In Reformation times not a few Anabaptists constituted a radical fringe among those who broke with Rome which threatened to bring all evangelical Christians into disrepute by their vociferousness and at times their violence. No one ought lightly dismiss the Munster episode with all the activity which preceded it in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere. These people were by no means so peaceful as their spiritual and theological heirs of later years. Not until the influence of Menno Simons among them became dominant did a change for the better become evident. Both Luther and Calvin were compelled to enter into dispute with them repeatedly and that not merely on such theological issues as the authority of Scripture, Christ's human nature and infant baptism. Stringent measures seemed necessary to prevent social and political disorganization as a result of their agitation. Among them were those who insisted that there was no room for civil magistrates, since Christ alone was king of his people. This present world, so others argued, was in control of the prince of darkness and thus ought to be ignored by the true believers. They rejected all oaths, which did not make procedures in which they were involved easy for the authorities. Not only did they oppose Rome; they were often avowed and outspoken antagonists of the Zwinglians, Lutherans and Calvinists. Stern and repressive measure were taken against them by the magistrates, many of whom were evangelicals. This sternness not infrequently went to great excess and must be greatly deplored by us. Yet fair-minded students of history will agree that kindly counsel and patience could not prevail in the case of those who did *reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order which God has established among men.*

The *Confession* at this point still speaks relevantly today.

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No Reformed believer can in good conscience advocate the theories of Communism as set forth by Marx, Lenin and their disciples. Not only must its forcible introduction of community of goods (which never yet has been attained despite all the purges) be rejected as unbiblical, but also its subversion of justice and decency and good order. Its methods and goals clearly betray its antichristian presuppositions.

Instruction in the teachings of this article is not only necessary in the churches. It is equally necessary among the believers in the younger churches which have sprung up on the mission fields throughout the world. New nations have been created among the former colonies of the European powers. For many of these the cup of their new-found freedom contains some bitter dregs. In this completely new situation Christians must learn to find their way. The Reformed faith declares on the basis of God's word that those who are Christ's may not be exclusively concerned with personal salvation. Although strangers and pilgrims on earth, theirs is the task of living according to God's word in all areas of life. Only then will they learn to be strong for the Lord as well as strong in the Lord.

THE CHURCH AND THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES

1. In which sense is the state "a riddle" for Christians? 2. Why do you suppose so many Christians seem satisfied with a "neutral" state today? 3. What was Rousseau's view of the origin and authority of the state? 4. Evaluate Calvin's position on the state. 5. Which objections have been raised against article 36 in the past? 6. What procedure should be followed when seeking a revision of our doctrinal standards? May an officer or member of the church contradict anything in these standards? 7. Evaluate each of the four principles enunciated by early Reformed leaders in the light of Scripture. 8. Is civil government a gift of God's grace? Explain. 9. Should Christ's kingship be publicly recognized by our governments today? 10. What is meant by "the power of the sword"? In how far may and must this be exercised? 11. How would you harmonize love and law in the realm of public life? 12. What is the state-church ideal? How did it arise? Which forms did it take in Europe? Why do we reject it? 13. How much of our daily lives may the government properly regulate? Is there too much or too little regulation today? 14. What do you suppose the American motto "under God" means in practice? Does this violate the separation of church and state? 15. How can the government uphold the first table to the law? In how far is this done today in Canada and the United States? 16. Demonstrate that God and his law are the true guarantees of our liberty. 17. Are wars ever justifiable? Prove your answer. 18. State and evaluate the arguments for and against capital punishment. 19. Do you think Christians in our lands should organize a distinctly Christian political party? 20. How can and should Christians take a more active part in political life today?

Chapter 37

The Consolation of Christ's Coming

Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, when the time appointed by the Lord (which is unknown to all creatures) is come and the number of the elect complete, that our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty to declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead, burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.

Then all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been

from the beginning of the world to the end thereof, being summoned by "the voice of the archangel, and by the sound of the trump of God." For all the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their souls joined and united with their proper bodies in which they formerly lived. As for those who shall then be living, they shall not die as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and from corruptible become incorruptible. Then "the books" (that is to say, the consciences) "shall be opened, and the dead judged" according to what they shall have done in this world, whether it be good or evil. Nay all men "shall give account of every idle word they have spoken," which the world only counts amusement and jest; and then the secrets and hypocrisy of men shall be disclosed and laid open before all.

And therefore the consideration of this judgment is justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly, but most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect; because then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne. Their innocence shall be known to all, and they shall see the terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, who most cruelly persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world, and who shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and shall become immortal, but only to be tormented in "the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels."

But on the contrary, the faithful and elect shall be crowned with glory and honor; and the Son of God will confess their names before God His Father and His elect angels; all tears shall be wiped from their eyes; and their cause which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God. And for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive.

Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. AMEN.

"Amen, come, Lord Jesus."—Rev. 22:20.

ARTICLE XXXVII

THE LAST WORD is often significant. Here is conclusion, saying in summary all that has been said before. Here is climax, standing on the ladder's highest rung to touch the trailing clouds of glory.

In the church's *Confession* the last word is Jesus Christ.

When Christians speak about the doctrine of the last things, they refuse to spend their time in speculation. All that men have said out of their own spiritual resources may emphasize how strong and surging are the longings for something better, grander, more abiding than this life offers. Such hopes, however, cannot guarantee their own truth. Only God, who is from everlasting to everlasting, can speak the truth about man and his destiny. This he has done emphatically and eloquently in his Son, our Savior. By him we know about "things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him." (I Cor. 2:9) Our standpoint must unabashedly be that of faith which hears and believes the word of the living God.

Aside from this we can only complain with Matthew Arnold,

*"The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world."*

Men will despise our hope as a delusion. They will deride it as unscientific. They will detest it as an insult to man's own

capabilities and courage. But all this still leaves them standing in the sharp wind as the darkness deepens around them. Since they determine to live without God in the world, they are doomed to a future without hope. Amid such conflicts and contradictions the Christian sings of his victory through Jesus Christ. "For whatsoever is begotten of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith." (I John 5:4) He knows the consolations of Christ's gracious and glorious coming again.

A Renewed Interest in Eschatology

Eschatology is the name given to the church's teaching concerning "the last things," those mighty and marvellous events which are the consummation of world history.

Often the early Protestants have been accused of neglecting this aspect of our Christian faith. In their zeal for reforming the visible church they are supposed to have preoccupied themselves only with their immediate problems. Meanwhile the Anabaptists busily discussed and eagerly awaited the blessed return to the Savior. This construction of the actual situation is hardly accurate. Indeed, none of the reformers provided the church with a systematized eschatology. Calvin, who wrote on nearly all the books of the Bible, failed to provide a commentary on *Revelation*. But to deduce from this that he and the rest were indifferent to the Christian hope is unwarranted. Especially, the Reformed, so frequently and fiercely persecuted, drank deeply from the cup of consolation which Christ's promised return afforded.

This Christian hope did not always burn brightly within the Christian church. It shone most clearly in periods of persecution or in times of cultural, social and political tension.

We find much mention made of our Savior's return in the earliest churches. In their distress they sought refuge in Christ's own words and those of his apostles. Had the Lord not said, "Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven?" (Matt.

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26:64) Did not Paul encourage his readers, "The Lord is at hand?" (Phil. 4:5) And was not James even more explicit, "Behold, the judge standeth before the doors?" (Jas. 5:9) Frequent references were made, both direct and indirect, to the book of *Revelation*, which to so many believers since seems to remain an insoluble riddle. Some of the church fathers, like Papias and Irenaeus, meditated fondly on a millennial kingdom. Others rejected this as a Judaistic fancy without Biblical warrant. But with a united voice they proclaimed the blessed coming of Christ on the clouds.

About the year 1000 people were again preoccupied with the doctrine of the last things. Much of this was due to the unsettled situation which then prevailed throughout western Europe. Some two centuries later Joachim of Floris, an Italian monk and mystic, announced that the age of the Spirit would commence in 1260. At that time the church would be purified, great numbers of Jews and Gentiles would be converted, a world-wide war would be waged against the powers of evil, and Christ would establish his blessed reign. Many strange notions were also propagated during the early years of the Reformation. In every age since men turned their thoughts to the last things largely in proportion to the unrest which disturbed human society.

In the United States the past century has produced some self-styled prophets concerning the end-time. During the second quarter of the previous century William Miller travelled widely throughout the eastern states announcing that Christ would return in 1843. When that year passed without any unusual occurrence, he argued that Christ had indeed come but remained in hiding for a season because of the impenitence of the people. Later he admitted that his interpretation of Daniel 8 had been incorrect. His labors led to the establishment of the Adventists, or Millerites, which group was revived and transformed by Ellen White into Seventh Day Adventism. In addition to its peculiar doctrine of Christ's atonement, it teaches soul sleep after death and the annihilation of the wicked.

Far more insidious are the notions first propounded by Charles T. Russell, the father of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who gained much recognition with his sensational insistence, "Millions now living will never die." He boldly proclaimed that Christ would return in 1914. When this proved incorrect, he and his followers adopted a subterfuge similar to that advocated at one time by Miller.

Meanwhile in the churches this doctrine has received more attention than throughout the years wherein the older liberalism held many in thrall. It had proclaimed a gradual evolution of society into the kingdom of Jesus Christ. This dream was rudely shattered by the first World War. Since then, although the spirit of the older liberalism is far from dead, new voices are heard which seem to take more seriously the Scriptural doctrines of sin and grace. The dialectical theologians with one accord deplore the secular spirit which pervaded the churches and theology throughout the nineteenth century, Aulen, Barth, Berdyaev, Tillich and the Niebuhrs, each in his own way, speak of the consummation of world history in terms borrowed from the Scriptures. In how far they are true to apostolic preaching on this point is open to serious question. Much chiliastic literature, both moderate and extreme, continues to pour from the presses, often titillating the readers' imaginations by discovering in the prophecies of old the detailed events of today. Speculation runs rife with the result that many sincere Christians wonder what Biblical prophecy is all about anyway. Against this backdrop of uncertainty and unrest the church is called to proclaim those things which are most certainly delivered unto us in the Scriptures.

The Blessed Return of Our Lord

Since the day of his ascension Christ's return upon the clouds of heaven has been confessed and anticipated with ardent longing by true believers. Thus the church has been and is still living "in the last days," the interlude during which the glorified Savior exercises his sovereign and saving rule at the

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Father's right hand. Over all men and nations he holds sway, even as he assured his disciples, "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth." (Matt. 28:18) Throughout this period he gathers his elect church out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation by his word and Spirit. By this double rule he is bringing to fulfilment the eternal counsel and will of God. He is the one "worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof." (Rev. 5:2, 5) Therefore of him Peter could say, "Whom the heavens must receive until the times of the restoration of all things, whereof God spake by the mouth of his holy prophets that have been from of old." (Acts 3:21)

Thus the *Confession* does not hesitate to affirm that *this old world* shall not continue forever. Such words sound strangely up to date. During the past half century the prophets of doom, including poets and philosophers who owe no allegiance to our Savior-King, have been busy preaching. A pall of pessimism hangs low over the human race. All the optimistic notions of an onward and upward progress of mankind, so fervently proclaimed when our grandparents were young, are outmoded. Few are willing to hazard a guess concerning the future, especially in view of political instabilities, religious conflicts, economic disorders and scientific achievements which have produced the most frightening weapons of war. The doctrine of the last things announced by men without faith in God is one of ever-deepening gloom. To them the light of this present life grows ever feebler and forebodes a final flicker which will plunge us into unrelieved darkness. Poignantly does Bertrand Russell express this mood, "Brief and pitiless is man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gates of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day . . ."1 With such small shreds of comfort man must content himself, as he strives to hide his culpability and confusion from the God to whom he refuses to return.

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How different is the faith concerning the future which the *Confession* proclaims in the name of all sincere believers. Written in days of dark disorder not too dissimilar from our own, these words announce a glowing and glorious hope for all who are Christ's. We dare make this confession our own in the sweet confidence that not man but Christ is on the throne.

Our present age, indeed, will come to an end. On the basis of the Scriptures this article even spells out the manner thereof.

The Savior shall return *when the time appointed by the Lord . . . is come and the number of the elect complete*. The future is safe in the hands of God. He engages to do his work according to his own time schedule, *which is unknown to all creatures* and therefore lies beyond the bounds of legitimate Christian investigation. To all Christ says, "Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour." (Matt. 25:13) Instead of prying curiously into the hidden things of God we are commanded to "take heed to yourselves, lest haply your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you suddenly as a snare: for so shall it come upon all them that dwell on the face of all the earth." (Luke 21:34, 35)

In language restrained and yet refreshing for the saints God's word speaks of this blessed coming. Not only Christ but also the angels spoke of this to the disciples, as they witnessed his ascension on the fortieth day. In numerous passages the apostles proclaim it to the believing church. Often it is called an "unveiling" to remind us of the removal of all that which now prevents us from seeing the Savior in his full glory. (I Cor. 1:7; II Thess. 1:7) We read of it as an "appearance," at which our Lord will reveal himself together with all the blessings of his salvation. (I Tim. 6:14; Tit. 2:13) A term frequently used is "presence" (*parousia*), the arrival of the king in all his glory and power which has been announced by his heralds and is being eagerly anticipated by his subjects. (Matt. 24:3, 27, 37; I Cor. 15:23)

The emphasis here falls on the central fact. No mention is made of the signs which shall precede this glorious event, such

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as the conversion of Israel, the preaching of the gospel among all nations, the great apostasy, the manifestation of antichrist, and great wonders in the heavens and upon earth. All these are clearly affirmed in the Bible. Yet the *Confession* would fill our hearts with him who alone is our hope. Christ shall return *from heaven corporally and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty.*

In this respect his second advent will differ markedly from his first coming. At his incarnation he appeared in the body of humiliation. He was made under the law to redeem his people by the shedding of his blood. But so great and glorious will be his appearance at the end of the ages, that even the archangels will be his heralds (I Thess. 4:16), the angels his bodyguard (II Thess. 1:7), the clouds of heaven his royal chariot (Matt. 24:30), and all the saints of God his retinue (II Thess. 1:10). At that time he will be publicly acclaimed as Lord of lords and King of kings, who by the word of his mouth will vanquish all his and our enemies. Believing this we even now raise the song,

*“Brothers, this Lord Jesus
Shall return again
With His Father’s glory,
With His angel-train;
For all wreaths of empire
Meet upon His brow,
And our hearts confess Him
King of glory now.”*

The purpose of his coming, so we acknowledge with the *Confession*, is chiefly twofold. He shall appear to *declare himself Judge of the living and the dead.* To this final judgment much attention is devoted here. At the same time Christ will engage in *burning this old world with fire and flame to cleanse it.* The significance of his second coming is not limited to the human race but is cosmic in its sweep. Although God created the world good, so that it may not be deprecated or despised by the believers, the Reformed churches are fully aware of and proclaim in the light of Scripture that sin has invaded and

ruined the created order. By means of man's transgression death entered the world and passed unto all men. (Rom. 5:12) This is further delineated, "For the creation was subjected to vanity, not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God." (Rom. 8:20, 21) We therefore look for the renewal of all things at the time of Christ's glorious appearance. With Peter and all the saints we await this transformation, "Looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. But according to his promise, we look for a new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (II Pet. 3:12, 13)

Such and similar texts make it mandatory that we distance ourselves from all speculation. In a crude form this is found among fundamentalists who, while claiming to accept the teachings of the Bible, dream fantastic dreams. Even more necessary is it to distance ourselves from nearly all the neo-orthodox who employ all the Scriptural terminology while reducing it to symbol. Their involved discussions on time and eternity, fact and myth, history and supra-history distort the doctrine of the last things, so that it bears little resemblance to the teachings of our Lord and his apostles. Earlier Barth had maintained that the end proclaimed in the New Testament was "no temporal event, no legendary destruction of the world . . . It has nothing to do with any historical or 'telluric' catastrophe." This he has considerably modified, although all his speculation about time in its several senses makes us wonder precisely what he does mean.² In C. H. Dodd's "realized eschatology" the end-judgment has actually come in the death and resurrection of our Lord. Tillich reduces eschatology as the church has always understood it "into a theory of knowledge." Apparently what believers have always regarded as the "facts which are to be" aren't facts in that sense at all. To accept uncritically what these theologians say, because the words sound orthodox, is to undermine the faith which the Christian church throughout the ages has proclaimed.

The Resurrection of All Mankind

When Christ returns, *all men will personally appear before this great Judge, both men and women and children, that have been from the beginning of the world to the end thereof.* The prelude to this judgment is, therefore, the resurrection.

Concerning this many theories have been advocated. In the days of our Lord Pharisees and Sadducees were sharply divided on this issue, the former acknowledging and the latter denying a physical resurrection. When Paul preached this doctrine in Athens, not a few of those who listened to him mocked. Hymenaeus and Philetus substituted for the Biblical view of the resurrection of the body a spiritual transformation which they asserted was already past. Since those days both within and outside of the church this teaching has been attacked and ridiculed and denied. Many have substituted for it the notion of the soul's immortality, preferring the views of the philosophers to Paul. Many of these conceptions are notoriously vague and contradictory.

It can hardly be denied that the Bible, especially the New Testament, clearly announces the resurrection at the last day. This proceeds not from any powers inherent in matter or man's constitutional nature. It is presented as the work of the living God. (Matt. 22:19; II Cor. 1:9) For believers it is always associated with the Savior and his redemptive power. (John 5:21-29; 6:38-54; I Thess. 4:16) In this connection mention is also made of the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 8:11) We are not to regard it as an wholly new creation but rather the raising up of the present body which for a season was delivered unto death. (Rom. 8:11; I Cor. 15:33) At that time the bodies will be greatly changed for believers, since "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." These changes are not inconsistent with basic identity. Since the resurrection is the result of divine, miraculous action, we need not be perturbed by our inability to comprehend and explain precisely how this can and will take place.

That both believers and unbelievers will be raised is plainly taught in Scripture. The resurrection of the just, to be sure,

stands out much more prominently, but several texts affirm that the wicked shall have their bodies restored to them. (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28, 29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:13-15) Those still in the flesh when Christ returns "shall not die, as the others, but be changed in the twinkling of an eye, and from corruptible become incorruptible." This "incorruption" (I Cor. 15:42) is bound up with Christ Jesus and refers only to his people. Thus the text says nothing of the change which the wicked who are alive at Christ's coming shall undergo. That they will be judged in the flesh, their lot decided and their fate made irrevocable is the clear and consistent teaching of the Bible.

The *Confession* leaves little room for dispensational views of two or more resurrections and judgments at the end of the ages. Since such views are exceedingly prevalent among American evangelicals, we do well to study and evaluate them in the full light of Scriptural teaching on the last things. The scope of this study neither allows nor demands it here. The Reformed usually speak of only one resurrection and judgment, possibly distinguished somewhat as to time and order in the great day of our Lord. This seems plainly indicated from our Lord's words, "Marvel not at this; for the hour cometh, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment." (John 5:28, 29)

The Last Judgment

On that great and notable day when Christ returns and the dead are raised and the living changed in the twinkling of an eye, the final judgment takes place. This is the unanimous testimony of the Christian church.

Not all judgment, however, is suspended until that time. Already in this life God rewards the good with blessings of many sorts and inflicts penalties upon evildoers. None of these judgments is final. Often evil in this present world seems to continue without restraint and reproof, while the good who trust the Lord suffer many afflictions. This was the problem

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with which Job and his friends as well as Asaph wrestled. The decisive answer, so the Bible informs us, will be given when Christ comes personally and publicly to judge all men. It will be announced in the presence of all men and angels. It is always represented as a definite and decisive event; not a process. It is a formal and forensic declaration; not merely a making manifest of certain inherent tendencies or qualities within the lives of men.

Not a few have regarded such a judgment as superfluous. When man dies, his soul goes to its own abode, whether heaven or hell. No further consideration of his thoughts and words and deeds is necessary on God's part. No final investigation will reverse man's destiny. Yet the final judgment occupies a very significant place in God's plan for the world. It will magnify his holiness and righteousness as well as his grace and mercy in the sight of all. It is public and not secret. It pertains to the body as well as the soul. It fixes the destiny of covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers alike.

Therefore we confess, *Then the books (that is to say, the consciences) shall be opened, and the dead judged according to what they have done in this world, whether it be good or evil.* Nothing in the record of our lives will be kept secret. Everything that men have said or done will be judged in the light of God's revealed will. This is the standard or norm of the judgment which will be pronounced. Those who have enjoyed full gospel light will be judged in the light of these greater privileges. This does not imply, however, that there are different conditions of salvation for different classes of men. Only those who are clothed with Christ's righteousness will be justified in that great day. Nonetheless, there are degrees of bliss in heaven and of punishment in hell, determined by God in the light of what men have done while in the flesh. (Matt. 11:22, 24; Luke 12:47, 48; 20:47; Dan. 12:3; I Cor. 9:6) In this judgment God in Christ will manifest himself as perfectly just and righteous and holy. Even the devils and sinners will acknowledge that they are receiving their just due.

What this judgment will mean for the wicked is stated in a few striking phrases. *The consideration of this judgment is*

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justly terrible and dreadful to the wicked and ungodly. And well may it be, for it testifies to the terrible vengeance which God will execute on the wicked. They shall be convinced by the testimony of their own consciences. As that day descends upon them, the Bible says that "the kings of the earth, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" (Rev. 6:15-17) Knowing all this the Reformed churches have categorically rejected such notions as annihilation of the wicked, conditional immortality and universal salvation, confessing instead that at the last judgment the wicked shall become immortal, but only to be tormented in the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels.

To us who live by the word the condemnation of the wicked is no insoluble riddle. Indeed, there are mysteries in the divine purposes which we cannot comprehend. Yet we do not hesitate to affirm *the terrible vengeance* of our God and Savior.

Too much nonsense has been spread about divine love and wrath in our day to allow such statements to go unchallenged. This appeals not only to those who wish to escape the impact of the demands of the covenant God who commands all men everywhere to repent and believe. It also seeps into the minds and hearts of those who pose as being "more loving" and concerned than others in the church. One wonders whether they allow themselves to be more loving than God himself.

Indeed, when speaking of divine wrath and vengeance, we must know what we say. Here our words must be tested by Biblical norms. God is not an over-grown, self-centered being who quickly takes offense at any injury to his majesty and rages capriciously against those who insult him. His is no arbitrary and egocentric anger. We must think of divine wrath as his immutable righteousness and perfection in action to re-

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veal an unremitting opposition on his part to all sin. Because he is the foe of sin and all its tragic consequences, we can truly rejoice in the redeeming and reconciling love which he pours out in Christ Jesus. If he is not the enemy of all evil, God would deny himself and corrupt his creatures with an indulging of their every whim and wish which would ruin them forever. His love seeks that which is good for them. This is covenantal communion with the fulness of his life forever. Without love God could not truly hate. Without wrath he could and would not overcome sin within the world and our lives.

The Eternal Blessedness of Believers

Much more is said about the reaction of Christians to the final judgment and its concomitants.

Strange as it may seem at first reading, the church affirms that the contemplation of our Savior's return with all that accompanies it is *most desirable and comfortable to the righteous and elect*. This proceeds not from any high regard which they cherish concerning themselves. Believing the testimony of the gospel, they place their confidence solely in the perfect satisfaction and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore they enjoy the assurance that *then their full deliverance shall be perfected, and there they shall receive the fruits of their labor and trouble which they have borne*. With Paul they affirm, "When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory." (Col. 3:4) In the sight and hearing of all who have maliciously slandered, ridiculed and persecuted them their innocence shall be fully declared. *They shall be crowned with glory and honor*.

Wherein all this consists is briefly outlined.

First and foremost, *the Son of God shall confess their names before God His Father and His elect angels*. Personally and publicly he shall acknowledge them as his own people, the ones whom he has redeemed and reconciled and renewed. That is the day when he cometh to make up his jewels. At that time the prophecy of Malachi shall be gloriously fulfilled, "But

unto you that fear my name shall the sun of righteousness arise with healing in its wings; and ye shall go forth, and gambol as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I make, saith Jehovah of hosts." (Mal. 4:2, 3) Or to say the same thing in the words of Paul, that will be the day "when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at in all them that believed." (II Thess. 1:10)

No longer shall they suffer any pain or sorrow or persecution, for *all tears shall be wiped from their eyes*. This promise is repeated frequently in Scripture, assuring us that with Christ's return a new order shall be brought forth by him out of the ruins of the old. The hearts of believers shall leap for joy as they taste the fruits of victory in Christ, for *their cause which is now condemned by many judges and magistrates as heretical and impious will then be known to be the cause of the Son of God*. The Confession does not hesitate to apply the Biblical promises most personally and pointedly in the historical situation.

Finally, for a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as never entered into the heart of man to conceive. Its details are not here rehearsed, for all believers know that this includes the inheritance of new heavens and a new earth wherein righteousness dwells (II Pet. 3:13) and perfect communion with the God of salvation whom his people have learned to know and love and serve while on earth. (Rev. 21:3) Therefore their joy is made forever full. Looking forward to this future, the saints already sing on earth,

*"Jerusalem the golden, with milk and honey blest,
Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and voice oppressed.
I know not, O I know not, what joys await us there,
What radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare.*

*"They stand, those halls of Zion, all jubilant with song
And bright with many an angel and all the martyr throng.
The Prince is ever in them, the daylight is serene;
The pastures of the blessed are decked in glorious sheen.*

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*"O sweet and blessed country, the home of God's elect!
O sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect!
Jesus, in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest,
Who art, with God the Father and Spirit, ever blest."*

Rejoicing in such a promised destiny, the Reformed believers amid pain and persecution concluded their witness to the world of their day with the shout of victory. The true church of every age will learn to repeat it after them.

Therefore we expect that great day with a most ardent desire, to the end that we may fully enjoy the promises of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Amen, come, Lord Jesus.

1. Which views of "the last things" are entertained by religions such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism? 2. Which various subjects are considered in eschatology? How are these related to the rest of Christian theology? 3. Mention and discuss the results of sin for the whole created order. How do these affect men's lives today? 4. Can you give evidence that the last days are at hand? 5. How must and can we cultivate a healthy spiritual interest in Christ's return? Have the Reformed churches too much neglected this doctrine? 6. How would you interpret Revelation 20:1-6? 7. Describe from Scripture the order of events on the last day. 8. What is the usual Premillenarian construction of Christ's return? To which texts do they appeal? How would you respond to them? 9. What happens to the soul at death? Prove from Scripture. 10. What is meant by degrees of bliss in heaven and of torment in hell? Is this Scriptural? 11. What is the Biblical view of hell? 12. How does the Bible describe heaven and the eternal blessedness of believers? 13. How specifically will God be glorified on that last day? 14. Are there Biblical indications that we shall recognize loved ones in heaven? 15. What does it mean that **the books** (i.e. the consciences) shall be opened? 16. What is meant by the wrath and vengeance of God? 17. Should Christians look forward eagerly to heaven? to the last day of judgment? If so, why and how?

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