

Gepubliseer op:

Deur Christus Alleen

Tuisblad van dr. A.H. Bogaards

www.enigstetroos.org



The Overflowing Riches of my God

Revisiting the Belgic Confession

**by
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PREFACE

Perhaps you're inclined to consider this book a waste of time and paper. After all: of what value to today's people is a confession written centuries ago in a far-away corner of the world? Why should I consider the confession of a long dead stranger beneficial to me today? Why is *his* profession of more significance than another's?

The book before you is not about an individual — even though Guido deBrès features prominently on its pages. The book is not about a time long forgotten either — even though references to the historical circumstances surrounding the *Belgic Confession* are scattered throughout. The book is instead about the high and holy Inhabitant of heaven, the God who was pleased to establish a bond of love with people-made-of-dust living on Planet Earth. This book does not comment on deBrès' opinion of this God, for the opinion of a man-made-of-dust about the identity and work of heaven's almighty Inhabitant is neither here nor there. This book seeks to explain the faith Holy God worked in deBrès' heart, the faith deBrès was so happy to put to paper - and even die maintaining.

Such a faith of *necessity* has infinite value for today's generations - simply because the God who revealed the faith does not change! If deBrès in his tumultuous times could know himself safe for Jesus' sake in the care of Sovereign God, you and I in our (very different) circumstances are also able to know ourselves safe in the hands of this God! In a changing and confusing era, this is comfort and stability we need so much.

That's also why I have not shied away from using the first person pronoun repeatedly in this book. DeBrès listened to what the Lord God revealed in holy Scripture, and then repeated-after-God what He heard God say concerning deBrès himself - gospel truths valuable not for a museum but truths comforting and encouraging in the aches and pains of deBrès' *personal* life. As deBrès was eager to confess the personal relevance of the gospel, so I have attempted to give expression to what personal faith looks like. It is my hope and prayer that the reader, living as he does in the bustle and rumble of daily life in a world hostile to the gospel, grows not just in knowledge of the Lord, but especially in trust.

* * * * *

Over the span of two and a half decades in the ministry of the Word. I have had opportunity to teach the *Belgic Confession* many times. A decade ago the material I had compiled over the years was published under the descriptive title. *Notes on the Belgic Confession* (1996. with a second printing appearing in 1999). When the publisher recently sought permission to reprint again. I considered the need and possibility of giving that earlier work a thorough overhaul. The result is this publication. As I taught the material once more in a Postconfession class in my present congregation. I took the opportunity to rewrite some chapters in their entirety, while others have been radically reworked. The reader will notice too that I have added discussion questions to each chapter, as well as cross references to the Creeds, the Liturgical Forms. Prayers and Church Order found in the *Book of Praise*.

Once again, a team of dedicated assistants has offered invaluable help to make this publication possible. A special word of thanks should be extended to Johanna vanderPlas. It was she who did so much work a decade ago in getting the earlier edition ready for printing. This time again she was willing to give abundant assistance in finalising the manuscript. Thank you sincerely, Jo, for your work! Your insights, comments and corrections have been greatly appreciated!

Lisa Byl has assisted with the editing work, and Rev. WWJ vanOene has assembled the text and subject index. From behind the scenes Robert Eikelboom has exerted his own level of

push to get the project completed, and put in many hours to give this book a professional look. The elders and members of my congregation in Yarrow have graciously given space and encouragement to work on this project. Last to be mentioned, but certainly not least in my appreciation, is the support and encouragement received from my family, especially the precious helper God has graciously granted me on life's pathways. A sincere thanks to you all for your participation in this venture.

Yarrow, BC

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BELGIC CONFESSION

WE BELIEVE

Thirty of the thirty-seven articles of the *Belgic Confession* begin with the phrase “*we believe*”. Who is meant by the pronoun ‘*we*’? In first instance this refers to the author and the people around him. To give some color to this refrain in this confession, we need to familiarize ourselves with the situation of the author and his congregation.

Guido deBres was born in 1522 in Bergen, Belgium (then known as the Southern Netherlands), to devout Roman Catholic parents. Five years before his birth, on October 31st, 1517, Martin Luther had nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Church in Wittenberg, attacking the official teachings of the Roman Catholic Church – to which all Christians of Europe officially belonged. His attack on the doctrines of the church earned him the wrath of the Pope, so that Luther –just a year before deBres was born– was excommunicated from the Church. As young deBres was growing up, the Great Reformation spawned by Luther’s work was washing over Europe. By the time deBres was 24, he was a convinced Protestant and had joined the Reformation in Bergen.

EXILE AND TRAINING: 1548-1552

As a young man deBres experienced first hand that joining the Reformation came at a cost. When deBres was 24 years of age (1548), two Protestant ministers and their wives spent a few days in Bergen while journeying from Geneva to England. The two men took the opportunity to speak with some of the Protestants in Bergen. Scarcely had the four left Bergen when one of the men and the two women were arrested; the other minister was captured later. Because of their Protestant faith the two ministers were publicly burned at the stake, and one of the women was buried alive. (What happened to the second woman is not certain). While the one minister was being burned, Franciscan monks reminded the crowd that this man was possessed of the devil. With the fires burning at his feet, the minister replied with the words of Ps 6:5 (rhymed):

*“Depart from me, transgressors.
Flee now, all you oppressors;
The Lord did heed my cry!
He heard my supplication,
My plea for consolation,
And with His help is nigh.”*

One can readily imagine that such an event did not leave the town’s folk unmoved – and certainly not the Protestants. The cost of embracing the faith of the Reformation was distinctly high! Yet deBres and many with him did not turn back from the faith they had come to love. The episode of the two ministers alerted the authorities to the fact that a Protestant Church was flourishing in town, and so they initiated persecution against these ‘heretics’. That fact compelled the faithful, young deBres included, to face the question head on: was the wealth that came with believing God’s Word in Scripture really worth persecution??

DeBres was convinced it was. In the face of the persecution, deBres did not give up his new faith. Instead, he left his hometown and went to London in 1548 and lived there till 1552. During his time in London he came into contact with some other leading Reformers of the time, such as Maarten Micron, Johannes a Lasco, and Johannes Utenhove. During this time

deBres received his ‘training’ to become a preacher of the Gospel. What Satan sought to achieve by persecuting the Church, God worked for good.

RIJSSEL: 1552-1556

In 1552 deBres left London and went to Rijssel, a town close to Bergen. The minister of the Protestant church of that town, Pierre Brully, had recently been burned at the stake. It was obvious that becoming a minister in Rijssel would certainly not lead to a peaceful life! Yet deBres agreed to minister to the persecuted people of God in this town. For four years deBres proclaimed the gospel in Rijssel, but always the persecution forced him to do his work in secret.

EXILE AGAIN

In reaction to the persecution in the Netherlands, deBres went in 1556 to Geneva where, amongst others, he met Calvin and spent time being instructed by this great reformer. Here, we may say, deBres completed the training he needed for his future work. In 1559 he married Catherine Ramon.

DOORNIK: 1559-1561

DeBres returned to the Southern Netherlands in 1559, and settled in a town called Doornik, where he was a minister for 3 years. Due to the threat of persecution, deBres had to labor in secret. He went habitually from home to home under cover of darkness, where he met the members of his congregation in small groups of 6 to 12 persons. DeBres opened the Scriptures for them, explained it, encouraged his listeners and then went on his way. Many congregation members did not even know his real name.

As a result of his work, a considerable number of residents in Doornik embraced the faith, including also some leading figures in town. The day came that some of the Protestant people in town considered their numbers to be adequately substantial to go public. They did so, singing psalms openly in the streets. This action, however, provoked the authorities to send in the troops. Just prior to this event, deBres, in 1561, had written an introduction to the confession he had been working on during the past few months. With the arrival of the troops, he tossed a copy of this Confession, together with the Introduction, over the wall of the regent’s home in Doornik, who in turn passed it on to King Philip II. DeBres’ aim was to make clear that “*the adherents of the Reformed faith were no rebels, as was laid to their charge, but law-abiding citizens who professed the true Christian doctrine according to the Holy Scriptures*” (p. 440, *Book of Praise*). The king, however, was not persuaded, and Doornik felt the wrath of the authorities by way of persecution. DeBres was again forced to flee and live as a ‘wanderer’ for five years.

VALENCIENNES: 1566-1567

In 1566 deBres was called to minister to the town of Valenciennes. Support for the Reformation continued to grow, and the people grew bold, meeting in the fields in crowds numbering 4000 to 12000 to hear deBres preach. In March 1567, the authorities thought to put an end to the Protestant church in Valenciennes, and so captured the town and imprisoned many. DeBres managed to escape, but during a pause at a hotel was recognized, betrayed and arrested. He was taken back to Doornik, imprisoned, and two and a half months later, on 31st May 1567, was hung on the gallows.

CONFESSION OF FAITH IN THE FACE OF PERSECUTION

One might well question the value of knowing all this. DeBres began the Belgic Confession with the remarkable words of Article 1: *“We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth...”* So many of the following articles repeat this same statement, be it with the abbreviated form *“we believe”*. Such a statement (*“we all believe”*) gains color and perspective when we realize that deBres, together with his persecuted congregation, made the statement in a time when doing so could mean one’s death! They stated their faith in an environment of radical hostility, in an environment in which both the Roman Catholic Church and the government hated anything and anyone Protestant. Again, they did so in the full awareness that the authorities had at their disposal the horrid tool of the Inquisition, persons specialized in torturing in order to force people to recant the Protestant faith and return to Roman Catholicism. Yet in that environment, deBres and the people said, *“We believe.”* The wealth of God’s redeeming grace in Jesus Christ was to them well worth the price of persecution, imprisonment, even death! More: *all* the articles of the Confession were for deBres and his congregation of such importance and value that they were unwilling to deny or alter any for the sake of freedom and peace. They knew: *if God revealed it, it was worth more than life itself.*

Just how much the faith meant to deBres is evident from a letter he wrote his wife while in prison, dated 12th April 1567. This letter reads (in part) as follows:

“My very dear Catherine Ramon, my precious and most loved wife and sister in our Lord Jesus Christ... You know well enough that when you married me, you married a mortal man whose life was not sure for a single minute. Yet it has pleased our good God to give us about seven years together, and five children. If the Lord had wanted us to live together longer, He has the means to make it happen. But it is not His pleasure; so, His will be done and that be sufficient to you.

Remember too, that it was not by chance that I fell into the hands of my enemies, but through the providence of my God.... My God, You have let me be born at a time and hour determined by You, and through all the time of my life You have preserved and protected me in the face of unimaginable dangers, and You have fully delivered. And now, if the hour has come in which I must leave this life in order to go to You, Your will be done...

Especially forget not the honor which God has shown to you by having given you a man who was not only a minister of the Son of God, but also a man so esteemed and privileged by God that He honored him with the crown of martyrdom. I am joyful and my heart rejoices. I lack nothing in all my troubles. I am filled with the overflowing riches of my God.... I had never thought that God would be so merciful to a poor creature as I am...

Adieu, Catherine, my dear good friend...”

Reading such a letter can hardly leave one untouched. One asks oneself, ‘how was it possible for deBres to speak like that, having been persecuted throughout his life, in jail, fully aware of the fact that he was about to die for the faith, yet speaking of joy, and of not lacking anything in all his troubles!’ What this is?? This is **FAITH!** By the grace of God this man knew more than biblical facts. He also knew the words of Scripture to be true for *him!* He knew himself forgiven of his sins through the blood of Jesus Christ, and consequently felt secure in the almighty hands of His heavenly Father – who is *“eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.”* So he was content, though he knew it was this very same God who

directed his recognition and arrest in the hotel, and now gave him a cold prison cell. In faith he worked with the promises of Scripture in passages as Psalm 57, singing of God,
“Beneath Thy mighty wings I’ll seek protection

Until the storms pass by. To God I flee –

To God Most High who charts my life’s direction” (Book of Praise, Psalm 57:1).

He **believed** that his God led his life the way it went, this God made no mistakes, even worked all things for good. So he could be content. His was the same faith as is pointed up in the examples of Hebrews 11:

“Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance [from their tortures], that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword...” (vss 35-38).

Here was faith in action, a faith that knows and trusts the promises of God in the midst of the real struggles of this life. Because of his faith in Jesus Christ, deBres awoke from the event on the gallows into the presence of God Most High, and received from Him *“the crown of glory that does not fade away”* (1 Peter 5:4).

EVIDENCE OF FAITH

To us it seems too much. Confess that the almighty God who let deBres live in a time of persecution, who let His children be hounded, chased, arrested, burned is *“just”* and *“good”*?? Confess that such a God is the *“overflowing fountain of all good”*?? It doesn’t sit well with our sinful minds. But *this is faith!* This is the material deBres found in the Bible and so he confessed it and said ‘this is the way it is. I cannot understand God and I cannot understand why He does what He does, but this is my God, my Savior! So I accept it, I’m content.’ He could confess in Article 13:

*“We **believe** that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction.”*

Similarly, despite the pronounced danger of belonging to the church, he could confess in Article 28:

*“We **believe**, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it.... They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.”*

He could confess in Article 36:

*“We **believe** that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.”*

What a statement, given that the king of his day was the tyrant Phillip II of Spain, and his regent was the vengeful Margaret, who persecuted the Church so cruelly in Belgium! Even

under the rule of such kings, deBres confessed what he read in Scripture: “*our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.*” So he could add too, despite the difficulties of obedience in the grind of real life, that “*everyone –no matter of what quality, condition, or rank – ought to be subject to the civil officers...*,” and that included obedience to King Philip II. Truly, this is a confession borne in the grind of **real life!** As Guido deBres analyzed his daily circumstances and considered what he ought to think and how he ought to act, he took God for real and included Him and His promises in his calculations. That is faith in action. It produces a manner of living and a confession that countless millions cannot comprehend. But those who take God seriously understand deBres’ confession and share it eagerly.

FAITH: EVIDENT THROUGH WORD AND DEED

We live more than four centuries after deBres wrote this confession, in very different circumstances. Many of us have made profession of our faith, and so stated in the presence of God and His congregation that we love the Lord, want to serve the Lord, and believe His Word. Despite the passage of time and the change of circumstances, we profess the same faith deBres professed. That’s why the words of his confession can be our words also. Readily we today take deBres’ confession on our lips and join with the saints of his day to say, “*We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth....*” DeBres’ God is our God; this God has not changed with the passage of time! Since He has not changed, we may dare with deBres to speak the faith and live it publicly, despite the reactions of those around us. DeBres’ example is encouragement to take God seriously, and so include Him in one’s calculations as we decide what to say and what to do.

GOD GIVES STRENGTH TO LIVE BY FAITH

As we read of deBres’ faith, and consider how he lived that faith in the trials of life, we may well begin to feel so inadequate in our faith. Compared to deBres, we are so weak, so frightened, so easily cowed..., we feel. We do well to bear in mind that deBres was a man like any of us, with no strength within himself. That he could see God’s hand behind his arrest, that could be joyful in prison, that he could entrust his wife to the care of his God and go readily to the gallows, was not an expression of his personal strength of character; it was rather an expression of God’s faithfulness to this child of His. Here is an example of the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13:

“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

DeBres was what he was by the grace and blessing of God! This God does not change, and holds on to His own today still. That is why I need today not worry about what will happen tomorrow. Faith says: I know I am safe in the hands of the God who gave His Son for my sin. This gracious and mighty God leads my life today in perfect wisdom, and so His way with me is always good. This is *my* faith, one that repeats after God (as deBres did) all He promised me and expresses itself readily in the dirt and dust of daily living.

Should I despair then if my faith seems so weak in comparison to the faith of deBres? Should I conclude that I am not a real Christian after all? Should I be envious of deBres because in the struggles of my life I stumble so often? No, I should not! I believe that God holds on. Yes, I stumble, I have my shortcomings. But I am confident that the God Who claimed me as His will always hold on to me, and so I am safe in His hands. This, after all, is the promise of His Word.

Points for Discussion:

1. The *Belgic Confession* is a confession of faith. Discuss what faith is.
2. What is the cost of being faithful to the Lord – and hence to His Word? Is every doctrine God revealed so important that one would rather choose death than deny that doctrine? In the light of 2 Timothy 3 (vs 12), are you willing to pay this price?
3. Read and discuss the Introduction to the *Belgic Confession*, as printed on page 440 of the *Book of Praise*.
4. If the *Belgic Confession* was deBres' confession in the face of his persecution some 400 years ago, is it right to say the *Belgic Confession* is also *our* confession? Why?
5. Read deBres' letter to his wife. How does this letter display deBres' faith? Do you think you could write a letter in the same vein? Why or why not?
6. Need ones faith simply be *believed* or also *lived*? Why? See James 2:14-26.

WHY STUDY THE BELGIC CONFESSION?

GOD'S COVENANT AND OUR RESPONSE

It all begins with Triune God. In compassion unlimited, before we reached out to Him, He established a bond of love with believers and the children He gives to these believers. In this bond of love the Lord God claimed for Himself people lost in sin. Such a claim comes complete with rich promises. The “Form for the Baptism of Infants” (*Book of Praise*, pg 584) summarizes God’s promises clearly.¹ Those promises are not extended to all men in general, for His covenant is not made with all. As God speaks specifically to those who are baptized, I take the liberty to replace the third-person references in this Form with first-person references. That helps us to see how *personal* God’s promises actually are.

- “When **I** was baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father testified and sealed to **me** that He established an eternal covenant of grace with **me**. He adopted **me** as His child and heir, and promised to provide **me** with all good and avert all evil or turn it to my benefit.” That is: in my infant days, before I consciously knew how to do good or evil, when all I had done was fall into sin together with Adam and Eve, God the Father said to me, “You are Mine, I will be a Father to you.”
- “When **I** was baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promised **me** that He washed **me** in His blood from all **my** sins and united **me** with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus **I** was freed from **my** sins and accounted righteous before God.” That is: God the Son promised to make me clean before God, and to forgive all my sins – both those committed consciously as well as those committed unconsciously.
- “When **I** was baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assured **me** by this sacrament that He would dwell in **me** and make **me** a living member of Christ, imparting to **me** what **I** have in Christ, namely the cleansing from **my** sins and the daily renewal of **my** life, till **I** shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God’s elect in life eternal.” That is: God the Holy Spirit promised to recreate me. Though I was dead in sin, He would make me alive again so that I could live for Him.

One cannot help but notice: the claim God lays upon undeserving people is rich, so incredibly rich!

PROFESSION OF FAITH: RESPONSE TO GOD'S COVENANT

We never asked God for any of these riches, nor did He offer them to us in the sense of: ‘are you perhaps interested in a relationship?’ No, God *imposed* His promises upon us. For that reason, each of us is to consider what our response is to God’s gift. Do I get excited about it? Am I indifferent to it? Do I simply reject it? God has given so much wealth in the covenant that one’s response must be one of excitement, of eagerly embracing God’s mercy, delighting in it. Given the glorious nature and life-renewing content of God’s covenant with the undeserving, indifference or unbelief are simply unacceptable responses, and provoke God’s judgment.

One gives expression to one’s delight in God’s covenant promises through confessing God’s Name publicly. Historically the churches expect baptized children, once they come to an age of maturity and independence, to state openly their response to God’s promises in a ceremony

¹ The “Form for the Baptism of Adults” mentions the identical promises for believing adults. See *Book of Praise*, pg 588.

known as *Public Profession of Faith*. As the young adult makes profession of his faith, he (or she – let us, in accordance with Scripture, include both genders in the pronoun ‘he’) effectively says to God, “Yes Lord, I believe what You said to me concerning Your love for me. I love You because You have made me Your child, because You care for me, because You forgive my sins, because You have renewed me. I delight in the rich gospel You gave me, and I want to live as Your child.” Profession of faith, then, is nothing other than a response to baptism.²

The wealth of God’s promises in the covenant points up why such privileged sinners as we *ought* to make profession of faith – in hearty gratitude for the abundance of God’s mercy to us. Reality, though, does not always follow the norm. There were those of us who made profession of faith so many years ago because we knew it was the expected thing to do, or because we wanted to get married, or perhaps wanted to be done with Catechism instruction. Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that adults in faithful churches of God around the world, with scarcely any exception, have publicly professed the faith. That is to say, we have stood before the Lord and His holy congregation, and confessed that we love Him, believe all He has said in His Word, and will serve Him. Saying such a thing in the presence of God means that our words have the weight of an oath – irrespective of our motives at the time. Today we remain bound to the oath we swore so many years ago (Numbers 30:2).

PROFESSION OF FAITH: ITS IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

Is making profession of faith, though, simply a once-off statement that I can easily divorce from my life today? Is profession of faith perhaps something that must determine my life on Sunday, but not on Monday? By no means! The oath I swore so many years ago (with whatever motive at the time) remains binding on my life today, each day of the week, any hour of the day. God is no small god, touching only a small portion of my life and claiming only a small portion of my allegiance. He is none less than the Creator without whose will and direction not a moth can move. How much more, then, does His claim upon me reach into every corner of my life, every moment of the day, for as long as I live. In fact, one who is excited by God’s glorious promises in the covenant seeks to live each moment of his existence in grateful obedience to and trust in this God. Professing the faith, swearing to love and serve the Lord, *impacts* the way I live my whole life.

Psalms 119:97-112 captures David’s enthusiasm for his God and His promises. “*Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day*” (vs 97). “*How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*” (vs 103). Here is a man in love with God’s law! That means in turn that David did not leave his Bible on the shelf to collect dust. Rather, David was eagerly busy with that Word, keen to meditate continually about the wonderful God who established His bond of love with a sinner as himself.

BUSY WITH GOD’S WORD

Being busy with God’s Word is not just the fitting response of all upon whom God lays His claim of love. Such absorption with God’s Word is also the express command of the God who claimed sinners for Himself. In fact, it is the will of this God that His people delight in the *entirety* of His revelation to sinners. One cannot pick and choose what doctrine of God’s revelation to believe, or which Bible book to treasure.

² The reader is further referred to K. Deddens, *Response to Your Baptism*, Inter League Publication Board, 1985.

- Deuteronomy 5:31-33: *“But as for you, stand here by Me, and I will speak to you all the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments which you shall teach them, that they may observe them in the land which I am giving them to possess. Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess.”*

God would pass on to Moses all the commandments he must teach the people. Those commandments include God’s instruction about Israel’s feasts, the laws about clean and unclean animals and clothing, the sacrifices of the tabernacle, etc. These laws and so many more embodied God’s instruction about the doctrines of sin, redemption, depravity, election, and so many more, etc. Moses must teach them *all* to the people, and must insist that the people not turn to the right or left of anything God has revealed.

- Matthew 28:19,20: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

Just before His ascension into heaven, Jesus instructed His disciples to **teach all** things He commanded them; no apostle could pick and choose what he would teach his converts. Jesus added that disciples everywhere were to **“observe all that I have commanded you.”** No Christian could pick and choose what he would believe.

- John 20:30,31: *“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”*

With the term ‘these’ John refers to all Jesus’ deeds and words recorded in his gospel. He has written about the providence of God (9:3), salvation in Christ (10:28), the Savior’s sonship (1:1ff), our adoption (1:12f), the incarnation (10:30ff), the suffering of Christ (19:12ff), the two natures of Christ (16:28; 14:16ff), the ascension of Christ (14:16), Christ’s enthronement in heaven (5:22f), the Holy Spirit (15:26), the doctrine of the church (10:11, 27ff), forgiveness of sins (3:17f), the life everlasting (17:3).³ If *“these are written that you may believe”*, it will not do for any Christian to reject any of these doctrines.

Texts as these make plain that the Lord wishes His people to be busy with the entirety of His Word, and to delight in it all.

CONFESSIONS AND CREEDS

God has given us the Bible, and in it revealed all He wishes us to know about the covenant He made with us. It is because of what the Bible is that David could say, *“Oh, how I love Your Law”* (Psalm 119:97). His love for God and His Word caused him to *believe* what the Lord had told him in His covenant claim upon David. When someone, then, asked David *what he believed* he could summarize God’s message with words of His own. In Psalm 23, for example, David echoed the glorious gospel he heard God say to him in Scripture, *“The*

³ These topics and texts are gleaned from a browse through the proof-texts mentioned in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lords Days 8-22.

LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want.” This echo or summary of God’s gospel is at bottom a *confession*. The Greek equivalent of the term ‘confession’ means literally, *to say the same thing*. One listens to God’s promises, and enthusiastically repeats in one’s own words what he has heard God say – *that* is a confession.

Inherent to a confession is that one *believes* what the Lord has promised. One does not repeat-after-God only with the mind, intellectually, but one embraces those promises with the heart, receives them for gospel truth true for oneself. That is faith. That is why a Confession is also a Creed – for the word *creed* describes a statement of faith (Latin: Credo = I believe). One believes (creed) what God has said, and repeats it after him in one’s own words (confession).

Reformed churches around the world typically have six creeds or confessions, subdivided as follows:

ECUMENICAL CREEDS	REFORMATIONAL CREEDS
dating from the first centuries, approximately 200 - 600 A.D.	dating from the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century
embraced by all the churches of the western world at that time (Europe)	adopted by the several continental reformed churches of the Reformation
includes: i) The Apostles’ Creed ii) The Nicene Creed iii) The Athanasian Creed	includes: i) The Belgic Confession (1561) ii) The Heidelberg Catechism (1563) iii) The Canons of Dort (1618-1619)

The creeds are not theological treatises, though they do contain theology (see, for example, the Athanasian Creed or the Canons of Dort). Rather, they are *personal statements of faith* wherein believers (one or more) expressed in their own words the glorious promises God in mercy had extended to them. Since these confessions capture accurately what the Lord has promised to His people, and since His promises have not changed over the centuries, we today can take on our lips the summaries of faith penned by those who went before us, and repeat them as our own statement of what God has promised us. That’s a lot easier than reinventing the wheel!

THE PURPOSE OF CREEDS

Over the centuries of church history, the nature and purpose of creeds have often been misunderstood. Some of the more common misunderstandings are the following:

1. ‘A creed is an infallible decree,’ and is to be accepted without any question. This is a distinctive view of the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope makes decrees, and one must simply agree. *Refutation:* Creeds are written by people, who are all sinners. No Creed, therefore, is infallible. For that reason no one may attach to any of the creeds the same authority they attach to the Bible.
2. ‘A creed is an iron chain,’ something that ties you down. This description is typical of the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation. They wanted to leave room for the Holy Spirit to speak truth in one’s heart apart from the Bible, and so one’s heart must remain open to new truths or further insights the Spirit may yet give. *Refutation:* The Spirit does not give any new revelation to us. The Bible is the definitive and complete revelation of God, and it’s to this revelation God wishes sinners to respond. As long as Creeds echo faithfully what the Bible says, they are never more restrictive than the Bible itself is.

3. ‘A creed is a sign-post,’ indicating the personal faith of a long-dead author. Primarily a creed has historical value in telling us what persons of a previous generation believed. We for our part should remain free to decide what we wish to believe today. Arminians have historically held this position. *Refutation*: To say that creeds are primarily of historical value is to say that the truth can keep changing, or at least our understanding of the truth can keep changing. But the truth does not change, and God has been clear over the centuries in what He actually promises to mankind. Instead of reading the Bible as if we are the first to do so, we may stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, glean from their insights into God’s revelation, and even confess the faith with words borrowed from them.

A creed, then, is a faithful echo of what the Scriptures teach. In a creed (or confession) I repeat in my own words (which I perhaps learned from students of Scripture who have gone before me) what I hear God promise me in His Word. So there is no contrast between the Scriptures and the Confessions. The content of the two are identical in substance, though not necessarily in scope.

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CREEDS

From the above it is clear that Creeds have “derived” or secondary authority. Only God’s Word is infallible, and the final authority in all questions. Creeds come from people, and therefore are subject to error – and so in principle can be revised if a conflict between Scripture and the creeds is found. However, since a) I’m convinced I’ve caught accurately what the Lord has said in Scripture, and b) a creed is my echo of what I have heard God say in the Bible, I readily concede that a creed has authority.

THE FUNCTION OF THE CREEDS

From the above it is evident that creeds and confessions are intrinsically *personal*. In a creed I state *my* faith. Yet that does not make creeds and confessions individualistic. God’s promises are the same for people of any tribe or time, and so all people ought to be able to repeat God’s promises after Him with the same words. Agreeing together on a limited number of Confessions –tested and tried as they have been over the years– points up something of the *unity of faith* these Christians have together.

Reformed churches around the world of continental origin commonly have three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed) and three Reformational Creeds (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort). Guido deBres wrote *The Belgic Confession* in 1561. The purpose of this *statement of belief* was to inform the oppressive authorities concerning the beliefs of the people they were persecuting. The *Heidelberg Catechism*, compiled in 1563 upon command of Elector Frederick III, was a *teaching aid* for the people of the kingdom, so that they might get to know what the Lord says in Scripture. The *Canons of Dort*, prepared at the Synod of Dort in 1618-1619, *defended* the teaching of Scripture on particular points of doctrine concerning which heresy had arisen. Despite the varying backgrounds of these confessions, each drew the believers together, for each confession captured what Christians believed, and shoulder to shoulder they repeated after God the glorious promises He gave them in His Word. So these three confessions have become known as the *Three Forms of Unity*.

GETTING DOCTRINE RIGHT IS THE KEY TO GETTING LIFE RIGHT!

What you believe determines how you live. Taking seriously God’s bond of love with you

affects every decision you make. If I believe what God says about Him creating the world and entrusting its care to the human race, I cannot in good conscience exploit the environment for personal gain. If I believe what God says about marriage reflecting the relation between Christ and the church, I cannot marry someone who denies God's existence or one who serves Him in a self-chosen manner. In a Confession I echo in words what I have heard God say in Scripture; in my lifestyle I echo in deeds what I have heard God say. Between Scripture and my lifestyle is my confession; my confession determines how I live. Where there is a disconnection between my confession and my lifestyle, I need to investigate whether I am in fact sincere in my confession. There may also be need for greater maturity and understanding of God's Word and will.

Right doctrine produces right ethics. Right doctrine determines the way one lives. If one errs in doctrine, this will be evident in his life, and vice versa. Many of Paul's letters can be divided into two parts: the first part is devoted to doctrine, and the second to the practice resulting from this doctrine. See, for example, Romans 1-11 on the one hand, and Romans 12-16 on the other.

Here, then, is the reason why those who have once professed the faith ought to continue to study the Scriptures, and hence also the Confessions – including the *Belgic Confession*. Getting doctrine right is the key to getting life right!

Points for Discussion:

1. Discuss how Triune God initially reached into your life. What promises did He give you? On what grounds did He extend these promises to you?
2. List the possible responses to God's promises. Which response(s) is/are legitimate before God? How have you responded to these promises? How does your lifestyle manifest the sincerity of your response?
3. God has revealed Himself to sinners through Holy Scripture. Reflect upon your Bible reading habits, in light of David's words in Psalm 119:97-112. Would giving an account to another of your daily performance assist in improving your habit? If so, consider practical ways to give account to another.
4. One hears from time to time that the Bible is more important than the Confessions. The statement, of course, is true inasmuch as the Bible is inspired and the Confessions are not. Still, the statement harbors a false dilemma. Explain what the false dilemma is. In the process, give consideration to what a creed (or confession) actually is.
5. Explain how Creeds from centuries ago can be valuable to the child of God today. Does change in culture or technology render an ancient creed useless today? Why or why not?
6. Is there merit in today's Christians drafting a modern creed? Why or why not?
7. Discuss why "getting doctrine right is the key to getting life right." What implications follow?

ARTICLE 1: THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD

ARTICLE 1

We all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God, who is a simple and spiritual Being; He is eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good.

WHO IS GOD?

Who is the God in whom DeBrès trusted? What kind of God is the Lord, that DeBrès could be confident and content even under the pressures of persecution and with the threat of having to leave his wife a widow?

In the first article of his confession, DeBrès lists several characteristics of the God who has claimed sinners for Himself. DeBrès' list is not complete; other qualities of the Lord God could be mentioned too (eg, jealousy, hatred, holiness, love, etc). In what follows, I intend to discuss the characteristics DeBrès mentions in Article 1. As we seek to understand God's revelation concerning Himself, we do well to remember that this God is *our* God. To study God's characteristics is no mere academic pursuit, but is an effort to understand better *Who* the God is who has made Himself my Father – and me His child.

GOD IS GOD

DeBrès, and we with him, confess that “*there is only one God.*” The term ‘God’ refers to the high and noble Inhabitant of heaven who is in turn so exalted that heaven itself cannot contain Him.

- Isaiah 57:15: “*For thus says **the High and Lofty One** who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place....’*”
- Isaiah 66:1: “*Thus says the LORD: ‘**Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made....***”

This God is so different, so unique and exalted above and beyond anything the eye can see or the mind can imagine in this limited world. Isaiah saw something of this **otherness** of God when he “*saw **the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And the one cried to the other and said:***

*‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
The whole earth is full of His glory!’*

And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:1-4). Isaiah saw the Lord, but he could not describe Him; God was too awesome for that. The best the prophet could do was describe those with whom God surrounded Himself – and they covered their faces and their feet (creatures as they were!) in the presence of such a wonderful God, and ceaselessly sang one to the other of the super-holiness of this exalted God. So other was He, so holy and unique, that Isaiah was sure he

would perish on account of seeing such a God. “*Woe is me, for I am undone!*” he cried in despair. “*Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts*” (Isaiah 6:5). It was when he was confronted with the **Godness** of God that Isaiah suddenly realized who –and what– he himself was: finite, a sinner, nothing. His own smallness in relation to God’s exalted greatness left room for but one reaction: praise and awe for such a God.

The psalmist understood it:

- Psalm 99:1-3: “*The LORD reigns; Let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; Let the earth be moved! The LORD is great in Zion, And He is **high above all the peoples**. Let them praise Your great and awesome name – He is holy*”.

Yet the **Godness** of God encourages more than praise and adoration. His identity as God gives His people reason to be secure in His care.

- Isaiah 40:25-31: “*To whom then will you liken Me, Or to whom shall I be equal? says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, And see who has created these things, Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, By the greatness of His might And the strength of His power; Not one is missing. Why do you say, O Jacob, And speak, O Israel: “My way is hidden from the LORD, And my just claim is passed over by my God”? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, The Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, But those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint*”.

How delightfully encouraging such revelation was for DeBrès and those with him! They knew: the God they learned to love and trust was no little god sitting in some irrelevant corner of heaven. Their God was the only one who **lived**, who was real. He was **God**, as none else is! That reality gave perspective and comfort in the face of their persecution and oppression.

This high and exalted One did the most unexpected – and so demonstrates what His **Godness** is really all about. For this God from heaven on high established a unique bond of love with the creature man, claimed that finite being for Himself as His child-by-covenant. That the living **God** would draw a finite *creature* into His holy presence as His child takes one’s breath away – how glorious is He! And when this finite creature in immeasurable arrogance rose up against holy God in an attempt to be equal with his Creator and Master, this awesome God did not snuff man out with a decree of de-creation, but He sent His one and only Son into the world of man in order to recreate and to restore. “*In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that **God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for ours sins***” (1 John 4:9,10). Truly, “*behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that **we should be called children of God!***” (1 John 3:1). How thoroughly delightful this God is, in a league all by Himself!

No wonder the apostle Paul can be so confident in his God:

- Romans 8:31-34: *“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?”*.

Though tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, and so many other afflictions beset the child of God in this fallen world, God’s identity as **God** gives Paul so much confidence:

- Romans 8:37-39: *“Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”*.

If Paul could be so confident in this God, DeBrès and the persecuted churches of Rijssel, Doornik and Valenciennes could be too. Boldly they let the world know, when persecutors sought to crush them, that *“we all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth that there is only one God”* – and this holy, awesome God loves His own enough to give His only Son for them. Such a God is *worth* believing in – and *worth* trusting!

GOD IS ONE

DeBrès read in Scripture several characteristics of this glorious God. The Holy Spirit moved Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4 to say, *“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!”* There are two equally legitimate ways of understanding this text:

1. The LORD alone is God.

There are not two Gods or three Gods but only *one* God. I read in Deuteronomy 4:39 that *“... the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; **there is no other.**”* There is no competition between God and another god. There simply is no second God. The Holy Spirit repeats the point elsewhere: *“... I, even I am He, and **there is no God besides Me**”* (Deuteronomy 32:39). *“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the First and I am the Last; **besides Me there is no God**”* (Isaiah 44:6). *“There is **no other God but one**”* (1 Corinthians 8:4).

The Bible certainly knows that other gods exist *in the minds of people* (see 1 Corinthians 8:5,6). Yet these gods people serve are not living, actual gods. Instead, says Paul, these gods are demons. *“What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God”* (1 Corinthians 10:20).

Since there is but one God, He alone is to receive the praise and the trust belonging to a God. Since there is but one God any form of idolatry is illegitimate. DeBrès and those with him realized that they could not embrace the gods of their pagan fathers – demons as these gods actually were. They realized too that they were not to serve the god of the Muslims encroaching on their civilization either. They could not place their trust in any person, be he the pope or a military commander, and could not depend on indulgences or gold as a source of happiness either. God’s identity as the only true God made service to Him both necessary and pleasant.

Similarly, if God alone is God, only His revelation is true and worthy of belief. Any other ‘revelation’ is by definition false and unreliable.

2. God is not divided in Himself.

This notion is captured in the confession of Article 1 that God is a simple Being.

GOD IS SIMPLE

Simple contrasts with compound, the latter meaning ‘made up of many parts’. For example, the compound word ‘himself’ is made up of the words ‘him’ and ‘self’. God is simple: just *one* part. Scripture makes various statements concerning what God is:

John 4:24 “*God is Spirit*”

1 John 1:5 “*God is light*”

1 John 4:8 “*God is love*”

These various descriptions of God do not make God compound. God is not made up of three parts (part Spirit, part light, part love), but He is *simple*, all the same: He is 100% Spirit, He is 100% light, and He is 100% love, simultaneously. In all He does He is always completely love, completely light, completely holy, etc.

God’s revelation concerning His simple-ness is rich:

1. There is no tension between the different characteristics of God.

God’s mercy does not cancel out or contradict His justice. People’s moods vary, and different characteristics of our true selves reveal themselves at different times. But this is not true of God. In God’s wrath is His love; in God’s justice is His mercy. The characteristics of God cannot be played off against each other (see further Article 20). Therefore one may never say that, though God’s revealed will for me is to follow course A, He understands my situation and so will not mind me transgressing His law and following course B instead. To reason and to act this way is to play off God’s love against His holiness. God is not holy one time and loving the next; He is *always the same*, always holy and always loving. So His commands for me are always good no matter my circumstances, though I may not see how obedience is actually good for me.

2. God comes to us as He is.

God is not like people, who show a certain side of themselves the one hour and another side the next (eg, grumpy in the morning, happy at noon and tired at night). God always shows Himself in totality: righteous, holy, gracious, loving, wise, jealous. So, He is never unpredictable, His ‘mood’ never surprising. There is no hidden side to Him. He always comes as He is. Tomorrow God will be as holy, merciful and just as He was yesterday, and as He was at Calvary. This characteristic of my God gives me great comfort and reassurance, for I always know what I have in my God and I always know where I stand with my God.

GOD IS SPIRITUAL

DeBrès’ confession in Article 1 that God is a spiritual Being is based on John 4:24, “*God is Spirit.*” This characteristic has traditionally been understood to mean that God is non-physical, non-tangible, that God does not have a body like ours. Further, it means that God is **different**: there is nothing earthly about God, nothing creaturely. We are creatures and therefore tend to think in limited and creaturely terms. God, however, is Spirit, which means that He is not a creature. God is Creator, different from us, of another realm. We can, therefore, never ‘measure’ God with standards of this world – the only standards available to us.

The Bible speaks of God having hands, arms, eyes, ears, and a mouth. We mistakenly understand that to mean that God has a body. We read in Genesis 1:27 that man was created in God's image, and so imagine that we now look like God. That, however, is not the point of being created in God's image; see further Article 14. Theologians describe the Bible's reference to God's hands, arms, eyes, etc, with the Greek word 'anthropomorphic.' (Anthropo = man and morphic = form). The point is that God *speaks as a man would*. Calvin compares this to the way a mother speaks to her child; she gets down to the child's level so that the child might be able to understand what it is she has to say. Likewise the Lord, because He wants us to understand what He has to say to us, gets down to our level and speaks to us in a language that we are able to understand. God does not have a body as we do. We don't know what God looks like. He is a spiritual Being, and therefore too great for my finite mind to grasp. God is totally different to anything on this earth. And that is why He is worthy of service and praise!

GOD IS ETERNAL

To confess that God is eternal means the following:

1. God has no beginning and no end.

The Holy Spirit moved the psalmist to confess: "*Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God*" (Psalm 90:2), and: "*But You are the same, and Your years will have no end*" (Psalm 102:27).

God always was and always will be. He never became God, and never ceases to be God. This eternal God created the world, and with creating the world He also created time. Though the world and time may cease, the eternal God will not. He remains who He is.

2. God is above time.

All things around us change in time: days change over into night, hour passes into hour, summer changes into winter. Man is caught up in the web of time. But not so God; He is above the time He created. God doesn't follow the same sequence of day and night as man does. Says Moses in Psalm 90:4, "*For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past, and like a watch in the night.*" Likewise, Peter in 2 Peter 3:8 says, "*with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.*" This is incomprehensible to us, for we can only think in categories of time, of *before* and *after*. God, however, is above time; time is one of His created works. God's eternity is an eternal *now*. For God there is no yesterday or tomorrow.

3. God controls time.

Because God created time He is also in control of time. In Genesis 1:14 we read of God dividing the day from the night. However, God's control over time is not just restricted to a control over the hours of the day and the seasons of the year, but also extends over all things that happen in time. God, then, is not bound to time, but as Creator of time He is able to do with it whatever He wills. In whatever God allows to happen in this world I meet God, and consequently any response of mine to what takes place in my life is ultimately a response to what God does. My decisions, my responses to what God does, have a bearing on eternity. This knowledge makes life all the more awesome.

GOD IS INCOMPREHENSIBLE

God is so far above us, so exalted, that no creature can fathom God or God's thoughts. With our minds we try to understand the things around us, and to a large extent we can. The Lord, though, is emphatic that we cannot understand Him. "*Have you not known? Have you not*

heard? *The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable*” (Isaiah 40:28). Ps 147:5: “*Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite.*” Elihu adds: “*Behold, God is great, and we do not know Him*” (Job 36:26). In graphic picture after graphic picture, God confirms Elihu’s confession in His revelation of Job 38-41: “*Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you have understanding? ...Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? ...What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside?*” (Job 38:4, 16,19). The church has read words of God such as these, and so confesses that we are “*not to think of God’s heavenly majesty in an earthly manner*” (Lord’s Day 46.120). He is so far *above* us.

The fact that we cannot comprehend God does not mean that we do not know anything about God. Only God Himself knows the thoughts of God, and He has been pleased to tell us some of His thoughts through the Holy Spirit. This is Paul’s point in 1 Corinthians 2:11,12: “*...no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.*” Paul refers here not only to the fact that God has spoken to mankind (be it directly or through His prophets of the Old Testament), but specifically to the fact that God through the Spirit opens deaf ears so that we hear what God is saying. See further Article 3.

Meanwhile, the fact that God is above human understanding is itself a source of so much comfort and encouragement. In his context of persecution DeBrès confesses God’s incomprehensibility not because he feels compelled to express his bewilderment at what this God does, but rather because he wants to explain the peace that fills his heart. A child does not need to understand the actions of his parent in order to be content. On the contrary, the child is at peace in his parent’s arms exactly because he does not have to understand; he can rather entrust himself to Dad’s better knowledge. So it is with God. “*For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts*” (Isaiah 55:8,9).

GOD IS INVISIBLE

Moses once sought to see God’s face. “*No one may see Me and live,*” was God’s reply (Exodus 33:20). The sun is too bright for one to gaze upon without damaging one’s eyes. God is even more glorious, more splendid and awesome. That is why the angels Isaiah saw were covering their faces in the presence of God (Isaiah 6:2). It is also why Isaiah and Ezekiel when they attempted to describe what they saw of God ended up recording not a description of God Himself, but rather the things around this God (see Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1). This God is too glorious for mortals to observe.

It is not that the Lord God wishes to remain hidden. He has revealed much about Himself in His holy Word, and made Himself most clearly known through His only Son. Jesus Christ “*is the image of the invisible God,*” Paul writes (Colossians 1:15). Jesus told Thomas, “*Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9). Christ is “*the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person*” (Hebrews 1:3). Yet no man who looked upon Jesus while He was on earth saw in Him the full glory that belongs to the Father, for God is too wonderful, too heavenly, too much *God* for a finite, sinful man to behold.

God’s insistence that He is too wonderful for man to behold highlights again the miracle of His relation with man. That *such* a God would make sinners His children, and would tell

sinner about Himself, can only drive one to adore Him. How remarkable His mercy in Jesus Christ!

GOD IS IMMUTABLE, UNCHANGING, TRUE

God does not change. Holy Scripture states this frequently:

- Numbers 23:19: *“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”*

This is God: One who does not change His mind at random, or under pressure or changing circumstances. What He says He’ll do, He **does** do.

Samuel told Saul after Saul’s disobedience in the battle against the Amalekites, that:

- 1 Samuel 15:28: *“the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For **He is not a man, that He should relent.**”*

God, the “Strength of Israel”, does not chop and change as people do, nor does His mood vary with the weather.

- Psalm 102:25-27: *“Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. They will perish, but You will endure; Yes, they will all grow old like a garment; like a cloak You will change them, and they will be changed. **But You are the same,** and Your years will have no end.”*

Here the Psalmist compares God to creation. Despite the fact that all things around him change and age, he confesses that God Himself does not change. God stays the same, always.

- James 1:17: *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, **with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.**”*

Scripture speaks of God as being constant and consistent.

When the Lord reveals Himself as unchanging, He does not wish us to conclude that God is therefore cold and unemotional. God indeed does interact with our actions, and even gets emotionally touched by what we do. Consider the following texts:

- Genesis 6:5-7: *“Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And **the LORD was sorry** that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LORD said, ‘I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, **for I am sorry that I have made them.**”*

After Israel had made and worshipped the golden calf, we read of a dialogue between God and Moses about the people with whom God had established His covenant of love:

- Exodus 32:10-14: *“‘Let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.’ Then Moses pleaded with the LORD his God ... ‘Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people.*

Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Your own self, and said to them: I will multiply your descendants' So the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people."

God can be sorry, but His being sorry, and consequently His act of changing His plan, does not mean He is changeable, whimsical. To understand the point we need to realize that the Lord is the God of the Covenant. In the context of His covenant God said He would either bless or curse, depending upon His people's behavior. This is not the equivalent of God changing His mind. The point is that when His people broke the covenant at Mt Sinai God *did what He said He would do* when they would break the covenant, namely, He cursed them. God always works within the confines of the covenant, and remains unchangingly faithful to what He has promised and planned in the covenant, be it promises of blessing or promises of curse. Yet when He curses He has no pleasure in cursing; that is what the Scripture catches with the term 'sorry'.

So who is my God? My God is One who does not change. He is the same God as Abraham had, the same God who preserved Moses and David. Though my circumstances and culture today are so vastly different from the circumstances and culture of Abraham, Moses and David, I am in the hands of the same God who carried them – and this God has not changed.

That means in turn that the characteristics of God as revealed in His dealings with David are equally the characteristics true of my God today. So I can discover what kind of a God I have by studying how God dealt with David. When David fled from his son Absalom (who wanted to dethrone his father), David cried out his anguish to God. "*LORD,*" he cried, "*how they have increased who trouble me! Many are they who rise up against me. Many are they who say of me, 'There is no help for him in God'*" (Psalm 3:1,2). But David three thousand years ago could confess that his God was "*a shield for me, my glory and the One who lifts up my head*" (vs 3). He knew: his God would protect him because His Son would lay down His life for him. God has not changed, and so we too can cry to God in our troubles, and be comforted with the knowledge that He is a shield for us. Even though my circumstances are vastly different than David's, we share one God. David's enemy was ultimately Satan, and over against Satan David could have but one defense. Our enemy, too, is ultimately Satan, and over against that enemy we have but one defense. So we can make David's cry our own, "*How they have increased who trouble me!*" And we can equally make David's comfort our own: "*You, O LORD, are a shield for me, my glory and the One who lifts up my head.*" To think this way is to make Psalm 3 come alive, and to appreciate the comfort the Lord gives in His word.

As we give attention to God's unchangeableness, we ought also to note that the Bible repeatedly speaks of God's truthfulness.

THE TRUTH OF GOD

To say of God that He is "true" means that there is no deceit in Him. God is fully reliable in all He does and in all He says. The following texts from Scripture give evidence of this:

- Psalm 31:5: "*Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O LORD God of truth.*"

In the verses 9-13 of this psalm David expresses that he is in trouble, sought after by his enemies. Yet, in spite of these very real and difficult circumstances, David knows that he is

secure with God because his God is true, reliable, and He is who He says He is. Jesus quoted these words of David on the cross after God had poured out on Him the full measure of His wrath and totally rejected Him. Jesus, like David, could count on His Father and therefore he could say, “*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit*” (Luke 23:46)

- Exodus 34:6: “*And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “**The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.**”*”

While Moses was with God on Mount Sinai, Israel had sinned by making and serving the golden calf. God, though, did not annul the covenant He had made with Israel, but kept that covenant and spared Israel because He is a God of truth – and hence does not change His mind in the face of new circumstances.

- John 17:3,17: “*And this is eternal life, that they may know **You, the only true God Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.***”

Jesus confesses that God is characterized by truth. He is faithful, reliable, void of any deceit.

- Romans 3:4: “*... **Indeed, let God be true, but every man a liar.***”

The truth of God stands in stark contrast to man’s deceit. People lack truthfulness, but this can never be said of God. I may have my own perceptions of what is real and what is true, but I cannot rely on these perceptions, for I am a fallen creature – and hence my powers of reasoning are corrupted. God, though, is God, free of any consequence of the fall into sin. In His Word He has spoken truth. So, where my perceptions, experiences or conclusions differ from what God says in His Word, I must conclude that the error lies with myself.

For example, the science of geology has its method of dating, to establish the age of different rocks and soils of the world. Though the accuracy of such calculations need not be a point of dispute, the conclusions based on these calculations are indeed to be disputed, because they undermine God’s revelation in Genesis 1. God **said** that He created the world, and this God never lies or deceives; He is *true* and therefore His Word is *truth*. Though we might **think** our conclusions (based on the science of geology) are correct, those conclusions must take second place to God’s unerring Word: He said he made the world not that long ago, and so that’s the way it is. Perhaps geologists’ calculations are inaccurate, or perhaps God created a world with evidence of older age built into it (see further Article 12).

Likewise, we may adopt for ourselves solutions to problems or situations in our lives. However, if these solutions do not comply with the course of action God says we are to follow in our lives, then we go wrong. If God says No to opting out of a broken marriage, then we must heed His No – for He has connected His blessing to obedience and His curse to disobedience, and He is not about to change His mind on that connection or become untruthful to Himself. I cannot separate my confession concerning the truth of God from my obedience to His Word.

Again, if God has said that He will give what He has promised, I may pray with great boldness and insistence. I *count* on it that God is true to His Word, and so lay His own promises before Him. That in turn underlines how important it is for God’s children to know their Bible, for from the Bible we learn what God promised to give to His children.

GOD IS INFINITE

The term ‘infinite’ catches the notion that our God has no limits. We already spoke of His limitlessness in relation to time, for God is eternal. We need now to speak of His limitlessness in relation to space – God’s omnipresence.

When Solomon dedicates the temple of Jerusalem to the Lord, he says:

- 1 Kings 8:27: *“But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built.”*
- Jeremiah 23:24: *“‘Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD.”*
- Psalm 139:5-10: *“You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it. Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me.”*

There is no place in all creation where God is not present. Wherever He is He is also in control, for He is almighty. Here is great comfort for the child of God. Though one may feel alone and forgotten, one never is – for the Lord God is present everywhere, and therefore is always with us. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me”* (Psalm 23:4).

The fact that God is present everywhere does not mean that He is present everywhere *in the same way*. His presence in heaven with the angels is different than His presence on earth. Again, His presence with His people is different than His presence with unbelievers; His people experience His grace while the unbelievers do not. Once more, His presence in hell is different than His presence in heaven, for in hell God displays the fullness of His wrath against sin. Hence the terror of hell! On the day of Christ’s return God’s presence on earth will be the same as it is today in heaven, that is, in fullness of glory. This is the promise that makes God’s children look forward to that Day with great eagerness. Meanwhile, we are greatly comforted that *“with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit”* our Savior *“is never absent from us”* (Lord’s Day 18.47).

GOD IS ALMIGHTY

The almighty power of God receives frequent mention in the Bible. The Old Testament, for example, repeats the phrase ‘LORD of hosts’ some 280 times. ‘Hosts’ is here a reference to angels, spirits of the air. The phrase, then, portrays God as the commander of countless thousands of angels. The New Testament also speaks of God’s greatness, but it does so in New Testament language. In Revelation 1:8 the word ‘Almighty’ is used, which is the equivalent for the Old Testament phrase ‘LORD of hosts.’ This is the word DeBrès includes in His list of godly characteristics in the first article of his confession.

As a consequence of being almighty, God can do whatever He intends to do. So He spoke, and a world that did not exist in any way, shape or form, instantly was there (Psalm 33:9). He could challenge Sarah, a woman barren for all the ninety years of her life: *“Is anything*

too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son” (Genesis 18:14). And it was so. Through the almighty power of God a woman past retirement age gave birth to a healthy son! More, through the almighty power of sovereign God a virgin conceived without the involvement of a man (Luke 1:35). Nothing is too hard for this God.

Who is **my** God? The people of Israel in exile protested their circumstances: *“My way is hidden from the LORD, and my just claim is passed over by my God” (Isaiah 40:27).* As if God were powerless to help, or ignorant of Israel’s suffering.... But the Holy Spirit moved Isaiah to set forth in colorful terms who God really is. *“Who,”* says the Holy Spirit through the prophet, *“who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?”* We have all seen the ocean and know its depths. But measure the oceans in the hollow of my hand?! Measure the distance to the moon with the width of my hand?! Calculate earth’s endless dust?! Weigh Mt Cheam, Mt Robson, Mt Everest?! We are so little in the face of such challenges! But the Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, can do it – and does it; He has the whole world in His hands! Truly, what a God! More: how wonderful is **my** God!

Isaiah continues. Our God is so great that to Him, *“the nations are as a drop in a bucket ..., all nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.... He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless” (Isaiah 40:15, 17, 23).* God is not cowed by large nations. They are as insignificant in God’s eyes as a drop remaining in a pail after we washed the car. God regards even the largest nation as less than nothing – including the superpower of Isaiah’s day, Assyria under King Sennacherib. So as far as we are concerned today, who needs to live in fear of a potentially rising superpower as China, or organizations of terror as al-Qaeda? They are as nothing in comparison with our God!

For that matter, how does God view Israel, or the inhabitants of the earth, or even we ourselves? Isaiah reminds Israel that the earth’s inhabitants *“are like grasshoppers” (Isaiah 40:22).* That’s all! The American Marines, Hesbollah’s fighters, Kim Il Jong’s physicists, the millions using the subways of New York: all are like so many grasshoppers before Him – insects we never worry about as we walk through a field. It’s humbling, and teaches us our place. At the same time it tells us so much about our God! He is the Almighty, exalted immeasurably above the little people teeming over earth’s surface. Shall Israel complain against such a God that He has forgotten them?? “Get real!” says Isaiah to Israel. More, shall **we** complain that this God fails us?! Who is your God?!

Though almighty, this God does not use His power in a rash, abusive way. This God is my **Father**. Each Sunday we confess the faith from which we draw strength for our lives, as summarized in the Apostles’ Creed. Then we also confess, *“I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.”* Lord’s Day 9 elaborates on what it means to confess this. First of all, it means that I believe *“that the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... is, for the sake of Christ His Son, my God and my Father.”* Secondly, it means that I confess that *“in Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul, and will also turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow. He is able to do so as almighty God, and willing also as a faithful Father.”*

How come certain things happen in my life? Is that due to chance? Or perhaps because Satan is getting the better of me? It cannot be! My Father in Jesus Christ is **almighty**. Not a hair falls from my head unless almighty God permits it (Lord's Day 1). Therefore Satan cannot touch me unless God allows it. *Almighty God* is behind whatever happens to me – and that is so comforting because this God is my faithful Father – the One who gave His only Son for me (see Article 17 and 18). So, I'm confident: all He gives He turns to good.

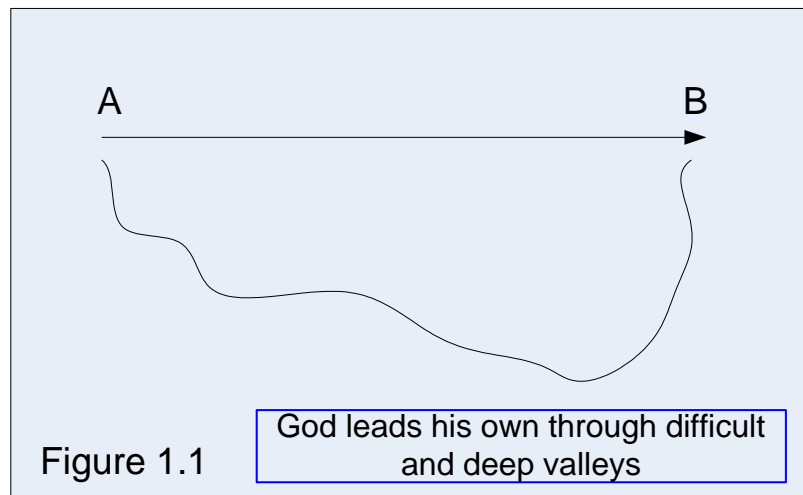
What a God this is! Would that we would daily have big thoughts of this God, always reckon with His limitless power! What peace would fill our hearts, what contentment in our circumstances! *"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, Neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable"* (Isaiah 40:28).

GOD IS WISE

On the basis of what he read in the Bible, DeBrès believed and taught that his God was also perfectly wise. Romans 16:27: *"to God, **alone wise**, be glory through Jesus Christ forever."* With reference to His work of creation, the psalmist says, *"O LORD, how manifold are Your works! **In wisdom** You have made them all"* (Psalm 104:24).

In the Bible, God's wisdom means that God knows the goal and how to attain it. God knows where I am now and He knows what is the right goal for me to His glory. He also knows the right way to get me to the goal He has in mind for me. If I were today to know the goal God has in mind for me (for example, a godly widow who means much in the community) and the way God intends to bring me to that goal (for example, having to nurse a cancer-ridden husband for some years), I might today protest loudly that such a program for my life is bad. But confessing today that God is wise implies that I leave the goal and the way to the goal in God's capable hands, and trust that His way with me is good.

God's word in Hebrews 12 helps us get a handle on His wisdom in relation to our lives. The chapter tells us of our Hebrew brothers and sisters struggling and suffering in the grind of this life (though the details of their sufferings are not known to us). They had their own ideas (we may surmise) as to how they were to get to their goal, and (not surprisingly) will have preferred a straight path from



A to B (see Figure 1.1). But God's plan was different. In His wisdom, He determined that the Hebrews were to travel through some very difficult valleys, so that they might in turn grow in God. The Hebrew Christians complained about the way God was leading them, and the task of the author of the letter to the Hebrews was now to encourage them. How then were they encouraged?

The inspired author urged the Hebrews (vss 5,6) to remember the exhortation with which

Solomon, as father, exhorted his children in Proverbs 3:11,12: “*My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.*” The author of the letter to the Hebrews then explains this exhortation in the verses 7 to 11. God deals with them as a Father, he writes. As a father is motivated by love for his children when he disciplines them, so God in love disciplines, moulds, and directs His children on the paths of life He has marked out for them. Verse 10: God chastens us “*for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.*” It is true that “*No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful.*” Just as God was busy in the lives of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Daniel and so many others of His children in Scripture, so He is busy in my life, in **His** own way. In His wisdom God led them down a different track than the one they preferred, and God remains equally wise today in leading us down different tracks than we prefer.

So what am I to do? Christian wisdom is to **accept** that God’s way with us is wise. Wisdom on the part of the Christian is not that we understand the mind of God but, rather, that we acquiesce to His leading, irrespective of circumstance, and entrust ourselves to His wisdom. The *wise* Christian confesses that God Almighty never makes a mistake.

Precisely such a confession is so difficult to make in the pains of real life. In His wisdom our God may lead us along paths of abuse and molestation, or along paths of accident or sickness – with as result that we grow up physically or emotionally broken. Then it can indeed be a daily struggle to be at peace with the confession of God’s wisdom, and to be content in the midst of brokenness and pain. The temptation is so great to give in to feelings of bitterness or anger against God on account of the way He led my life. But God’s identity as a *wise* God points us to the better way. Acquiescing to the greater wisdom of our Father in Christ gives peace in the midst of adversity, and grace to be content in life’s brokenness. So DeBrès, on the eve of his martyrdom, could write as he did to his wife.

GOD IS JUST

DeBrès acknowledged too that the Lord God is just (or righteous). God has revealed this characteristic in passages of Scripture as:

- Psalm 11:7: “*For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; His countenance beholds the upright.*”
- Psalm 33:5: “*He loves righteousness and justice.*”

Traditionally, the justice (or righteousness) of God has been understood in the line of Greek philosophy (and hence Roman –and even Western– law): giving to each what each deserves. Yet that cannot catch the Biblical doctrine of God-as-just, for the Lord does not give to each what (we think) each deserves. How could the criminal on the cross, after years of unbelief and violence, be assured that he would “*today*” be with Christ in His kingdom?! (Luke 23:43). How could a murderer and adulterer as David be rehabilitated? How can Paul say that in the gospel “*the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’?*” (Romans 1:17).

We need to be careful that we do not read the Bible’s description of God as a God of justice in human terms or expectations. In the Bible one is *just* if one treats another according to the requirements of a given relationship. In terms of God’s justice to man, His justice is determined by the requirements of the covenant. In that covenant the Lord emphatically said

that disobedience would result in death (Genesis 2:17). Adam's sin resulted in precisely that; he was estranged from God (spiritually dead) and after he lived 930 years he died physically also. God kept His word, and acted in justice, according to the requirements of His relation with Adam. Similarly, when God established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, the Lord included in His covenant the promise of blessing on obedience and curses on disobedience (Leviticus 26). In the years that followed, the Lord dealt with Israel according to the stipulations of that covenant; He gave His blessing on Israel's obedience, and His curses on their disobedience.

Yet we also need to be aware that when the Lord gave His blessing on Israel's obedience God in fact was not dealing with His people according to what they deserved – for their obedience was so mediocre, so far short of His holy standard; much sin remained. Day by day and year by year Israel deserved God's wrath and hence destruction, but God spared them their just sentence because He intended to pour that wrath and destruction on Another instead. That too was according to the stipulations of God's covenant with Israel. That is God's justice *and* His mercy: Jesus Christ received the penalty sinners deserve, and the sinners go free. Calvary displays the justice of God better than any other event in world history, for on the cross The Sinner was cursed with hellish torment. So Calvary points up for us, too, something of God's **hatred** for sin and His **wrath** against evildoers. At the same time Calvary points up the grace and mercy of God for us, for we do not receive the judgment we deserve. Again, what a God this is!

That in turn is why Christian justice is not *tit-for-tat*. The state has to punish evildoers, as the apostle said in Romans 13. But God's people, in their relation to each other and to unbelievers, are not to insist on "*an eye for an eye*" or "*a tooth for a tooth*" (Matthew 5:39). The God of justice did not deal with us that way (else we would long ago have perished in hell) but showed us mercy instead for Jesus' sake. God's children, too, may show mercy to the undeserving, and leave the justice of things to God. God will 'set things straight', perhaps in this life (for example, through the courts of the land) or in the life to come (in the fires of hell) – or perhaps He has already through the blood of the Son who died not only for me.

GOD IS GOOD

The final characteristic DeBrès mentions concerning God is His goodness. Of no one but God can it be said that he is good. Said Jesus to the Pharisee who addressed Him as "Good Teacher", "*Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is God*" (Mark 10:18).

All His works are good also. David says in Psalm 119, "*You **are** good, and **do** good*" (verse 68). This confession of David was not just a general statement about God, but a firm conviction on David's part, confessed in his particular circumstances. In the verses 65-67 David writes, "*You have dealt well with Your servant, O LORD, according to Your word. Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe Your commandments. **Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word.***" Then follows David's confession: "*You are good, and do good.*" David doesn't dwell on the nature of the affliction, doesn't make an issue either of how difficult he experienced this affliction to be, but instead focuses on the nature of His God and so confesses God's goodness. God's way with David, he acknowledges, is above criticism, and is in fact *good*.

Nahum describes some far-reaching works of God. He says, "*He rebukes the sea and makes it dry, and dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither, and the flower of Lebanon*

wilts. *The mountains quake before Him, the hills melt, and the earth heaves at His presence, yes, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by Him*" (1:4-6). Such divine deeds make men tremble! But listen to the prophet's next words: "*The LORD is good*"! (Nahum 1:7). People are not asked to give their *opinion* about God as He revealed Himself through His works in nature, but they are *told* God's revelation about Himself: He is good even when He sends earthquakes and tsunamis and volcanoes. My sinfulness may make me balk at such a revelation of who God is, but the humility of faith embraces and confesses it. All He does is good, and beyond criticism.

To whom does God do good? In Psalm 145:9 David writes, "*The LORD is good to all.*" All God's works are good for all people. God does not reserve His goodness for only a few good people or for a few righteous people. Jesus says the same in Matthew 5:44,45 where we read, "*But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*" The Spirit relates God's work of giving sunshine and rain to the godly and the ungodly, and tells us to act like God, be sons of the Father, and that means: "*do good*" to all as He does good to all. "*For He is kind to the unthankful and evil*" (Luke 6:35).

What are the consequences of believing that God is good? In the first place, I am to confess that whatever God does in my life, be it in things big or things small, *is* good. NOTE: this is not a comment on what I see, for I see so many negative things in my life. Rather, this is a confession of faith: I **believe** that God's deeds in my life are good. Similarly, I also confess the goodness of God in relation to what God does in the world around me – including the horrors known as 9/11 or the hurricane that devastated New Orleans (August 2005). By all human standards these things are evil and terrible, and in so far as there is human guilt involved, wrongdoers are to be brought to justice. But God would have us say more than that. He would have us say too that His almighty hand was behind it, and He is good in all He does.

Secondly, if God does good and if I am allowed to be a child of God, **I am to do good**. I am to imitate my God, not just in doing good to some, but in doing good to **all**, even to the unthankful and the evil. See the above quote from Matthew 5:44,45. I should remember too that I was a sinner, evil to God, when God sought me out (Romans 5:8).

Thirdly, because God does good, I am to praise God without ceasing. In the words of Scripture: "*Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands..., For the LORD is good*" (Ps 100:1,5) and "*Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!*" (Ps 136:1) This refrain is found repeatedly throughout Scripture; see also Psalm 107.

God's goodness demands a response of faith, service and praise on my part. However, if I fail to appreciate God's goodness I can only expect a response of judgment from Him. In Romans 11 Israel is compared to a tree. Because of their unbelief, the Lord God cut many Israelites (dead branches as they were) off the tree of Abraham. The Holy Spirit explains God's action as His severity. On the other hand, the same God grafted Gentiles into the tree, and the Holy Spirit describes this as God's goodness (vs 22). God's goodness and His severity go hand in hand. Let no one, then, take His goodness for granted. "*Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you,*

goodness, if you continue in His goodness” (Romans 11:22). If the Romans do not appreciate the goodness of God, they will experience the severity of God, and be cut off from the tree into which God had earlier grafted them. Rejection of goodness leads to experiencing God’s severity. This is a principle that applies to any situation in life. God causes His rain to fall on both the just and the unjust. The fact that God does good to all does not mean that all will acknowledge God as good, and not to do so is to bring judgment upon oneself. It is a matter of faith: do I believe that what God does is good? If I don’t believe this, the consequences are serious.

CONCLUSION

In His Word the Lord has revealed much more about Himself. The characteristics listed in Article 1 are not (meant to be) exhaustive. One can speak about His wrath, His vengeance, His mercy, and so many more characteristics. One can also spend a lifetime trying to understand more about who our God is. In this life, however, we shall never arrive at a full understanding of who He is. He remains **God**, so far above what our creaturely and sinful minds can comprehend.

Exactly because He remains **God**, awesome and wonderful in all His characteristics, it is right and proper that we *“have no other gods before”* Him (Exodus 20:3). That is to say: the urgency is upon me *“that I rightly come to know the only true God, trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience, expect all good from Him only, and love, fear and honor Him with all my heart”* (Lord’s Day 34.94). The better we know Him, and the more we realize how much **God** He is, the more we –through the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit– entrust ourselves to His care. With such a God we’re safe, absolutely safe both now and forever.

Points for Discussion:

1. Discuss what the author is trying to catch with the phrase 'the Godness of God'. What is your (emotional) reaction to the fact that God established a bond of love with you?
2. According to society around us, what kind of God (if indeed there is a god) is God? Why? What consequence follows from the thought that God is weak?

The following questions consider the characteristics of God. As you discuss these characteristics, strive to make discussion personal. You are not speaking of a God who is ‘out there’, but of *your* God. Awareness of that fact should add emotion and passion to the discussion.

One

1. What does it mean that God is one?
2. What consequence flows from the fact that God is one?

Simple

1. What does it mean that God is simple?
2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is simple?

Spiritual

1. What does it mean that God is spiritual?
2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is spirit?

Eternal

1. What does it mean that God is eternal?

2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is eternal?

Incomprehensible

1. What does it mean that God is incomprehensible?
2. Does this mean that we ultimately cannot know God? Why or why not?
3. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is incomprehensible?

Invisible

1. Why can no one see God and live?
2. How has the Lord God made Himself visible?
3. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is invisible?

Unchanging

1. What does it mean that God is unchanging?
2. What does Scripture mean when we read that God was sorry for what He had done?
3. What comfort is there for you in the fact that He is unchanging?
4. What can I learn from the attitude of a Daniel in the lions' den, or a David when Absalom chased him?

Truth

1. What does it mean that God is truth?
2. In the face of life's questions, what instruction is there for you in the fact that He is truth? Are we actually able to know truth?
3. How does the doctrine of God's truth affect our praying?

Infinite

1. What does it mean that God is infinite?
2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is infinite?

Almighty

1. What does it mean that God is almighty?
2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that He is almighty?
3. What can you learn from Isaiah 40?

Wisdom

1. What does it mean that God is wise?
2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that He is wise?
3. On the topic of God's wisdom, what can one learn from an Abraham or a Jacob, or Hebrews 12?
4. What is Christian wisdom?

Just

1. What does it mean that God is just?
2. Show how Calvary demonstrates both God's justice and mercy.
3. What comfort is there for you in the fact that God is just?
4. Discuss the correct Christian attitude to justice for wrong doers in our society.

Goodness

1. What does it mean that God is good?
2. What comfort is there for you in the fact that He is good?
3. How is a Christian to reflect God's goodness today? Who should be recipients of the Christian's acts of kindness?

Finally:

DeBrès mentioned several characteristics of God in Article 1. List and describe characteristics mentioned in Scripture which DeBrès omits. Be ready for some surprises!

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 8.25; 34.94, 95; 46.121

ARTICLE 2: HOW GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN TO US

ARTICLE 2

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

HUMILITY

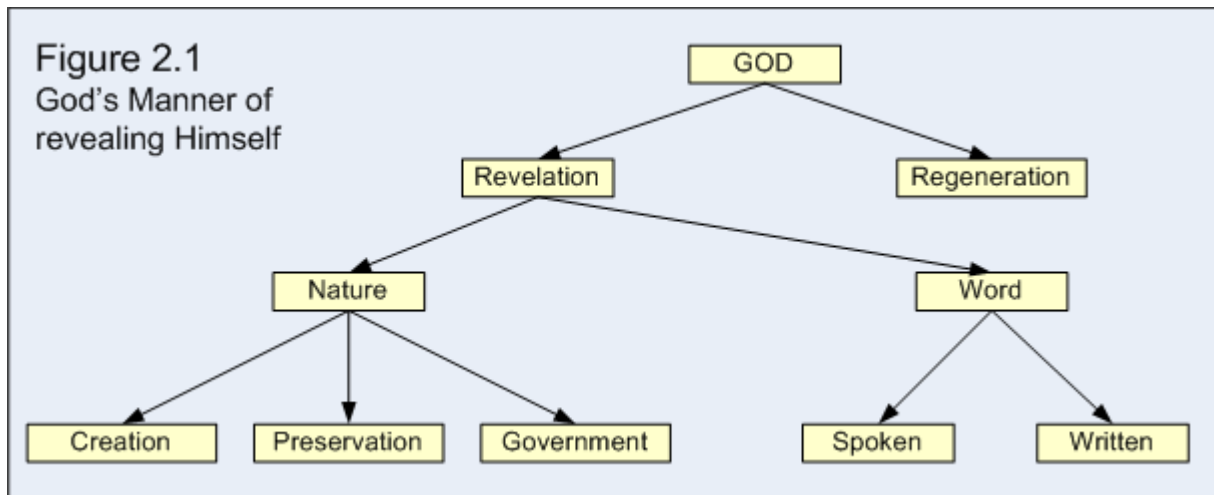
DeBrès confessed in Article 1 that there is only one God who is eternal, almighty, etc. That confession begs the question: how did DeBrès know this? Did he arrive at his convictions about God through a process of thought, or through examining his emotions, life experiences, or perhaps even nature? There are many who argue today that the answer is: Yes. In fact, if one insists that no God actually exists (as all consistent evolutionists must do), one must come with a *natural* explanation for why religion exists in this world. A natural explanation by definition must begin with man (for there is no God from where it could begin). Man may have certain fears of a fierce lightning storm, and then conclude that there must be a deity who displays his power and/or anger and/or justice. From further observations or experiences or thoughts man can construct what this god is like. So the History of Religions school insists that all religions are in the end nothing more than the thoughts and feelings of different peoples (in different cultures and times) about the divine. The pages of the Bible, then, record what many persons in the course of Judaic and/or Christian history thought or experienced about their god – just as the Koran would capture what Mohammed thought or experience about his god.

When DeBrès in Article 1, though, confessed that there was a God, and confessed too what this God was like, DeBrès did not anchor his confession in his own experiences or thoughts, nor in those of the learned who had gone before him. Instead, he anchored his confession in the living God Himself. For the living God, DeBrès knew, was pleased to *tell people on earth about Himself*. Human knowledge of God begins with the-God-who-is; this living God *reveals Himself*.

It cannot be otherwise. Shall the creature man, finite and mortal as he is, sinful and perverted as he is also, discover the Inhabitant of heaven (or even discover *whether* there is an Inhabitant) and then describe what He is like? Shall the creature man, finite and mortal as he is, and sinful and perverted also, first declare that heaven is empty and then explain all religions as being simply man's thoughts and hopes and experiences about a heavenly being that, at the end of the day, simply does not exist? Let there be humility. Let man *listen*, and be open to whatever the God of heaven is pleased to reveal about Himself. This is the attitude of DeBrès as he speaks about God's revelation in Article 2 and subsequent articles.

He says in sum: in order for man to know of God, God must take the initiative and reveal Himself to man. More, God must also open the eyes of man to see or hear God's revelation – since man is dead in sin, and dead men neither see nor hear what is revealed to them. God through the Holy Spirit, then, must regenerate man. Further, God reveals Himself by two

means: 1) by nature, which includes its creation, preservation, and government, and 2) by His Word, be it spoken or written. See Figure 2.1.



GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN THROUGH NATURE

DeBrès was quick to acknowledge that “*we know Him ... first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe.*” We observe three aspects of how God reveals Himself in nature around us.

1. Creation

There was no world. God spoke and the world was there (Psalm 33:6,9). The process through which God created this world through His Word is described in Genesis 1. There were no human witnesses present to observe God making the world, but there was a gallery of witnesses in heaven. And they, God tells Job, burst into songs of praise when they saw in God’s creating work something of His wisdom and His majesty and His glory (Job 38:6,7). We today see the effects of what God has made in the trees and flowers, the insects and animals, the galaxies and the ecosystems of the world in which we live. They all speak of the glory of God, and so reveal for our admiration something of what the Creator is like.

2. Preservation

After God called the world into existence He caused it to continue to exist. This is His preservation. If God would withdraw His hand from the things He once made, they would collapse back into the nothingness they were before Genesis 1. The fact that the chair upon which I sit can hold me up is God’s work; it is He who keeps the steel (or timber) legs stiff. Equally, that flowers live and bloom, that birds fly and sing, is the ongoing work of God. David once stood outside and looked up at the stars of heaven (or perhaps the sun and clouds), and marveled at what he saw; this, he realized, displayed who God was. Said David: “*The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork*” (Psalm 19:1).

Read what God tells us of Himself in Isaiah 40:12. The waters of the earth He measured in the hollow of His hand, including the countless waves and incredible depths of Lake Superior and the Pacific Ocean. He measured the infinite distances of outer space with the breadth of His hand, including the distance to the Milky Way and the distance between each star in that endless cluster. He held the dust of the earth in a basket, including the dust on your skirting boards today and the dust blown up in the Sahara yesterday. He weighed the mountains in

scales and the hills in balances, including the mighty peaks of the Rockies. It was He who determined how much water there had to be on the face of the earth and how high the mountains had to be so that life might be possible on the face of this Planet. He determined the exact distances between stars and planets so that people and animals and plants might be able to live on planet Earth. “*Who,*” says Isaiah, “*has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed Him as His counsellor?*” (vs 13). In truth, by the way He created the world and upholds it day by day, God tells us something of Himself, and we can see it even today. His handiwork speaks, and continues to speak, of His glory. He spoke and it was all there, and what He made *worked* and continues to work! What a God this is!

3. Government

He also governs the world He once made so that nothing happens apart from Him. God allows reproduction among living organisms so that an aging generation of koalas is replaced by a new generation. He is in full control of the tectonic plates upon which He built the continents – so that *His* hand moved the plates that triggered the powerful tsunami in the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004. It is equally His hand that stirred up hurricane Katrina and moved its trajectory in such a way that it hit New Orleans as it did (August 2005). This God remains *at work*, directing all events on Planet Earth and the galaxies of the universe in incomprehensible wisdom. All that happens reveals *more* of who the Lord God actually is.

READ THE BOOK OF NATURE

Who, though, is able to read this book of nature? Granted, all people *should* be able to read this book and, from what they see and hear and smell and taste and feel, distil what God is like. This is Paul’s point in Romans 1:20: “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.*” In point of fact, though, countless people do not realize the significance of what they see and feel and hear and smell. Our fall into sin has left us blind and deaf to God’s revelation in creation. Yet, since sin is always our own fault (God holds us to the standards in which He created us in the beginning), our inability to read the book of Nature is no excuse before God. As Paul continues: “*they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened*” (Romans 1:20,21). To be able to understand what nature is really about, man needs to be regenerated, man needs faith. In Calvin’s analogy, man must put on the glasses of Scripture to be able to read the book of nature (*Institutes*, I.6.1).

That is why DeBrès in Article 2 speaks of **we**: “*We know Him by two means*”. By using the word ‘we’, DeBrès did not mean to say that all people know God by the two means mentioned in Art 2. Rather, DeBrès refers specifically to believers. I am privileged to be able to benefit from the book of nature, for God has opened my eyes and so enabled me to read it. That is to say, because of His regenerating work I am made able to appreciate the things He created, including the smells and textures of the flowers, the speed and agility of the mouse, the mosquito with wings that carry it though they’re so very thin, the way the birds find their food. By God’s grace I, in distinction from many other people still in their unbelief, am made able to see something of my Father’s greatness and glory. What a privilege it is to be made able to read the book of nature!

Since our God reveals Himself to us “*first*” in creation, we do well, in the midst of the concerns of daily life, to pause and look at nature’s display of God’s glory. In Matthew 6:26 we read of God feeding the birds: “*Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap*

nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" By observing attentively the works of God in preserving and governing the creatures of our gardens, we get to know our God better – and so become the more convinced of His care for us, His children in Christ Jesus.

GOD MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN BY HIS WORD

In nature God reveals much concerning Himself. Yet, God wants us to know Him even better. His Word speaks of His mercy, His love, His grace which He displayed through Jesus Christ and the salvation obtained through Him. This is a topic about which the book of Nature does not speak. In His great mercy, God *"makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation."* DeBrès confesses the details of this means of God's further self-disclosure in Article 3.

NOT A THIRD WAY

It is striking that DeBrès mentions two ways by which God makes Himself known, and not three. Over the centuries of church history, appeal has repeatedly be made to one's personal experience as a means of coming to know about God. One needs to bear in mind, though, that one's emotions, feelings, thoughts and conscience are warped as a result of the fall into sin. For that reason alone one can never appeal to personal experiences as a source of knowledge or accurate information about God.

This point is worth emphasizing, since all religions in the world today (except the Christian faith) come out of the mind or experiences of man. Other religions certainly do not come from God, for God does not contradict Himself. They do not come from other gods, for other gods do not ultimately exist. Satan would have people believe things about God which God has not revealed, or believe things about gods that are not real, and he does this by having people build their perceptions about God or the gods on their own thoughts or emotions or desires. Micaiah's word to king supplies an example: *"Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?' So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, 'I will persuade him.' The LORD said to him, 'In what way?' So he said, 'I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And the LORD said, 'You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.' Therefore look! The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the LORD has declared disaster against you"* (1 Kings 22:19-24).

Today's pluralism may insist that every religion represents a valid way to serve God. This insistence assumes that God has revealed multiple truths about Himself, be it through nature, through the Bible, through a revelation to Mohammed, through the intellect of philosophers, etc. The church's confession in Article 2 leaves no room for that sentiment.

Points for Discussion:

1. When we seek to learn about God, what attitude is necessary?
2. What can you learn about God from a walk in nature? Does this make a periodic walk in nature advisable?

3. What can you learn about God from reading the newspaper? Does this make following the news discouraging or advisable?
4. Who can know God in the two ways expressed in Article 2? How come others cannot know God even from creation?
5. Given the confession of Lord's Day 2, should a Christian go out of his way to preserve the environment? Why?
6. What role does experience play in knowing God? Why? How important, then, are your feelings and experiences?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.19; 9.26; 47.122

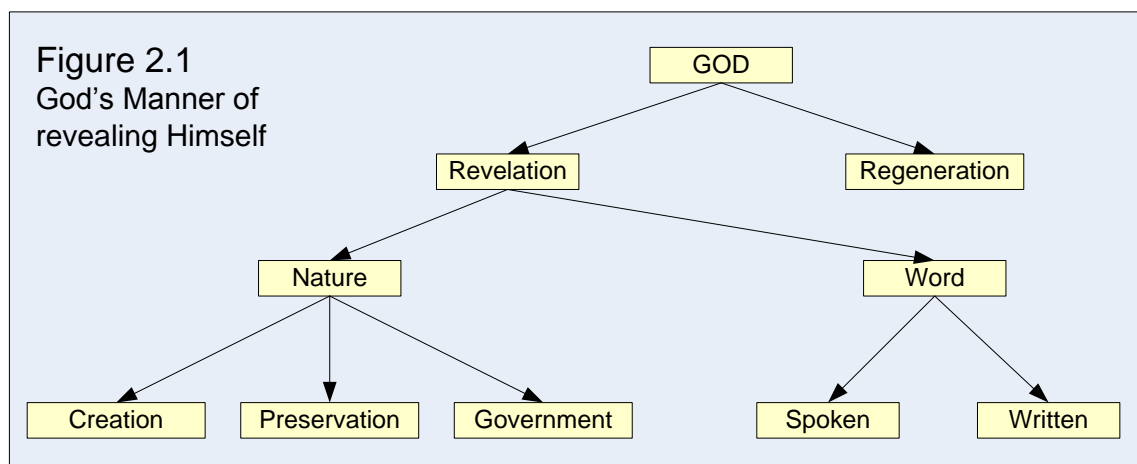
ARTICLE 3: THE WORD OF GOD

ARTICLE 3

We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God, as the apostle Peter says (2 Peter 1:21). Thereafter, in His special care for us and our salvation, God 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.

NATURE'S REVELATION INCOMPLETE

The church confessed in Article 2 that the Lord God reveals things about Himself through nature. This revelation, though, cannot reveal all there is to know about the Lord. Mountains and thunderstorms speak of His majesty and power, and flowers and birds speak of His care and wisdom. But the world of nature cannot reveal the hatred of God against sin, and cannot tell us either how He in justice and in love sent His only Son into the world to redeem sinners. Yet it is God's thoughts about sin and redemption that show us more clearly just Who this God actually is – holy, righteous, gracious, compassionate. That is why the church treasures the Word of God. In Article 3 the church repeats after God what we have heard God say in Scripture about His revelation through the Word (see Figure 2.1).



MARVEL

It is fitting that we reflect first on the marvel of God actually speaking to man. This God: from His Word we learn that He is so high and exalted, so infinitely glorious and holy, that in His presence the holy angels cover their faces. Yet, this wonderful God was pleased to speak to creatures on earth! More, this wonderful God was pleased to speak to fallen, sinful creatures! He even caused the words He spoke to one generation to be recorded for the benefit of future generations. How telling this is of God's glorious identity as God! Truly, there is none like Him!

GOD'S SPOKEN WORD

The Holy Scripture we have today did not magically appear on earth, but was formed through a process. From beginning to end this process is the work of God. It began with God *speaking*. We can mention three means by which God spoke His word: 1) Theophany, 2) Prophecy and 3) Miracles.

Theophany

The term ‘theophany’ means literally ‘an appearance of God.’ When Jacob fled from his brother Esau, the Lord God appeared to him in a dream at the top of a ladder to encourage him (Genesis 28:12,13). To mandate Moses to speak to Pharaoh, the Lord came to him in a burning bush that did not burn up (Exodus 3:2). After Israel was delivered from Egypt, the Lord God appeared to them at Mt Sinai in cloud and smoke and thunder (Exodus 19:18-20). In each of these occasions, the holy and sovereign Creator of heaven and earth condescended to come to the creature man and interact with him. What Jacob and Moses and the people of Israel were permitted to see constituted revelation from God about Himself.

Prophecy

God does not always come Himself to speak to man. The term ‘prophecy’ refers to God taking hold of particular persons and causing them to say certain things on His behalf. As Amos says, *“Surely the LORD God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets. A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken! Who can but prophesy?”* (Amos 3:7,8). Just as the obvious and inevitable reaction to a lion’s roar is fright, so prophecy is the predictable and inevitable reaction to God moving one to speak. Jeremiah decided he would no longer speak the word of the Lord because of all the derision he daily suffered from the people. *“But,”* he says, *“His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, And I could not”* (Jeremiah 20:9). The apostle Peter tells us that *“prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”* (2 Peter 1:21). On another occasion Peter tells the Jews that *“God has spoken by the mouths of all His holy prophets since the world began”* (Acts 3:21). We have many questions about the mechanism God used to cause people to speak His Word, and there is much here we cannot understand. The fact remains, however, that the Lord takes hold of people and compels them to speak words of His choosing. Those words spoken by the lips of man come, in fact, from heaven, and so constitute revelation from God. As the prophets repeatedly said, *“Thus says the LORD.”*

Miracles

The Lord God also used miracles to show people something about Himself. When He opened up the Red Sea for the people of Israel, He taught them that He was a God worthy to be followed and trusted. When He rained manna on the ground for His people morning by morning, He taught them that He supplies daily bread. Sometimes miracles confirmed the validity of the spoken word (John 5:36; Acts 14:3), but always faith was needed to understand the message of the miracle. There are three clusters of miracles in the history of redemption, all at decisive turning points: 1) the period of Moses, when Israel as a nation is born and must learn to trust God, 2) the period of Elijah and Elisha, when God’s people first gave themselves officially and openly to idolatry, and 3) the period of Christ’s earthly sojourn, when the Lord worked salvation for sinners. In the context of Israel’s actual circumstances, the Lord revealed through miracles something about Himself.

GOD’S WRITTEN WORD

Wonderful as it is that God spoke and acted amongst men, it is even more wonderful that He caused what He spoke (or did) to be written down. The Lord did not have to cause His spoken Word to be recorded. His act of causing the spoken Word to be written down, however, reveals again something of His care (and hence His love) for His people. For:

- What is written down is more *durable*. It lasts over the span of many years, despite the death of the writer.

- A written document is also *reliable* in that it does not change with the passing of the years, unlike the message that is passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. Think of the Chinese whisper. If the word God spoke so long ago had not been written down, we would have but little guarantee that the message we today have is the very same message which God spoke to Moses, to the prophets, to Paul, etc.
- What is written down can be correctly spread more easily to more people than a spoken word.

Long ago, God already loved us who live today, and so caused His Word to be written down. Paul tells the Corinthians: “*Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition*” (1 Corinthians 10:11). The words ‘all these things’ refer to the matter Paul wrote about in previous verses – about Israel’s exodus from Egypt through the Red Sea (Exodus 14), Israel being fed with manna and supplied with water in the wilderness (Exodus 16 & 17), Israel’s disobedience in the desert and God’s righteous penalty (Numbers 14). When Moses wrote the books of Exodus and Numbers, he certainly was not aware that one day there would be a congregation of believers in far off Corinth. Yet Paul writes to the Corinthians that Moses recorded these specific events *for the benefit of the Corinthians* so many years later. How deeply that speaks of God’s care for the Christians of Corinth! This is the thought that deBres and his fellow believers in Doornik confessed in Article 3, when they spoke of God’s “*special care for us and our salvation.*” By ‘us’ deBres meant himself and the rest of the believers in the little town of Doornik in the midst of their persecution. From passages as 1 Corinthians 10 deBres learned that God had *him and his congregation* in mind when He caused Moses to write the book of Exodus, and so deBres repeated after God the glorious truth he learned from Scripture. What comfort that God thought of them so long ago already!

The same truth is valid for us today. God had *us* in mind when He caused Moses, Jeremiah, Amos and Paul (to mention only these) to put pen to paper so many centuries ago! He wanted us, people of the 21st century, to know what He was like, to know what He did for us in Jesus Christ, and so to serve Him in gratitude. What love, what mercy, what special care!! With what eagerness, then, shall I pick up the Bible and meditate on its gospel in the midst of life’s questions and struggles! If my God was preparing hundreds of years ago already for my needs today, I can do little else!

The apostle and the psalmist develop this theme further. Paul tells Timothy that “*all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16,17). ‘The man of God’ spoken of here is not just Timothy as preacher, but refers to the believer – and so includes even you and me today. The God Who by His grace allowed us to be His wants us to be thoroughly equipped for every good work in any circumstance life may present, and so has caused His spoken Word to be written (be a “Scripture”) for our benefit today. David understood the wealth of that, and so exults, “*The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb*” (Psalm 19:9,10) and “*Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day*” (Psalm 119:97). Being eager to pick up the Bible and reflect on its message is not a new sentiment!

What, then, is the Bible? It is *Father’s letter to His child*, a letter that expresses His love, His mercy. Given what the Bible is, I do not leave it unopened on the shelf, but I treasure it, I read it. I find the thought stimulating: God has given me the Bible so that He may speak to

me in my circumstances!

THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE

Scripture teaches that the Word of God is inspired (see above quoted text from 2 Timothy 3:16,17). Peter refers to the same notion of inspiration when he writes that “*prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Peter 1:21). The ‘speaking’ part as well as the ‘writing’ part come from God Himself, are ‘inspired’. The Greek word translated for us as ‘inspiration’ means literally “God-breathed.” The point of the term is that God sovereignly worked upon human authors so that they wrote what He wanted them to write. DeBres catches this teaching of Scripture in Article 3: “*We confess that this Word of God did not come by the impulse of man, but that men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*” So all Scripture has the stamp of God upon it.

In an attempt to explain how this inspiration actually worked, a number of theories have been formulated over the centuries:

The Mechanical Theory of Inspiration

This theory, promoted especially in the days following the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century, claimed that human authors were merely ‘machines,’ ‘typewriters’ moved by God to put to paper what He desired to have on paper. In this view, people were thoughtless agents so that the Bible is void of any active human thought or feelings.

The problem with this theory is that human feelings are in fact quite evident in the Bible. The Psalms of David, for example, clearly speak of his struggles, emotions and problems. Luke also testifies that he made a conscious effort of doing the research needed to know what to write in his gospel (Luke 1:1-4; see below).

The Dualistic Theory of Inspiration

This theory was a reaction to the Mechanical Theory, and was embraced by rationalists, for example, the Remonstrants, at the time of the Synod of Dort. This theory claims that the Holy Spirit is the actual author of those parts of Scripture dealing with salvation itself. Those pages of Scripture dealing with history, geography, human emotions, culture, etc, are then said to be simply human writings. As a result, the Bible actually consists of two parts: writings from God and writings from people.

Who, though, is to determine which writings in the Bible are of the Spirit and which writings are of human origin? If people are to make this judgment, we will invariably write off as mere human work those portions of Scripture requiring, say, more self-denial than one is willing to practice. One may think of the Bible’s teaching that the woman is to submit to her husband, or the Bible’s insistence that homosexuality is evil. We will retain as divine only those portions of Scripture *we* appreciate, and deem to be fitting words from God.

The Dynamic Theory of Inspiration

This theory claims that the Bible was written by human authors who lived very close to God, who knew God very well and consequently wrote down their thoughts of God. People as David, Jeremiah and Habakkuk loved God, but struggled much in their daily lives with questions about God’s nearness, how God works in history, how evil can happen to good people, etc, and recorded their conclusions and struggles in the Bible. We for our part can benefit from their thoughts and insights as we battle with similar struggles.

The problem with this theory is that the Bible is then essentially a collection of books written by man, a collection of human thoughts about God. There is then really no essential difference between the poetry of David and that of, for example, Helen Steiner Rice.

The Actualistic Theory of Inspiration

According to this theory the Bible *is* not the Word of God, but *can become* the Word of God when one reads it and is taken in by what one reads. Only when the written word does something to the reader, touches him, is one able to say of that portion that it is the Word of God.

The problem with this theory is that the work of the Holy Spirit is moved from the time the author *wrote* the Bible book to the time the reader *reads* that Bible book. The various books of the Bible are then simply human products, essentially no different from any other human book, and they become the Word of God today when the Holy Spirit touches the reader through his reading the Bible. One can then never lay one's hand on the Bible and say, "This *is* the Word of God."

The Organic Theory of Inspiration

This theory maintains that the living God used human authors, each with their own particular talents, struggles, feelings and circumstances, to write down His Word. The Lord sovereignly directed the circumstances of the human author in such a way that birth, education, gifts, research, memories, experiences, etc, were such that in and through and with the author writing his thoughts and recollections onto paper God's thoughts were put onto paper. The result is that peoples of any race or age are able to understand God's words. One cannot, then, separate God's Word and man's word in the Bible.

This theory is distinctly the most Scriptural of the above theories. As the almighty Creator of the world saw to it that His Word appear in printed text, He sovereignly moved people to write what He wished them to write. At the same time the human authors of Scripture put into their writing the results of their own research, expressed their own thoughts and feelings, reflected the culture of their times. The Holy Spirit formed every word appearing on the pages of the Bible, and at the same time each word and phrase bears the stamp of the very real human writer living with his feet on the ground in a specific context. So the Scripture is divine, and it is human at the same time. One cannot comprehend how these two can co-exist and co-operate to form one faultless product – no more than one can comprehend how Jesus Christ can be true God and true man at the same time. Yet given that none less than the Creator of the world is the Author of Scripture, it is satisfactory to creatures not to have to understand.

Luke 1:1-4 shows us something of the factors involved in the writing of the Bible. What should be noted here is what Luke says to Theophilus: "*Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.*" Luke, then, did his research before he set pen to paper. For example, he went to Zechariah and Elizabeth to hear from them first hand what exactly took place in the temple; he investigated what happened in the fields of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth; he interviewed Mary to discern her thoughts and actions. Once his research was complete, he recorded what he learned. Understandably, he

gave special attention to items that caught his special attention. Luke was a doctor, and so it is not surprising to find in his gospel various details of the ailments from which people were healed, details we don't find in parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark. Here we have an example of organic inspiration: a man at work, using his gifts of research, recording his thoughts, placing his personal stamp on his product – yet all of it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The result is a word from heaven that relates very well to the realities of this earthly life.

RULES FOR READING

Appreciating how the Bible came to be has consequences for how one reads the Bible. Rules that apply to any human writing are valid also for reading Scripture. That is, one ought to bear in mind who the author is, what his situation was (eg, the political climate of his time), what his purpose was for writing, who his audience was. God used human people who lived in very human circumstances, and so very human and common rules for reading are necessary for reading and understanding the Word of God. The following come to mind:

- Scripture must be interpreted literally. That is: read what the passage says, in its natural, straightforward sense. Of course, 'literal' does not mean 'literalistic'. The passage of Scripture that says that "*the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth*" (II Chronicles 16:9) do not teach that a pair of celestial eyes dash around the globe. This is something we understand too from the normal rules for reading any book or article.
- The nature of the writing must be considered. Poetry is different from prophecy, and history is different again. So is a letter. This is something we realize very well for our daily reading, for we intuitively read a newspaper article differently than advertisements, and advertisements differently than insurance papers. And a book is different again.
- The time when the Bible book in question was written, and its historical context must be considered. This, too, we find so self-evident in secular literature. A speech from Adolf Hitler would be totally misunderstood if we assumed it was written yesterday by our newspaper delivery boy. If we are to understand the prophecies of Amos, we shall need to investigate who Amos was, in what circumstances (national and international) he wrote, what had God revealed beforehand, etc.
- Scripture must be interpreted with Scripture. That is: read a verse not as a lone statement, but in its context, be it the paragraph where the verse appears, the chapter in which the verse appears, the bible book in which it appears (written by the same author as a complete unity), the Bible as a whole (written by the same Author –God– as a complete unity).

At the same time we are to bear in mind that Scripture can be understood only by the working of the Holy Spirit. Since we are dead of ourselves (see Article 14), and the Bible is the Word of the living God, we do well to pray that the Lord open our hearts and minds to understand what He was pleased to say to us.

A good Bible dictionary or the introductory pages to Bible books, as can be found in the New Geneva Study Bible or the Reformation Study Bible, make worthwhile reading when trying to ascertain the background of a Bible book studied at Bible study societies. Further, the student of Scripture is referred to the excellent series of ten volumes by Cornelis vanderWaal, entitled *Search the Scriptures* (published by Paideia Press, 1978).

BIBLE CRITICISM

Bible criticism is the product of those theories of inspiration mentioned above which claim that the Bible is not fully the Word of God. There is a logic to it: if the Bible is not fully

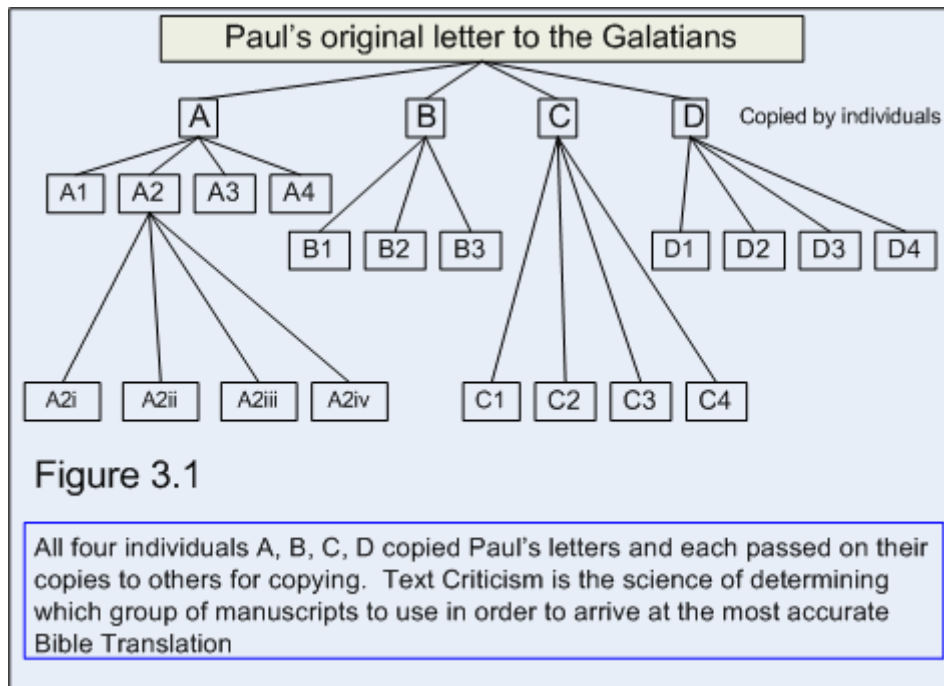
God's Word, a human is free to criticize it (or parts of it). One can, then, claim Genesis 1 to be nothing more than man's impressions and feelings concerning how the creation of the world took place, and therefore not an accurate account of what actually happened in the days of earth's beginnings. So one can embrace the evolution theory at the same time as one claims to be a Christian believer. Similarly, Paul's word about a woman being silent in the churches is then understood to reflect simply Paul's time, or perhaps Paul's preference. We, in turn, with our 'greater insights' about the nature of man and woman, and living as we do in modern times, cannot insist that women may not be office bearers.

The result of Bible criticism is that the Scripture is robbed of its power. If I cannot be sure that Genesis 1 actually gives me an accurate account of what happened in the beginning, why shall I believe that Matthew 27 gives me an accurate account of how Jesus Christ atoned for sin? If I cannot embrace what the Bible says about my past, why shall I embrace what the Bible says about my future, specifically my impending death? Shall I meet God then or not? Shall I be justified or condemned? If I cannot accept what Paul says about the woman not teaching in church, why shall I accept what James says about coveting being the cause of fighting? You see, Bible criticism robs the Scripture of its power, and leaves me rudderless and without comfort.

Much of Christianity today has embraced this Bible criticism. Many pulpits in the country offer 'stones' to the people in the pew because the preacher doesn't see the Bible as the real and living Word of the real and living God. So the people of the pew are not nourished and instructed in the way of the Lord. Similarly, many of today's commentaries do not take seriously the inspiration of Scripture, and so cannot apply Paul's writing (or Jeremiah's or David's) to today's people. As we reach for a commentary, then, we do well to consider whether or not the author indeed respects the Bible as the actual and living Word of God.

TEXT CRITICISM

Text criticism is a different matter than Bible criticism and, unlike the latter, is a necessary part of Bible studies. Take for example the letter of Paul to the Church at Galatia. Paul, moved by the Holy Spirit, wrote this letter and sent it to the churches of Galatia. The churches of Galatia therefore treasured it. Those wishing for a copy of Paul's letter could not reach for the photocopier, but had to physically write out a copy for themselves (or pay another to do it for them). But copying a (lengthy) letter word for word has its dangers. Human copiers invariably make mistakes, be it by omitting a word (or line), repeating a word (or line), misspelling a word, reading a word different (though similar) to the original, etc. When a third party now also wants a copy of Paul's letter, and you offer him your copy as a source for his (for someone else has borrowed the original to make *his* copy), what happens with the mistakes in your copy? The word you omitted is omitted in the new copy – or perhaps the copier takes a stab at what he thinks the missing word was.... The spelling error gets repeated too or perhaps corrected – maybe with the right word or maybe with a similar word that makes sense in the context.... To compound matters further, the copier will invariably make his own range of mistakes, in spelling, in omitting a word, in repeating a line, etc. And what will happen when a fourth party wants a copy of Paul's letter and uses the third party's work as his source?? (See Figure 3.1). It takes but little imagination to understand that various versions of Paul's letter to the Galatians could arise, all very similar, and yet having distinct differences. One can also understand that an expert could easily enough group the various copies into different families, where the one copy-of-a-copy-of-a-copy obviously belongs to family A, while another copy-of-a-copy-of-a-copy does not.



Does this all mean that we don't really know what Paul actually wrote to the Galatians? Here we do well to take note of what deBres wrote in Article 3. *"In His special care for us and our salvation, God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing."* This special care did not stop when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians. DeBres speaks of God's special care for *us*, and the reference is to deBres himself and the fellow believers of Doornik in 1561. In His special care for deBres and those with him, God saw to it that deBres still had Paul's letter to the Galatians, be it by means of many copies having been made over the generations and the centuries. Though one would expect that Paul's letter had deteriorated greatly due to so many people making copies of copies of it countless times, God graciously saw to it that this deterioration did not happen. We live today nearly twenty centuries after Paul wrote his letter. Yet between the numerous copies remaining to us today of Paul's original letter to the Galatians there is 95-97% agreement! And the 3-5% where there is some difference does not in any case place a point of doctrine in uncertainty! This can only be attributed to God's special care for His church over the centuries. He saw to it that human error did not destroy His Word to man!

Text criticism concerns itself with the 3-5% of words where copies of Paul's letters (and Jeremiah's prophecies, etc) have differences. Text criticism is the science of determining how these differences may have come about, and consequently tries to decide which copy has correctly transmitted the words Paul used. It is a very legitimate science, and requires some very specialist work. As we discuss the matter of underlying manuscripts to the various translations used in the churches today, we do well to focus our attention not on the small degree of uncertainty, but instead on the marvel of God's preservation of His Word for us over the centuries. It is the reality of His special care for us and our salvation as demonstrated (for example) through His preservation of His Word that encourages us in the challenges of our lives today.

Points for Discussion:

1. Discuss how the Word of God came from God to us. How does this compare with the Muslim explanation of how the Koran came from Allah to mankind?
2. The Bible dates from many centuries ago, and was addressed to peoples of different culture than ours. How, then, is the Bible relevant for us? In your answer, consider 1 Corinthians 10:11.
3. How does the fact that we have Bibles today reflect “His special care for us and our salvation”?
4. Is it fitting for a child of God to criticize the Bible? In your answer consider both “Bible criticism” and “text criticism”.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.19

ARTICLE 4: THE CANONICAL BOOKS

ARTICLE 4

We believe that the Holy Scriptures consist of two parts, namely, the Old and the New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged. These books are listed in the church of God as follows.

The books of the Old Testament: the five books of Moses, namely, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther; Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The books of the New Testament: the four gospels, namely, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; the Acts of the Apostles; the thirteen letters of the apostle Paul, namely, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon; the letter to the Hebrews; the seven other letters, namely, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, Jude; and the Revelation to the apostle John.

The Term

The word ‘canonical’ comes from the Latin word ‘canon’, and means *rule, norm, standard*. By calling the 66 Bible books *canonical*, DeBrès was confessing that these books contain the norm or standard determining the rights and wrongs for his life. This confession follows logically from the heavenly origin of the Bible as DeBrès had confessed it in Article 3. No one knows better how mankind is to live in this fallen world than the Creator and Redeemer of life. It is as Paul wrote to Timothy: “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*” – in all areas of life. DeBrès, then, humbly embraces the Word of God as normative for life.

No Errors

These canonical books, coming as they do from holy God Himself, contain no mistakes. To appreciate that “*nothing can be alleged*” against them, we need to note two points:

- a. Communication involves a speaker and a hearer. Communication will not be effective if the speaker is unclear. Similarly, communication will fail if the hearer is deaf. When DeBrès confesses that nothing can be alleged against the Bible, he is confessing that the Speaker has communicated perfectly; what He says and how He says it is accurate, factual, and clear.

DeBrès’ confession is not a comment on the qualities of the hearer. In point of fact, the hearer is a finite creature, made deaf through the fall into sin. As a result of our sinfulness we might detect (what we consider to be) inconsistencies in the Bible, or factual errors of history, geography, or biology, etc. However, where we perceive such errors, God’s identity as holy Speaker and our identity as fallen hearer compel us to acknowledge that the problem lies with the hearer and not with the Speaker. In humility we need to continue with careful reading, research and study, so that we come to understand what the Lord God is actually saying.

- b. In second place, the Lord God has spoken to man using man’s way of expressing himself. For example, people talk of the sun rising and going down, whereas in point of fact the sun is stationary while the earth is turning. When the Bible, then, says that the sun stood still in Aijalon (Joshua 10:12,13), the Lord is not giving us a lesson in

how the solar system functions. The Lord God uses human language, and so employs phrases and terms built on human observation, in order to communicate His divine thoughts to us. The Bible is not a textbook on geology or biology; yet whatever it says about these subjects, properly read, is factual.

The fact that nothing can be alleged against the Bible is due to God's care for us. His love for His people is such that He in no way wishes to lead us astray. Instead, He wants us to have and to know the truth as it really is – for our good and His glory. So His Word is trustworthy and reliable.

66 BOOKS

DeBrès listed by name all 39 of the Old Testament books and all 27 of the New Testament books. It seems to us self-evident that these are the books of the Bible; to name them is superfluous. Yet it was not so in DeBrès' day.

- The Church of Rome claimed that the Apocryphal Books (see Article 6) formed part of the Bible in addition to the Old and New Testaments.
- The Anabaptists insisted that the Old Testament presented God as a God of wrath, and that the New Testament superseded it, presenting God as a God of love. They effectively removed the Old Testament from the Bible.
- Luther claimed that the Bible contains both the Old and the New Testaments, but that the letter of James is merely a 'straw epistle' and therefore ought to be discarded.

In the face of these realities, DeBrès confessed that the Bible God gave His people contains the specific list of 66 books mentioned in Article 4. It is a confession still very relevant for us today, for the Church of Rome continues to include the Apocryphal books in their official Bible version, the *Jerusalem Bible*. Similarly, the Anabaptist notion with regard to the Old Testament is still very much alive today. Gideons International distribute New Testaments (plus the book of Psalms) because the Old Testament is seen as less than the New Testament. More sermons are today preached from New Testament texts than from the Old Testament – as if the Old Testament is somehow of lesser value for us today than the New Testament. In the face of these realities, we continue to confess that the Lord God gave His church a library of 66 books.

DID GOD GIVE THESE BOOKS?

Was it proper for DeBrès to *confess* that these 66 books come from God? To 'confess' is to repeat-after-God. Where did the Lord say that these 66 books come from Him? Why not include the prophecies of Nathan (1 Chronicles 29:29)? Or the letter of Paul to the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16)? Or such early church writings as the Letters of Clement or the Shepherd of Hermes? How did the current 66 books end up in the Bible we have today?

THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Jews of Jesus' days acknowledged all 39 books of the Old Testament as the Scripture. In Luke 11:51 Jesus gives an overview of Israel's sins "*from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah.*" The 'blood of Abel' catches the murder related in Genesis 4, while the 'blood of Zechariah' recalls the murder described in 2 Chronicles 24:20-24. The Jewish Old Testament lists the 39 books in a different order than we are accustomed to; for them the first book is Genesis and the last is Chronicles. (Even today Hebrew Old Testaments are printed with the Bible books in traditional Jewish order.) By mentioning the first and last books of the Old Testament, Jesus catches also all the books in between, and charges Israel with following in

the sins of their fathers as described in all these books. The point relevant to the current argument is this: Jesus embraced the entire Old Testament as the Word of God, just as the Jews of His day did. That in turn is why Jesus (and the apostles also) repeatedly quoted from the books of the Old Testament as authoritative proof of what they were saying.

It would be interesting to know how the various books of the Old Testament Scripture came to be acknowledged as canonical. This process, however, is something we do not know. We know only that by Jesus' day the 39 books we know as the Old Testament were commonly accepted as God's holy Word. Through His providence the Lord God sovereignly and graciously gave *these* 39 books to His covenant people.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the early church appreciated the writings of Paul and John and Luke, etc, and so made copies for wider circulation. In his first letter to Timothy (one of his last writings), Paul says, "*For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer is worthy of his wages.'*" The first quotation is from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 25:4, while the second quote is from Luke 10:7. Notice: Paul accepts Luke's work as 'Scripture', and places it on a level with the Old Testament! This is but one generation after Jesus' ascension, and shortly after Luke wrote his gospel. Similarly, Peter, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, makes reference in his second letter to the epistles of Paul "*which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures*" (2 Peter 3:16). With that last phrase – '*the rest of the Scriptures*' – Peter is placing Paul's epistles on a level with the Old Testament. As the Old Testament is 'Scripture' – God's inspired writings – so Paul's letters are also 'Scripture'. The lesson to draw from these examples is that early Christians understood very early that the Lord God was expanding the number of holy books from the 39 of the Old Testament. It did not take many decades for the New Testament books to be considered canonical.

Again, precisely what dynamics led to the New Testament having the specific 27 books now included is unknown. We cannot today look back and explain how it all came about. The fact of the matter is that the church recognized quickly that the Lord God gave His church specific canonical writings.

GOD GAVE

In fact, instead of seeking to look *back* from today's perspective and attempting to reconstruct how the Bible came to be (and therefore why *this* book is included and not *that* one), we do better to follow and appreciate God's way of giving His Word.

Before the fall into sin, God spoke to man in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8; 2:17). After the fall God continued to speak to man (Genesis 4:6; 7:1; 12:1, etc). It may well be that Adam or Noah or Abraham wrote down what the Lord said to them; we don't know. Of special importance to our topic is the word God spoke after Aaron and Miriam challenged Moses' position: "*Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Hasn't He also spoken through us?*" God's answer was this: "*Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; He is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face*" (Numbers 12:6ff). So, when Moses spoke to the people, the people were meant to *listen*, simply because he was God's spokesman among the people (see Exodus 20:19,21). To ignore or disobey Moses was to ignore or disobey God.

It follows that when Moses wrote down what God commanded (see Exodus 24:4) the people had to respect Moses' *written* words as much as his *spoken* words – for they were God's words. So Moses' words –he wrote the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy– had to be treasured in Israel; they received a place of honor in the Tabernacle beside the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:24ff). The priests also had to teach this word of God through Moses to the people over the generations (Leviticus 10:11).

Once Moses died, Moses could no longer be God's spokesman to His people. Does that mean that all revelation would cease? How would the people after Moses know whether God was speaking to them? Of course, the Lord could speak directly to the people (see Judges 2:1). But this was not the way the Lord was pleased to go; He would instead speak to the people through other men. Through Moses the Lord told the people how they could know whether a word of man was in fact a word from God.

- a. God moved Moses to tell the people: *“And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’ –when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him”* (Deuteronomy 18:21f).
- b. God also had Moses tell the people: *“If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods’ ..., you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams.... You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him...”* (Deuteronomy 13:1ff).

The point of these two quotes is that any future message in Israel must conform to the contours of what the Lord had earlier said through Moses. If any man had a word for Israel that contradicted what Moses said, or did not conform to God's revelation through Moses, that word was obviously not from God and was to be discarded. So when David wrote his psalms and Jeremiah wrote his prophecies, the people could know whether these men spoke God's words or not by applying the test of Moses in Deuteronomy 13 & 18: do these words conform with God's earlier revelation? If yes, the people had to receive it as a word from God; if no, the people had to reject it. That is why the faithful of Israel embraced the prophecies of Jeremiah and rejected the prophecies of Hananiah (Jeremiah 28). That is to say: the writings of Jeremiah received a place in their sacred library while possible writings of Hananiah did not.

The same line can be followed in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ obviously spoke from God, for He was the prophet Moses had mentioned in Deuteronomy 17 (see John 7:16-19). That is why all men were obliged to accept Jesus and believe His word (Acts 2:22). Jesus in turn appointed apostles, whom the Holy Spirit would lead into all the truth (John 16:13), and who were charged to preach the word to all nations (Acts 1:8). To these apostles the Lord Jesus added the persecutor Saul; Saul *“is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel”* (Acts 9:15). As a result of this call, Saul (=Paul) knew he spoke God's word, and not the word of men, and so he could say to the Thessalonians: *“when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God”* (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Obviously, it wasn't just Paul's spoken word that came from God, but his written word also.

That is why the church appreciated Paul's letters and made copies for circulation – as they also did with the writings of the other apostles. The church realized that these writings came from men specially equipped by God to write down His word. They realized too that these writings conformed fully to the books of Moses. So they were embraced, and added to the body of sacred writings.

The pattern that arises from the above material is that the Lord Himself *gave* these writings to the church. He specified criteria His people were to use to determine whether a prophecy or epistle or gospel was in fact *His* work, and He gave the people grace to recognize and receive His gifts. DeBrès catches this notion neatly in Article 5, when he writes, “*we **receive** all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.*” In an act of faith, DeBrès –and we with him– simply *receive* what the Lord has put on our path.

At the same time we are to recognize that not every sacred letter or prophecy ever written necessarily ended up in the Bible. Paul, for example, wrote more to the Corinthians than the two letters in our Bible (see 1 Corinthians 5:9); he also wrote a letter to the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16). Though the early church was to treasure those letters as having divine authority (as the two just mentioned texts make clear), the Lord has led circumstances in such a way that these letters have disappeared. In other words, God has removed them from the divine library He gave to His New Testament church. We are inclined to react with questions revolving around what we (think we) *miss* with the loss of these letters. Given that God has not preserved them for us *and has preserved so much else*, we do better to respond with questions revolving around what we *have*. More, we do well to marvel that God has left us not a meager four books but a full library of 66! Here is a wealth of resources; let us treasure and study what God *gave*, and not lament what He did not give.

From the above material it follows that the Bible is complete, the canon is closed. The apostles have all died, and it was only they of whom Jesus said that they would receive insight into all God's truth (John 16:13). We live in a period wherein the Lord no longer reveals additional material. Again, that is not a negative, simply because this is *the Lord's* doing, and He makes no mistakes. More, it is not a negative because He has given us 66 books with which to busy ourselves – and there is more comfort and admonition and instruction there than we shall ever be able to plunder before the Lord returns.

RELATION BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Both the Old Testament and the New come from the Lord God Himself. Both testaments reveal who God is. They do so particularly by focusing on God's relation with man, a relation made possible by the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. The Old Testament looks forward to the Christ who was still coming, while the New Testament looks back to the Christ who has come. In order to understand the New Testament and what it says concerning Christ's work on the cross, one needs to read and appreciate what the Lord God earlier said in the Old Testament. Similarly, to appreciate the wealth buried in the Old Testament, one needs to appreciate God's further disclosure of that wealth in the New Testament. The Old Testament directs us forward to the New Testament and the New Testament directs us back to the Old Testament. The two cannot be separated. The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament (cf Matthew 5:17). Both Testaments have the one and same message: who God is as manifested through Christ's crucifixion for sinners. Hence all exposition of Scripture in the preaching, every effort to draw out who God is, must be 'Christ-centered'. More, since one cannot understand the Old Testament without the New Testament, and vice

versa, it is necessary to draw the lines from Old to New and from the New back to the Old. This Bible is *one* Word with *one* message, just as the God who gave the Word is *one* God.

This close connection between the Old and New Testaments should always be borne in mind when involving oneself in Bible study. Remember Christ when reading Chronicles and remember Leviticus when reading Galatians. It won't do to forget the Old Testament when reading the New Testament, for the Bible is one entity. Just as it goes for any other book one reads, one must start at the beginning in order to understand what follows, and the end will make no sense if you have not read what came before.

Points for Discussion:

1. DeBrès uses the word 'canonical' to refer to the 66 books of the Bible. What did DeBrès mean with this word? Is it a fitting word for us to use regarding the Bible? Why?
2. Ought we to read the book of Leviticus or the Song of Solomon with the children at family devotions? Why or why not?
3. Given that the Lord has given His Word for His people's benefit, what role ought Children's Bibles to have in family devotion?
4. Discuss the merits or demerits of using a Teen Bible or a Woman's Bible.
5. Theological literature abounds today with statements like, "the New Testament teaches..." as if either the Old Testament is irrelevant or taught something different. What actually is the relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament?
6. If we would today find the letter Paul wrote to the Laodiceans, should we add it to the Bible? Why or why not?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.19

ARTICLE 5: THE AUTHORITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

ARTICLE 5

We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence thereof in themselves; for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled.

THE BIBLE IS RECEIVED

The attentive reader will observe that DeBrès began Article 5 with a different formulation than he commonly employed with the other articles. Article 1 began with the words “*we all believe with the heart and confess with the mouth.*” The vast majority of subsequent articles begin with a variation of this line (notably “*we believe*”). DeBrès began Article 5, though, with the words “*we receive.*” Why?

The word “receive” implies that the believer does not *examine* the 66 books to determine whether they are canonical, nor does he utter a declaration to give them the status of being canonical. Rather, the term catches the believer’s response to God’s act of giving. Inasmuch as the Lord God in mercy *gave* His Word to His people, their *response* can rightly be nothing else than grateful *acceptance* of God’s gift. It will not do for one to push this divine library aside as unnecessary or as a fraud. It will not do either to set it aside on grounds that I find too many mistakes or contradictions in it. The Bible’s identity as the writing of the world’s Creator and Redeemer dictates that we *receive* it humbly and reverently.

WHY GOD GAVE

For what purpose has God given these 66 Bible books? “*We receive all these books ... for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.*”

The regulation of our faith

The faith of the Christian is regulated, determined, by the Bible. I do not *choose* what I shall believe, nor does any person tell me what I must believe. Rather, the Word of God determines what I believe. I may not believe more than is revealed in the Bible, and I may not believe less either. If it is true that the Bible is God’s gift to me, I must accept it in its entirety. “*For I testify to everyone who hears the words of this prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book*” (Revelation 22:18,19; see also Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32).

The foundation of our faith

On what grounds do I believe what I believe? Do I believe the doctrine of creation or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit because scientists have proven it to me? Do I believe it because it makes sense to my mind? Or because my grandparents told me it is true? No! Scientists and grandparents can err in what they teach me. My mind is broken through the fall into sin and therefore an unreliable judge of what I should believe. The reason I believe what I do is because *God has revealed it in Holy Scripture*. God does not lie, and so His Word is believable.

The confirmation of our faith

Life confronts me with many doubts, making me question whether what I believe is really true. How do I in the battles of faith double-check or confirm the accuracy of what is written in Scripture? Will an experiment or encyclopedia or archaeology or expert confirm the truth of the Bible? None can, for then I look to an earthly source for confirmation of heaven's truths. That is obviously shortsighted, and an affront to the sovereign Creator. The Bible regulates the content of my beliefs. The reason I believe the Bible lies in its divine origin. Confirmation as to the accuracy of the Bible's faith comes from within the Bible alone. Its identity as the Word of God requires that I accept the Bible's message for reasons that come from within the Bible itself.

WHOSE FAITH?

DeBrès states that the Bible was received for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of *our* faith. Whose faith is meant here? In first instance, of course, the reference is to DeBrès himself and the other believers in DeBrès' congregation. Yet, these persons lived in particular circumstances. Specifically, they were being persecuted and even martyred simply because they believed what the Bible says. It makes one wonder: is the value of one's life not worth more than believing the Bible? Would DeBrès and his congregation not be justified in responding to God's revelation by saying they can't believe it now because it's too dangerous?

DeBrès and those with him knew that the Bible's identity as *God's gift* rendered it wrong to respond to God's gift with "no thanks God, it's too dangerous to believe it now," or to simply leave God's gift on the shelf and not work with it. Despite the cost, DeBrès and those with him "*received*" all these books as immeasurably valuable, their content worth more than life itself – for they spoke of a sinner's reconciliation with holy God and hence spoke of concrete blessings and curses in this life and the life to come! That is why DeBrès confessed what he did in Article 5, despite his persecution.

On the one hand, our freedom from persecution makes it easy to "*receive*" the 66 books of the Bible; we do not have to pay for this confession with our lives. On the other hand, there are other costs that come with receiving God's gift of His Word and believing it. To embrace that Word, believe its contents, and live in harmony with its instruction means we are friends of God and therefore enemies of the world – persons against whom the rage of the devil is directed. A spiritual war ensues, which can cost us family and friends, promotions at work, etc. We do well to be aware that the cost of "*receiving*" is, at the end of the day, as high for us today as it was for DeBrès in his day.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THE BIBLE IS TRUE?

I accept the Bible because God gave it to me. But how come I know that the Bible comes from God? What mechanism makes me accept the faith revealed in Scripture? Says DeBrès, "*We believe without any doubt all things contained in them,*

- *not so much because the Church receives and approves them as such, but*
- *especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and*
- *also because they contain the evidence thereof in themselves;*

for, even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled."

Here we find the reasons DeBrès uses to maintain his belief that the Bible is true.

The Church

Over the years, persons born to Christian parents have been instructed by these parents as well as by the Church to which they belonged. Parents and church alike insist that the Bible is true, and that instruction has an impact on those who are taught so that they follow the paths in which they were raised. Can it be said, though, that one believes the Bible *because* of parents' labors – or perhaps the labors of a minister? If so, one could conclude that Christian youth are simply being brainwashed. That's why it is interesting and important to note that DeBrès does not give much weight to this possible source for one's faith. Note his formulation: "*not so much..., but especially...and also.*" It is true that for many the faith comes to us through the work of parents and church, but one does not come to believe the Scriptures *because* parents and church said they must. That would not be true faith (see Article 22).

The Holy Spirit

Note the wording in Article 5. "*We believe (all these books) ... **not so much** because the Church receives them and approves them ... **but especially because the Holy Spirit** witnesses in our hearts ...and also because they contain the evidence in themselves....*" The emphasis lies here on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes clear to our hearts that the Bible is from God. We read in Acts 16:14 that "*a certain woman named Lydia heard us.... **The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul.***" The Holy Spirit caused her to appreciate the truthfulness of the words that came from God (through Paul) so that she received and believed them. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 2:14,15 we read why the work of the Spirit is necessary. "*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things....*" The term 'natural man' refers to a person dead in sin, one who is incapable of receiving the things of the Spirit. The heart of the natural man is closed. Only by the work of the Holy Spirit is the heart opened, so that it can detect the difference between the Bible and any other book – and recognize the Bible as being God's Word.

Internal Evidence

The Bible contains evidence of the fulfillment of prophecies recorded in it. Examples are for the taking:

- We read in Genesis 15:13-16 of God telling Abraham, before he had any children, that he was going to have many children who would be slaves in Egypt for 400 years, that afterward God would deliver them from Egypt and that they would depart from Egypt with many possessions. The book of Exodus records the fulfillment of this prophecy.
- In Isaiah 45:1 we read of God moving Isaiah to tell Israel about a future king named Cyrus who would subdue nations before him and permit Israel to return home from exile. The prophecy was fulfilled some 200 years after Isaiah spoke these words.
- The prophecies of Daniel contain detailed accounts of what was going to happen on the national and international stage many years after Daniel's death. They did happen many years later.
- From the earliest pages of Scripture the Lord God revealed that He would send a Seed of the Woman who would crush Satan and pay for sin (Genesis 3:15). The Lord God did so in the person of His Son Jesus Christ.
- New Testament writers describe in several places what sort of attitudes would prevail in an unbelieving world before the return of Jesus Christ. They mention too that the Word of God would spread all over the world and be a blessing to many – and be

rejected by many others. One sees and continues to see the fulfillment of such words in the course of church history.

There are two ways to explain that a prophecy of Scripture is being fulfilled. The one option is to disembowel the prophecy of its force. One can do that by insisting that the prophecy is so general that any event can be called its fulfillment. None of the examples mentioned above, however, could reasonably be placed in that category. One could also argue that the prophecy was in fact put to paper after its alleged fulfillment; hence the detailed accuracy of the prophecy. In point of fact, this ‘explanation’ has been put to all the examples mentioned above. The problem is, however, that evidence actually exists that the prophecies in question were truly put to paper long before the prophesied events took place. So one is left with the only explanation that accounts for how the Bible writers could know ahead of time what would happen – and that is that there is a living God who in fact announced beforehand what He was going to do. And that is to say that (the content of) the Bible in fact comes from heaven. This is distinctly the position of the Christian believer, and so he is happy to join DeBrès in confessing that “*even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are [still] being fulfilled.*”

IN SUM

How come, then, that DeBrès could understand that the Bible was God’s Word given to him for his benefit? Though the influence of the Church and the Bible’s internal evidence were contributing factors, it was specifically the work of the Holy Spirit in his heart which ultimately caused DeBrès to receive the Scripture as God’s Word. To be clear: the Holy Spirit does not work this conviction by means of a dream or an experience, but rather through our being busy with the Word itself.

How encouraging it is for the Christian believer, then, that he finds in himself the conviction that the Bible is God’s holy Word. Since that conviction is due to the Spirit’s work in our hearts, here is evidence that the Spirit works even in *us*. And yes, in the midst of life’s struggles, that is encouraging. We are not alone!

Points for Discussion:

1. Art 5 begins with the statement that we ‘receive’ all these books. What is meant by this term?
2. Why ought we to accept what God has revealed in the Bible? What price did DeBrès have to pay for accepting the Bible? Is that price too high for you? Why or why not?
3. What is meant by the terms ‘regulation’, ‘foundation’ and ‘confirmation’ of faith?
4. Explain how one knows that the Bible is true.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 6.19

ARTICLE 6: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE CANONICAL AND APOCRYPHAL BOOKS

ARTICLE 6

We distinguish these holy books from the apocryphal, namely, 3 and 4 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, additions to Esther, the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace, Susannah, Bel and the Dragon, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The church may read and take instruction from these so far as they agree with the canonical books. They are, however, far from having such power and authority that we may confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the holy books.

HISTORY

The Bible consists of 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament (Article 4). These 66 books are ‘canonical’, are authoritative for all mankind because they come from God in heaven.

There was a time after the completion of the 39 Old Testament books that writers arose in Israel who wrote in the vein of these canonical books. Whereas the 39 of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew, new writers wrote 15 more books in Greek. When the 39 were translated into Greek (approximately 200 years before Jesus’ birth), the 15 were included in the new publication. Greek-speaking Jews now had a ‘Bible’ of 54 books. We know this translation as ‘the Septuagint’. It is from this translation that New Testament writers (who wrote in Greek) took many of their Old Testament quotes. The early church had to make a decision whether or not these 15 books were canonical, and concluded the answer was No. The 15 were considered ‘apocryphal’, a term that means ‘hidden’. Unlike the books of the Old Testament that came from God Himself (be it through prophets as David, Moses, Jeremiah, etc), these 15 had a hidden, undisclosed origin. Their writers wrote in the vein of the Old Testament, but not with the authority of God.

However, when a man by the name of Jerome translated the Septuagint (the 39 Old Testament books plus the 15 of the apocrypha) into Latin (in a translation known as the Vulgate, around the 400 AD), he chose to include the apocrypha in his final edition. As a result, the apocrypha in time simply came to be accepted by the Church (of Rome). Hence, the Reformers of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century inherited Bibles with the Apocrypha included. So they had to consider whether or not to continue to accept the Apocrypha, or return to the conviction of the early church. (Even till today, the Roman Catholic Church prints the Apocryphal books in their official English translation, *The Jerusalem Bible*. Appeal is even made to these books to prove points of doctrine, for example, the doctrine of purgatory.)

DeBrès, together with the other reformers, maintained that only the 66 books of the Old and New Testament are canonical (see Article 4). The 15 books of the Apocrypha, he insisted, are not the Word of God. To make clear which fifteen books DeBrès distinguished from the canonical books of Holy Scripture, he included a list of names in his confession.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE APOCRYPHA

Those who read the apocryphal books will sense quickly enough that they contain a different ‘spirit’ than we are used to from the inspired books of the Bible.

- They reflect typically Jewish sentiments as opposed to Scriptural sentiments. For example, they show contempt for women. The canonical books definitely teach the need for the woman to be submissive to the man, but never do they prescribe or condone contempt for women.
- The Apocrypha emphasizes salvation through good works. The canonical books, on the other hand, insist that one is righteous on account of faith, and good works are the inevitable outward manifestation of the presence of faith.
- The Apocrypha contains distinct historical inaccuracies. For example, in the Apocrypha Nebuchadnezzar is said to have lived in Nineveh, whereas in fact Nineveh was destroyed years before Nebuchadnezzar’s time.
- Many writings within the Apocrypha are sheer fantasy.

God cannot contradict Himself. The different ‘spirit’ evident in the apocryphal books demonstrates that these books do not come from the Lord God, but are instead the product of man’s mind. Godly though these writers may have been, they were not moved by the Holy Spirit to write what they wrote.

VALUE

Since the apocryphal books do not come from God, they cannot be used for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith. One may therefore not build one’s doctrine on the basis of the Apocrypha’s content.

Rather, since they are man-made books, they have the same value as any other human book. One may read and take instruction from them, but their message and authority is not to be confused with the message and authority of the Bible. As DeBrès writes in Article 6: *“The Church may read and take instruction from these so far as they agree with the canonical books. They are, however, far from having such power and authority that we may confirm from their testimony any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less may they be used to detract from the authority of the holy books.”* At the same time these books have historical significance, for they tell us many things that happened in the 400 years between the completion of the Old Testament and the coming of John the Baptist.

PSEUDEPIGRAPHA

Beside Apocryphal books dating from the time before Christ’s birth, there also exist apocryphal writings from New Testament times. These writings are known as pseudepigrapha – writings (‘epigrapha’) falsely (‘pseudo’) attributed to an author in order to make the book acceptable amongst Christians. In point of fact their authors are unknown, and the church has never recognized them as inspired because they have the same type of characteristics as the Apocryphal books. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, relates many miracles Jesus purportedly did as a child, all to gain honor for Himself. The Gospel of Peter describes the Lord Jesus Christ as not being true man; behind this ‘Gospel’ is the same heresy John exposed in his three Letters found in the New Testament. As non-canonical books, these writings cannot be used for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith.

FOR INTEREST: THE APOCRYPHAL BOOK OF SUSANNA.

Printed below, as an example of apocryphal writing, is one of the Apocrypha's shortest books:

There dwelt a man in Babylon, called Joacim: ²And he took a wife, whose name was Susanna, the daughter of Chelcias, a very fair woman, and one that feared the Lord. ³Her parents also were righteous, and taught their daughter according to the law of Moses. ⁴Now Joacim was a great rich man, and had a fair garden joining unto his house: and to him resorted the Jews; because he was more honourable than all others.

⁵The same year were appointed two of the ancients of the people to be judges, such as the Lord spake of, that wickedness came from Babylon from ancient judges, who seemed to govern the people. ⁶These kept much at Joacim's house: and all that had any suits in law came unto them.

⁷Now when the people departed away at noon, Susanna went into her husband's garden to walk. ⁸And the two elders saw her going in every day, and walking; so that their lust was inflamed toward her. ⁹And they perverted their own mind, and turned away their eyes, that they might not look unto heaven, nor remember just judgments. ¹⁰And albeit they both were wounded with her love, yet durst not one shew another his grief. ¹¹For they were ashamed to declare their lust, that they desired to have to do with her. ¹²Yet they watched diligently from day to day to see her.

¹³And the one said to the other, Let us now go home: for it is dinner time. ¹⁴So when they were gone out, they parted the one from the other, and turning back again they came to the same place; and after that they had asked one another the cause, they acknowledged their lust: then appointed they a time both together, when they might find her alone.

¹⁵And it fell out, as they watched a fit time, she went in as before with two maids only, and she was desirous to wash herself in the garden: for it was hot. ¹⁶And there was no body there save the two elders, that had hid themselves, and watched her. ¹⁷Then she said to her maids, Bring me oil and washing balls, and shut the garden doors, that I may wash me. ¹⁸And they did as she bade them, and shut the garden doors, and went out themselves at privy doors to fetch the things that she had commanded them: but they saw not the elders, because they were hid.

¹⁹Now when the maids were gone forth, the two elders rose up, and ran unto her, saying, ²⁰Behold, the garden doors are shut, that no man can see us, and we are in love with thee; therefore consent unto us, and lie with us. ²¹If thou wilt not, we will bear witness against thee, that a young man was with thee: and therefore thou didst send away thy maids from thee.

²²Then Susanna sighed, and said, I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death unto me: and if I do it not I cannot escape your hands. ²³It is better for me to fall into your hands, and not do it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord.

²⁴With that Susanna cried with a loud voice: and the two elders cried out against her. ²⁵Then ran the one, and opened the garden door. ²⁶So when the servants of the house heard the cry in the garden, they rushed in at the privy door, to see what was done unto her. ²⁷But when the elders had declared their matter, the servants were greatly ashamed: for there was never such a report made of Susanna.

²⁸And it came to pass the next day, when the people were assembled to her husband Joacim, the two elders came also full of mischievous imagination against Susanna to put her to death; ²⁹And said before the people, Send for Susanna, the daughter of Chelcias, Joacim's wife. And so they sent. ³⁰So she came with her father and mother, her children, and all her kindred.

³¹Now Susanna was a very delicate woman, and beauteous to behold. ³²And these wicked men commanded to uncover her face, (for she was covered) that they might be filled with her beauty. ³³Therefore her friends and all that saw her wept.

³⁴Then the two elders stood up in the midst of the people, and laid their hands upon her head. ³⁵And she weeping looked up toward heaven: for her heart trusted in the Lord. ³⁶And the elders said, As we walked in the garden alone, this woman came in with two maids, and shut the garden doors, and sent the maids away. ³⁷Then a young man, who there was hid, came unto her, and lay with her.

³⁸Then we that stood in a corner of the garden, seeing this wickedness, ran unto them. ³⁹And when we saw them together, the man we could not hold: for he was stronger than we, and opened the door, and leaped out. ⁴⁰But having taken this woman, we asked who the young man was, but she would not tell us: these things do we testify.

⁴¹Then the assembly believed them as those that were the elders and judges of the people: so they condemned her to death.

⁴²Then Susanna cried out with a loud voice, and said, O everlasting God, that knowest the secrets, and knowest all things before they be: ⁴³Thou knowest that they have borne false witness against me, and, behold, I must die; whereas I never did such things as these men have maliciously invented against me.

⁴⁴And the Lord heard her voice. ⁴⁵Therefore when she was led to be put to death, the Lord raised up the holy spirit of a young youth whose name was Daniel: ⁴⁶Who cried with a loud voice, I am clear from the blood of this woman.

⁴⁷Then all the people turned them toward him, and said, What mean these words that thou hast spoken? ⁴⁸So he standing in the midst of them said, Are ye such fools, ye sons of Israel, that without examination or knowledge of the truth ye have condemned a daughter of Israel? ⁴⁹Return again to the place of judgment: for they have borne false witness against her.

⁵⁰Wherefore all the people turned again in haste, and the elders said unto him, Come, sit down among us, and shew it us, seeing God hath given thee the honour of an elder. ⁵¹Then said Daniel unto them, Put these two aside one far from another, and I will examine them.

⁵²So when they were put asunder one from another, he called one of them, and said unto him, O thou that art waxen old in wickedness, now thy sins which thou hast committed aforetime are come to light. ⁵³For thou hast pronounced false judgment and hast condemned the innocent and hast let the guilty go free; albeit the Lord saith, The innocent and righteous shalt thou not slay. ⁵⁴Now then, if thou hast seen her, tell me, Under what tree sawest thou them companying together? Who answered, Under a mastick tree. ⁵⁵And Daniel said, Very well; thou hast lied against thine own head; for even now the angel of God hath received the sentence of God to cut thee in two.

⁵⁶So he put him aside, and commanded to bring the other, and said unto him, O thou seed of Chanaan, and not of Juda, beauty hath deceived thee, and lust hath perverted thine heart. ⁵⁷Thus have ye dealt with the daughters of Israel, and they for fear companied with you: but the daughter of Juda would not abide your wickedness. ⁵⁸Now therefore tell me, Under what tree didst thou take them companying together? Who answered, Under an holm tree. ⁵⁹Then said Daniel unto him, Well; thou hast also lied against thine own head: for the angel of God waiteth with the sword to cut thee in two, that he may destroy you.

⁶⁰With that all the assembly cried out with a loud voice, and praised God, who saveth them that trust in him. ⁶¹And they arose against the two elders, for Daniel had convicted them of false witness by their own mouth: ⁶²And according to the law of Moses they did unto them in such sort as they maliciously intended to do to their neighbour: and they put them to death. Thus the innocent blood was saved the same day.

⁶³herefore Chelcias and his wife praised God for their daughter Susanna, with Joacim her husband, and all the kindred, because there was no dishonesty found

in her. ⁶⁴From that day forth was Daniel had in great reputation in the sight of the people.

Points for Discussion:

1. Explain what the apocrypha is.
2. Why would the fathers of old have rejected the book of Susanna as not inspired by God?
Put into words how it ‘feels’ different than the books of the Bible.
3. Discuss the value of the apocrypha for today’s people.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.19

ARTICLE 7: THE SUFFICIENCY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

ARTICLE 7

We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length. It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture: yes, even if it be an angel from heaven, as the apostle Paul says (Galatians 1:8). Since it is forbidden to add to or take away anything from the Word of God (Deuteronomy 12:32), it is evident that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.

We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the 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 lighter than a breath (Psalm 62:9). We therefore reject with all our heart whatever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us: Test the spirits to see whether they are of God (1 John 4:1). Likewise: If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting (2 John 1:10).

COMPLETE

DeBrès –like we today– lived in a time when countless teachers made their wisdom available on questions relating to the meaning and purpose of life. In the midst of that abundance, DeBrès confessed that accurate and helpful answers come ultimately from the Word of God alone. The Bible’s divine origin together with the care of the God who gave it conspire to mean that this Bible contains all I need in order to understand what life is about and how to live it. This conviction lay behind David’s delight in the law of God, or His commandments, His ordinances, His statutes and His Word –all terms that describe the Bible– and on this conviction was built David’s confidence that the Word of God was a reliable light on his path through life (Psalm 119). This canonical Bible is *sufficient*; it provides the *complete* standard for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of my faith. “*We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein. The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length.*” The result is that I need never worry that the day will come when I’ll be at a loss as to what I must do on the ground that God hasn’t told me. This gives immense comfort. My God doesn’t tell me just a fraction of what I need to know. Rather, in His love for me He has told me everything He considers necessary for me to know. What care and mercy this is!

This is not to say that I necessarily *understand* all of God’s Word or its implication for my life. Some parts of Scripture are indeed hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15,16). More to the point: I am finite and sinful, and so I cannot understand all the deep things of God (Isaiah 55:9). That is why there is need for a lifetime of being busy with the Scriptures, and always considering the questions of life in the light of God’s Word. Hence Paul’s charge to Timothy: “*you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them*” (2 Timothy 3:9). Timothy had learned much from Paul, the man chosen by God to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, and so ultimately Timothy learned these things from God Himself. In the midst of life’s big questions,

Timothy (and we too) must read God's Word regularly, and continue to learn its treasures. Paul expands on the point a few verses later: "... *Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:15-17). In truth, the Bible is *sufficient*, able to make a man of God capable of meeting the demands of the times. That was true in Timothy's days, true in DeBrès' days, and true today also. I don't need anything in addition to God's Word, for God's Word "*is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*" (Psalm 119:105).

The point is not easy to accept. We are quickly tempted to say that what God says in His Word doesn't make any sense in our circumstances. We tell ourselves that God understands that we find the Bible's directives to be too difficult for us. More, we remind ourselves that God gave us heads with which to think, and He wants us to use those heads. Yet the child of God acknowledges who God is, and therefore acknowledges that the Word such a God gave is invariably sufficient and its instructions accurate for whatever circumstances the same God puts on our path.

THE AUTHORITY, CLARITY, SUFFICIENCY, AND NECESSITY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

DeBrès wrote his confession in a particular context. Persons of Roman Catholic and Anabaptist persuasion surrounded him and his congregation. These Roman Catholic and Anabaptist countrymen held positions on the value of Scripture that differed dramatically from what DeBrès heard God say in His Word. Inasmuch as similar errors still surround us today, it is beneficial that we be acquainted with these errors, and with the Biblical response.

The Authority of Scripture

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church accepts that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. However, the Roman Church also accepts tradition as a reliable source for divine revelation. It falls to the Pope to determine which source has final say in a particular matter of doctrine or life. The Bible, for example, does not teach that Mary was without sin. On the basis of church tradition, however, the Pope has decreed that Mary was indeed perfect. The Pope, then, becomes the final authority, and not the Word of God.

Anabaptism

The Anabaptists also maintain that Scripture has authority. Yet Anabaptists leave room for the Holy Spirit to tell people in His own sovereign way what course of action must be taken. One can insist, for example that the Holy Spirit has revealed to me that I must be an office bearer in church – irrespective of what the Bible says about qualifications or how one becomes an office bearer. In theory, then, the Holy Spirit is raised above the Word of God. But in practice (since anyone can claim to receive a message from the Holy Spirit and nobody can verify it), man is made the final authority.

The Bible

In Article 4 DeBrès confessed the canonicity of the Bible. That is to say: the Bible is the final judge for what is right or wrong, in all areas of life. It is authoritative. Popes and people need to take a place *under* the Bible, not beside it or above it.

We do well here to take note of DeBrès' words in Article 7: "*We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the 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 lighter than a breath.*" We, too, can easily fall for the Roman Catholic error of ascribing the final authority to 'holy' men, be it Augustine, or John Calvin, or Klaas Schilder, or anyone else. Remember that all men of themselves are liars. Even large bodies of men (synods) do not have the final say regarding any point of doctrine, since even a large body of persons remains a body of sinful persons. Final authority lies with the Bible and with the Bible alone. It is for that reason that all communicant members of the church are responsible (according to gifts) to stay abreast of developments in the churches, and to ensure, as best as possible, that the churches together remain faithful to the revelation God has given in Holy Scripture. This will require prayerful reading and study by all of us. The confession that authority lies not with people or Synods, but with the Bible, has consequences.

Nor must we fall for Anabaptist tendencies and base our decisions and actions on what "I think." When it comes to the truth, there is no room for personal opinions or feelings, simply because our hearts remain sinful and inclined to evil. We need to base all our decisions and actions unequivocally on what the Bible says.

The Clarity of Scripture

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church says that the Bible is unclear at face value. In order to understand it one needs to digest the interpretation of the Church. So, in DeBrès' time, the Roman Catholic Church forbade the membership from having a copy of the Bible, and instructed the membership instead to listen to the priests, since the priests were equipped to interpret this dark book.

Anabaptism

The Anabaptists also deny that the Bible is clear. They claim that the Holy Spirit must reveal to each of us what the Bible means. Instead of reading and listening to the Bible, then, one needs to remain open to what the Spirit might be saying to you.

The Bible

Is God's love and care for me such that He has given me a Word that is too difficult for me to understand? Is that our God?! Thankfully, no! In His care for us, the Lord God has given us a Word that is not open to two interpretations. Granted, there are passages we struggle to understand. The Bible itself acknowledges that some things are difficult to understand: "*Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of Scriptures*" (2 Peter 3:15b, 16). Yet the drift of Scripture is clear, and the will of God is clear to all who humbly read what Scripture says. The consequence is that none may shy away from the Bible as if it is too hard to understand. It is for us instead to be prayerfully busy with the Scripture God in His care for us has given.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that the Bible is not enough. One needs the interpretation of the Church in addition to it. For many years it disallowed its members to have their own Bible. Only since approximately the last 30 years are members permitted to have a Bible of their own, but the official interpretation of the Roman Catholic Church is required alongside it.

Anabaptism

The Anabaptists maintain that the Bible is not sufficient. One needs the Holy Spirit to give additional revelation. This sentiment carries with itself the notion that the Lord can reveal new things to us.

The Bible

“We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein.” So, in the midst of life’s struggles, we do not look for new answers or new revelation from heaven, but we turn always and again to the Scripture. Our God does not change, and so His will does not either – even when He in His providence lets cultures change.

The Necessity of Scripture

Roman Catholicism

As far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned, at bottom one does not need Scripture, as long as one listens to and accepts what it is the Church teaches.

Anabaptism

Similarly, as far as the Anabaptists are concerned, one again ultimately doesn’t need Scripture as long as one listens to the voice of the Holy Spirit within you.

The Bible

In contrast to the Roman Catholics and Anabaptists of their day, DeBrès and his fellow believers treasured the Bible. They understood that if God gave His Word to man, then that Word obviously must be necessary. Since the Holy Spirit works faith by the means of the Word, each person is obliged to remain busy with that Word. More, since God is pleased to use the Word to light up the path along which He wants His children to walk in the journey of life (Psalm 119:105), God’s people obviously are to keep studying that Word.

In Sum

It is by His Word that God leads me and gives me direction for the questions and challenges facing me, no matter what my situation is. To find my answers to these questions and challenges I read the Bible first and foremost. To leave the Bible closed, to consider that the Bible is not really necessary for me in order to get through my day, is typically Anabaptist. I have confessed that the Bible is sufficient for the *daily* regulation, foundation, and confirmation of my faith. I now must live this confession. That is to say: I must be busy with the Bible, day by day, and make it my business to study it with a concerted effort. Being busy with the Scripture is simply a matter of living consistently with the faith we are allowed to confess. To leave the Bible closed, or to study it intermittently, is to deny the matter learned

from Scripture and confessed in Article 7.

Points for Discussion:

1. Are all answers for all questions of life found in the Bible? Discuss.
2. Why is continued Bible study so necessary?
3. Should we also study the writings of men of faith who have gone before us, eg, Calvin? How should we treat his work?
4. Somebody once said to me: “I read..., and read..., and read..., but nothing I read in the Bible seems relevant.... I get so disillusioned. What’s the sense of reading the Bible?!” How should one answer this challenge?
5. How should we treat tradition and customs received from our parents? I think, for example, of praying before and after meals, reading Bible at table.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.19; 35.98; 47.122

Canons of Dort, I.3; II.5; III/IV.6-8, 17; V.14

ARTICLE 8 & 9: GOD IS ONE IN ESSENCE, YET DISTINGUISHED IN THREE PERSONS

SCRIPTURE PROOF OF THIS DOCTRINE

ARTICLE 8

According to this truth and this Word of God, we believe in one only God, who is one single essence, in which are three persons, really, truly, and eternally distinct according to their incommunicable properties; namely, the Father, 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, the wisdom, and the image of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the eternal power and might who proceeds 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, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each has His personal existence, distinguished by Their properties; but in such a way that these three persons are but one only God.

It is therefore 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 our flesh and blood, neither has the Holy Spirit, but the Son only. The Father has never been without His Son, or without His Holy Spirit. For these three, in one and the same essence, are equal in eternity. There is neither first nor last; for They are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.

ARTICLE 9

All this we know both from the testimonies of Holy Scripture and from the respective works of the three Persons, and especially those we perceive in ourselves. The testimonies of Scripture which lead us to believe this Holy Trinity are written in many places of the Old Testament. It is not necessary to mention them all; it is sufficient to select some with discretion.

In the book of Genesis God says: Let Us make man in our image after our likeness So God created man in His own image...; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26,27). Also: Behold, the man has become like one of Us (Genesis 3:22). From God's saying, Let Us make man in Our image, it appears that there are more divine persons than one; and when He says, God created, He indicates that there is one God. It is true, He does not say how many persons there are, but what seems to be somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New Testament. For when our Lord was baptized in the river Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard, who said, This is My beloved Son (Matthew 3:17); the Son was seen in the water, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form as a dove. For the baptism of all believers Christ prescribed this formula: Baptize all nations into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). In the gospel according to Luke the angel Gabriel thus addressed Mary, the mother of our Lord: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God (Luke 1:35). Likewise: The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14). In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence.

Although this doctrine far surpasses all human understanding, nevertheless in this life we believe it on the ground of the Word of God, and we expect to enjoy its perfect knowledge and fruit hereafter in heaven.

Moreover, we must observe the distinct offices and works of these three Persons towards us. The Father is called our Creator by His power; the Son is our Saviour and Redeemer by His blood; the Holy Spirit is our Sanctifier by His dwelling in our hearts. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been maintained and preserved in the true church since the time of the apostles to this very day, over against Jews, Muslims, and against false Christians and heretics such as Marcion, Mani, Praxeas, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Arius, and such like, who have been justly condemned by the orthodox fathers. In this doctrine, therefore, we willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which in accordance with them is agreed upon by the early fathers.

GOD IS ONE

When the apostles after Pentecost began to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they preached that God is one. Paul, for example, wrote to the Corinthians that “*there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things*” (1 Corinthians 8:6). He wrote the same to Timothy: “*there is one God*” (1 Timothy 2:5). This is what the apostles had learned from Old Testament Scripture passages as Deuteronomy 6:4, “*Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one!*” and Isaiah 44:6, “*Besides Me there is no God.*”

GOD IS THREE

Yet the Old Testament also gave evidence that God is more than one. The Lord God announced His decision to make man with this word, “*Let Us make man in **Our** image, according to Our likeness*” (Genesis 1:26). The Scripture immediately adds, “*So God created man in **His own** image*” (vs 27). Here the plural and the singular are set side by side. Similarly, plurality within God is indicated in the passage about the burning bush. “*And the Angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush.... So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him* (Exodus 3:2-4). Here God is referred to as ‘the Angel of the LORD.’ Moses also hears the voice of God addressing him. The Angel is God, but is also mentioned separately from God. The best explanation for the identity of the Angel of the LORD is that this is the second person of the Trinity: the Son before He became flesh. Again, in Psalm 139:1 David addresses God, “*O LORD, You have searched me and known me,*” but further on he speaks to the Spirit saying (verse 7), “*where can I go from Your Spirit?*” Here the Spirit is also equated with God.

God’s New Testament revelation about Himself is clearer. Jesus told the Jews that “*My Father has been working until now, and I have been working*” (John 5:17). This upset the Jews so that they sought to kill Jesus “*because He ... said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God*” (vs 18). Jesus elaborated on His identity: “*The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.... For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will*” (vss 19-21). The Son and the Father are so close, Jesus maintains, that the Son echoes and copies the Father. Yet the Son does not copy the Father in creaturely activities, but copies Him in such divine activity as giving life. In so saying Jesus teaches that the Son is divine, equal with the Father, and yet not identical to the Father.

After His triumph on the cross Jesus gave further clarity on the point. He instructed His

disciples to “*go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). Here three divine Persons are mentioned in one breath, all as equals. The apostle Paul does the same as he extends the blessing to his readers, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all*” (2 Corinthians 13:14). The obscure plurality of the Old Testament gives way in the New Testament to clarity on God’s identity: holy God is One and is Three at the same time. That is why the apostles did not hesitate to write that Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God also (see Articles 10 and 11), and at the same time insist that “*God is one*”. As DeBrès puts it, “*what seems to be somewhat obscure in the Old Testament is very plain in the New Testament.*” He lists a row of evidences from the New Testament that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all equally God, and concludes, “*In all these places we are fully taught that there are three persons in one only divine essence.*”

ATTACKS ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Over the years of early church history, struggle arose concerning the doctrine of God. In an effort to capture the Biblical revelation that God is one and yet three, the Church Fathers coined the term ‘*trinity*’ – God is ‘tri-unity.’ But even the introduction of a Biblically faithful term does not explain just how God is one and three at the same time. And people want to understand....

Adoptionists

A group known as Adoptionists insisted that God is one – and that is to say that the Father alone is truly God.

They claimed that Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man with earthly biological parents, Joseph and Mary. What set Him apart from other people was His godly character, His overflowing love for God and His great zeal to glorify God through His ready obedience. So impressed (say the Adoptionists) was God with the good man Jesus that He adopted Him as His son, and poured out His Spirit (= a divine strength or breath) on Jesus so that Jesus might be a completely holy person. A well-known Adoptionist was Arius, who claimed that there was a time when Jesus did not exist (see below). Present day Jehovah’s Witnesses are also Adoptionists.

We need to be aware that if Jesus is not the divine Son of God, there can be no salvation for sinners. So intense is God’s hatred of sin, and so immense is His wrath on sin, that no creature could survive under the pressure of God’s holy judgment on sin. See Lord’s Day 6 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*. If Jesus Christ were but a creature (however holy), He would not be able to pay for sin and deliver others from it. In effect, the Adoptionist model destroys the heart of the Christian faith itself.

Modalists

The Modalists (mode = form; ie, God takes on different forms) said that the one God can be compared to a single earthly father who wears different hats, or assumes different roles, depending on where he is. For example, one might call his father ‘Dad’ at home, ‘sir’ at school, and ‘elder’ at church. So it is with God: He is one God who wears three different hats, ie, He was Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament and Spirit after Pentecost. From this it follows that the person who died on the cross was simply the ‘Father wearing the hat of Savior’ (so-called ‘*patripassionism*’ = the Father suffered).

If the Modalists were correct, Jesus’ prayers to the Father were an illusion or a charade – for Jesus was then praying to Himself. Similarly, the Scriptural teaching that the ascended Son

intercedes before the Father loses all sense if in fact the Son is simply the Father wearing another hat. Once more, God's revelation of Himself as a God of deepest love—for He “*sent His only begotten Son into the world ... to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 4:9,10)—would lose its profound meaning if the only begotten Son is in fact the Father.

DEFENCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: EARLY HISTORY

Adoptionism and Modalism are attractive inasmuch as they make God *understandable* to our minds. Yet the early church fathers insisted that these (and other) attempts to understand how God is put together are actually heresy. The Bible is emphatic that the Son of God is eternal, was always there (John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-18), and Joseph was not His biological father (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35). Similarly, the Father and the Son cannot be identified as one so that the Father is said to have suffered on the cross (see Matthew 27:46).

In the face of these heresies the early Church was repeatedly called to defend the truth. Hence Emperor Constantine convened the Synod of Nicea in 325 A.D. This synod declared Arius and Adoptionists to be wrong in their view regarding the Trinity. Arius, however, did not relent. Eventually the person who spearheaded the Biblical defense of the Trinity, Athanasius, was declared wrong in his teaching and exiled. In fact, in the course of the following years, the Church effectively embraced the doctrine of Arius. And that is to say that the gospel of redemption through the blood of the Son of God was buried under heresy.

The Head of the Church, though, led events in such a way that a subsequent Synod, the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.), condemned Arius' teaching for the heresy it was. This Council adopted a statement of faith that has become known as the Nicene Creed, as we find it on page 437 in our *Book of Praise*. When one compares the Nicene Creed with the Apostles' Creed, one notices that both creeds can be divided into three parts, according to the persons of the Trinity. The Synod of 381 A.D. essentially took the Apostles' Creed and elaborated on certain articles within it in order to state more explicitly what the Scriptures say about the Trinity. For example, the opening line of the Apostles' Creed (“*I believe in God the Father almighty*”) is expanded in the Nicene Creed to state: “*I believe in one God, the Father Almighty*”). Notice the insistence that God is one. The second statement of the Apostles' Creed (“*I believe in Jesus Christ*”) is expanded in the second paragraph of the Nicene Creed to explain who Jesus Christ is: “*God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made....*” Notice that the formulation leaves no room for Adoptionism or for Modalism. Again, the statement of the Apostles' Creed concerning the Holy Spirit (“*I believe in the Holy Spirit*”) is expanded in the fourth paragraph of the Nicene Creed to explain that He is God, “*the Lord and Giver of life*”. By placing in a creed what the church learned from the Word of God, the early church sought to arm the believers against the errors of the Adoptionists and Modalists.

Not long after 381, however, the confession captured in the Nicene Creed was threatened once more. The followers of Arius were not about to give up. In grace God preserved His Church by granting that, in the course of time, yet another creed was formulated in defense of the doctrine of the Trinity. This newest creed, known as the Athanasian Creed, expanded further on the doctrine that the Son and the Spirit, together with the Father, are true God. This creed, printed on page 438 of the *Book of Praise*, condemns in pointed terms the teaching of the Adoptionists and the Modalists. It states emphatically in article 3 that, “*And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.*” It insists that “*there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit*”, all three being equal, all three being eternal, all three being uncreated, and all three being

incomprehensible. Yet, it hastens to add, this does not mean that there are three Gods. *“In this Trinity none is afore, or after another; none is greater, or less than other. But the whole three persons are co-eternal, and co-equal.”* This creed is adamant: *“He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.”*

GOD: INCOMPREHENSIBLE

Still, could the fathers in these three Creeds make clear just how three Persons can be one God, and how one God can be three divine Persons? The Adoptionists and the Modalists tried so hard to understand God. But even the cleverest of the church fathers could not capture how God is three and one at the same time. In fact, our God is so great and majestic and awesome that He is *beyond* human understanding. The created, finite human mind cannot grasp that 3 can be 1 and 1 can be 3. Adoptionists and Modalists try to bring God down to a human level so that people can understand how God is ‘put together’. This will never succeed simply because He who created heaven and earth is beyond human comprehension.

COMFORT

The fact that I cannot comprehend how my God is put together provides incredible comfort! Daily I struggle with the ups and downs of life; I don’t understand the various things this sovereign God permits in my life, and that can get frustrating. Yet, if I bear in mind that this God is so vastly beyond my understanding even in how He is put together, I cannot expect to comprehend either why He does what He does in my life. I can rest in the arms of this God, even when I do not understand.

Further, might it be so that God the Father is angry with me while God the Son laid down His life for me? That would assume that the Father and the Son have a difference between themselves. Yet the very fact that God is One means there can never be a tension between the Father and the Son. If the Son in love laid down His life for me, the Father invariably loves me too. If the Son today pleads with the Father on my behalf, the Father invariably listens to the Son – for the Father and the Son are one.

Again, who is it that dwells within the believers? Yes, it is the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). Yet this Spirit is true God, with the Father and the Son. That is why Jesus can say, *“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him”* (John 14:23). If the Spirit were not true God, we could assume that the Father and the Son are far from us today, remote and isolated in heaven. But given the unity of Father, Son and Spirit, the Spirit’s indwelling in the hearts of God’s own means that the Father and the Son also are close by – they know us and our circumstances, and supply our needs.

The unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is beyond human comprehension – thankfully so! This triune God is far *beyond* our comprehension – in both His Person and His work. Here is cause for so much encouragement and comfort in the big questions of life! With such a God I am always safe.

Points for Discussion:

1. What efforts were made in the past in an attempt to understand the Trinity?

2. Why are these efforts inadequate? Is there any comfort in this?
3. Discuss development from Apostles' Creed to Nicene Creed to Athanasian Creed, in relation to the Trinity.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 8.24, 25
Apostles' Creed; Nicene Creed; Athanasian Creed

ARTICLE 10: JESUS CHRIST TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

ARTICLE 10

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 of the same essence with the Father, equally-eternal, who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature (Hebrews 1:3), and is equal to 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 with each other, teach us: Moses says that God created the world; the apostle John says that all things were made by the Word which he calls God. The letter to the Hebrews says that God made the world through His Son; likewise the apostle Paul says that God created all things through Jesus Christ. Therefore it must necessarily 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 He could say, Truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am (John 8:58), and He prayed, Glorify Thou Me in Thy own presence with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was made (John 17:5). And so He is true, eternal God, the Almighty, whom we invoke, worship, and serve.

WHO IS HE?

Jesus Christ once asked His hearers who they thought He was (Matthew 22:42). That question has remained important over the years and centuries since Jesus posed it. Various answers have been given:

- He was an *example* whose lifestyle of self-sacrifice we ought to follow.
- He was a greater *teacher* whose instruction we do well to take to heart. Interestingly, opinions vary on what His teaching actually was.
- He was a *political figure* who sympathized with the underdogs of society and sought to liberate them from their oppression.

The list can be continued. None of these claims to Jesus' identity, however, do justice to what God has revealed in His Word about Jesus Christ. The plain testimony of Scripture about Jesus Christ is that He is none less than *God*, come to earth in the flesh. So DeBrès, though living under the pressures of persecution, repeats after God in Article 10 what he has heard God say in Scripture about the deity of Jesus Christ. In Article 18 DeBrès makes confession about Jesus' humanity.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE OF JESUS' DEITY

That Jesus Christ is actually God is evident from the testimony of Scripture in four areas:

Jesus has Divine Names

John begins his gospel with this powerful statement: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God.***" In verse 14 he explains that "***the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.***" If Christ is the Word, and the Word is God (vs 1), it follows that Christ is God. Over the years of the earthly ministry of the Word-become-flesh, John spent three years walking with Jesus through the streets and villages of Israel. Yet in his letter this same John says emphatically, "*we are in Him who is true, in **His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life***" (1 John 5:20). Note how John does not hesitate to call the man Jesus 'true God'.

Paul the Pharisee hated Jesus Christ and persecuted His followers. He came to faith on the road to Damascus when that bright light from heaven surrounded him and he heard the voice of the ascended Christ. Paul could get around it no longer, and immediately addressed Christ as “*Lord*” (Acts 9:5; see below). Just what Paul understood concerning Jesus’ identity is clear from his writings; he tells the Romans that Christ is “*the eternally blessed God*” (9:5). To Titus he writes that Christians look forward to the “*glorious appearing of our great **God and Savior Jesus Christ***” (Titus 2:13).

As to the word ‘**Lord**’, it must also be noted that the term is frequently applied throughout the New Testament to Jesus Christ. English translations of the Old Testament print the word ‘Lord’ in two ways, one in lower case letters and the other in upper case letters (LORD). Lord in lower case letters renders the Hebrew word *Adonai*, meaning Master, hence ‘Lord’. LORD in upper case letters renders the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, God’s covenant name.

When the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew to Greek many years before Jesus’ birth (the *Septuagint*), both *Adonai* and *Yahweh* were rendered with the Greek term *Kurios* – without distinction in upper or lower case letters. When in turn the New Testament writers recorded the gospel of Jesus Christ, they freely used the name ‘Lord’ in relation to Jesus Christ. Which Hebrew term, though, were the gospels’ readers to think of when they read the name ‘Lord’ in relation to Christ? Were they to consider Jesus as ‘Master’ or as ‘Yahweh’? There are passages where the word *Kurios* is simply a term of respect to a superior, and hence rendered as ‘Sir’ (eg Matthew 13:27; 21:30; 27:63) or even ‘Owner’ or ‘Master’ (Matthew 6:24; 21:40). As a name for Jesus Christ, though, we find it repeatedly used as the Greek equivalent of Old Testament *Yahweh*. For example, when the angel spoke to the shepherds on the day of Jesus’ birth, he told them that “*there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:11). The angel surely did not intend the shepherds to understand that a ‘Sir’ or a ‘Master’ was born, but instead that God Himself had come in the flesh. That also explains why all who heard the shepherds’ report “*marveled*” (Luke 2:18), and why Mary “*kept all these things and pondered them in her heart*” (Luke 2:19). Similarly, when Mary visited Elizabeth some months before Jesus’ birth, Elizabeth says, “*But why is it granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*” (Luke 1:43). With the term ‘Lord’ Elizabeth was surely not calling the unborn Jesus her ‘Sir’ or her ‘Master’, but was rather recognizing that the child Mary carried was none other than divine. That is also the reason why her own baby in her womb leaped for joy (vs 44). When the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus addressed Jesus as ‘Lord’, he did so in full awareness of the Old Testament loading of the term. He recognized that the one who addressed him from that unapproachable light was none less than God.

Jesus has Divine Attributes

Jesus is ETERNAL

Unlike creatures that have been made (and therefore have a beginning), Jesus was not made and does not have a beginning. Jesus told the Jews that Abraham saw Jesus’ day. This statement prompted a disdainful reaction from the Jews: “*You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?!*” In reply Jesus said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, **before Abraham was I AM***” (John 8:56-58). With this reply Jesus said at least two things.

- 1) Jesus’ use of the words ‘*I AM*’ comes from God’s words to Moses at the burning bush, where He described Himself as the I AM WHO I AM. Here Jesus claims to be this same God! That is why the Jews “*took up stones to throw at Him*” (vs 59).
- 2) Jesus’ statement that He existed before Abraham points up that Jesus was not simply some thirty years old, like other men His age. Though He had been on earth only

some thirty years (and hence his body was that of the average 30 year old), Jesus in fact had existed since before Abraham lived many centuries ago. This second element comes out clearly in Jesus' prayer to the Father before He went to the cross. "*And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was*" (John 17:5). His point is clear: Jesus was with the Father in Heaven before the events related to us in Genesis 1 occurred. He is eternal.

Jesus KNOWS ALL THINGS

A number of texts in the gospel of John draw out Jesus' divine knowledge. John 1:48: "*Nathanael said to Him, 'How do You know me?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.'*" The branches of a fig tree hang in such a way that one could rest under a fig tree, hidden from the public eye. Despite the canopy of leaves, however, Jesus knew that Nathanael was under that tree. On another occasion John relates concerning Jesus that He "*had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man*" (John 2:25). How much He knew is illustrated by His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, when He "*said to her, 'You have well said, 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly*" (John 4:16-18). The only reason why Jesus knew that the woman's current man was her sixth and that they were not married was because He knows more than people can know. Here we are shown something of Jesus' divinity.

Jesus is Involved in Divine Work

Scripture is careful to show that some activities are ultimately beyond what man is able to do and are limited to God. Yet these works are attributed to Jesus Christ. One can mention the following:

The CREATION of the World.

In John 1:3 we read, "*All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.*" Paul adds that "*by Him all thing were created*" (Colossians 1:16). In Hebrews 1:2 we read, God "*has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.*" Not only do texts as these assume that Jesus existed before creation, but they also describe Jesus as centrally involved creating this world. Yet creating –making something out of nothing– is distinctly a divine work.

FORGIVENESS of Sins

Since sin in essence is offence against God, only God Himself can ultimately determine whether to punish a sinner or forgive him. Yet Jesus dared to say to the paralytic, "*Son, your sins are forgiven you*" (Mark 2:5). The Scribes understood well that only God could forgive sins, for they reasoned among themselves, "*Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" (vs 7). This was Jesus' point; in granting forgiveness Jesus revealed Himself as God.

JUDGMENT

All sin is ultimately against God, the Creator and Master of the universe. So God is the Judge, who will assign to each sinner a fitting penalty. Yet Jesus lets His hearers in on a divine decision: "*For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son*" (John 5:22). The Son permits believers to enter heaven and sentences unbelievers to hell

because He is God.

Jesus Receives Divine Honor

In Matthew 28:19 we read that the Son is not less than the Father or the Holy Spirit, but is placed on a level with these two Persons of the Godhead. *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* The apostle Paul also places Jesus Christ on the same level as the Father when he laid the blessing of the Lord upon the congregation: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all”* (2 Corinthians 13:14). Putting Jesus Christ on the same level as the Father is in keeping with Jesus’ own words: *“that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him”* (John 5:23).

The apostle John was given a glimpse of the honor given to the exalted Christ in heaven. He heard *“every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that is in them, ... saying: ‘Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, And to the Lamb, for ever and ever’”* (Revelation 5:13). To be accorded such worship is fitting only for one who is God Himself.

The above list of texts is by no means exhaustive. However, this brief list compels the devout reader of Holy Scripture to repeat after God that the Lord Jesus Christ is in fact true and eternal God. Although He is a man (see Article 18), His humanity does not exhaust His identity. The church humbly and gratefully echoes the Lord’s revelation concerning Himself on the point: *“We believe that Jesus Christ according to His divine nature is the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made, nor created ... but of the same essence with the Father, equally eternal....”*

CONSEQUENCES OF CHRIST’S DIVINE IDENTITY

That Jesus Christ is true and eternal God leads to particular consequences. They can be listed as follows:

Give Him Honor

It will not do to think or speak of Jesus Christ as if He were just a man, be it a great man. Since He was and is true God, all discussion about Jesus must be done in the awareness that we stand on holy ground. It is this awareness that renders erroneous and misleading pictures of Jesus as ‘only’ a man, as well as films wherein Jesus is enacted by a mere mortal. It is certainly true that the people of Nazareth who saw Jesus grow up, and the people of Galilee who witnessed Jesus’ earthly ministry, did not see in Jesus anything divine; Jesus played on the streets with the other boys, worked up a sweat as did the other men, could laugh and cry and be exhausted as anyone else. Yet we today do not live in the days of Jesus’ earthly sojourn; we live years later, after the Holy Spirit has made a point of impressing upon us that the Jesus who grew up in Nazareth and ministered in Israel was in fact true God. If we today ignore this progress in God’s revelation, and present Jesus in talk or picture as ‘just a man’, we in fact dishonor the Lord.

Characteristics of God belong to Jesus Christ

All that we confessed concerning God is true also of Jesus Christ. As we think of God’s wisdom and power and love and goodness, etc, our thoughts are not to be limited to God the Father alone. All these wonderful qualities are equally true of Jesus Christ. Granted, during His time on earth these characteristics were not all evident in all their brilliance, for Jesus hid

something of His divine qualities. Yet the fact that He hid them does not negate the presence of those characteristics. It is this observation that explains, for example, that He knew what was in the hearts of all men. Equally, it is this fact that gave Him the wherewithal to withstand the judgment of God against sin when He hung on the cursed cross. Now that Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven, His wisdom and power and goodness and love have not changed from what they were. Rather, these qualities are now fully ‘in the open’.

This Jesus came to Earth

The marvel of Jesus’ identity as true God is evident specifically in His work at Christmas. Jesus Christ, eternally with the Father in glory, left the presence of the Father in heaven in favor of a place in one of earth’s lowly stables. That true God left heaven for earth is itself a staggering thought; that He left the glory of heaven for rags in a feeding trough is more than our minds can comprehend! Yet this is Christmas: “... *Christ Jesus... being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men...*” (Philippians 2:5-8). He did not insist on the ‘rights’ that come with being true God, but was content to give it away in order to serve the unworthy – how awesome! In fact, “*He humbled Himself and become obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross,*” Paul continues. It is beyond human understanding: on the cross died none other than **true God**! More: this true God came to earth *to redeem me from all my sin!* How positively delightful the gospel is!

Heresies Concerning Christ’s Divinity

The Pharisees were not the only ones who took offence at Jesus’ claim to divinity (John 8:59). In the course of church history many have maintained the same error. Arius (b. 256) spread the falsehood that Jesus was created, be it the first of God’s creatures. To correct this heresy, the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) strengthened the current confession by elaborating on the Person of Jesus Christ. The Apostles’ Creed had said of Jesus Christ that He was “[God’s] *only-begotten Son, our Lord*”. The Nicene Creed (*Book of Praise*, p. 437) expands upon the Apostles’ Creed by adding in Paragraph 2 the following: “*I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.*” In confrontation with Arius, the church listened more carefully to God’s revelation about the Son, and then repeated after God, in her own words, what the Lord revealed about the Christ.

Arius’ false teaching, however, did not disappear in the face of a strengthened confession. So it became necessary to revisit the matter some years later. The Athanasian Creed (*Book of Praise*, pp 438-9) concentrates in its first 29 articles on the Trinity, and then proceeds in Articles 29-43 to detail the Person of Jesus Christ. Concerning Christ incarnate, article 30 goes on to say that He is “*the Son of God, is equally both God and man. He is God of the Father’s substance, begotten before time; and He is man from His mother’s substance, born in time. Perfect God, perfect man composed of a human soul and human flesh, equal to the Father in respect of His divinity, less than the Father in respect of His humanity.*” To confess that Christ is true God is no insignificant matter, says article 29, but “*necessary ... to eternal salvation.*” In fact, the Athanasian Creed concludes with a powerful statement of the necessity of maintaining Christ’s divine nature: “*this is the catholic faith. Unless a man believes it faithfully and steadfastly, he cannot be saved. Amen.*” This is the sentiment, historically embraced by the Church for many centuries, that Guido DeBrès repeated in Article 10 of his confession.

Despite the church's long and emphatic insistence on maintaining this confession on Jesus' identity, there have continually been those who keep denying Jesus' Godhead. One may think today of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This sect has produced its own Bible translation (the New World Translation), where John 1:1 is rendered as: "In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god" – a translation that simply does not do justice to what the original Greek says, for the Greek says plainly that "*the Word was God.*" To think of the man Jesus, though, as true God is too humbling for the sinful mind, for it means ultimately that man could not save himself from the justice of God; he is dependent on a free gift from heaven, none less than God the Son Himself!

Many theologians today deny that God exists; they maintain that heaven is actually empty and this world came into existence through a long process of evolution. It follows that Jesus could never be true God – for there is no God. Instead, Jesus' followers over the years claimed Jesus was (a) God, and wrote (or altered) the books of the New Testament to support their convictions. This is the message preached by so many mainline churches in the western world today. In fact, the Christian Church today is surrounded by the conviction that Christ is not really God.

Necessity of Christ's Godhead

At the end of the day, does it make any difference whether Jesus Christ is true and eternal God? The *Heidelberg Catechism* answers the question in Lord's Day 6.17. This historic confession states that if Christ had not been true God but were just an ordinary man no different from you and me, He could not have carried the burden of God's wrath against the sin of mankind. Then Christ on the cross would have perished under the fierceness of God's wrath, so that in turn every person must face the infinite wrath of God on own strength – and therefore perish also. As it is, Jesus' personhood determines His work. If He is not true God, He cannot be the Redeemer.

It is precisely on this point that the Christian faith differs from every other religion. Every other religion of the world has man's relation with God in man's control; man must perform some work to impress the Deity. Christ's identity as true God lies at the heart of Christianity's insistence that man's relation with God lies in *God's* control. For "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). Not people reached out to God, but God has reached out to people! That ensures that Christ's redeeming work is quality work; His identity assures us that we are in fact reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Here is enormous encouragement and comfort to mortal sinners.

Points for Discussion:

1. Do the characteristics of God mentioned in Article 1 apply also to Jesus? Why or why not? If they do, how does this affect (or perhaps alter) your perception of who Jesus Christ is?
2. Explain Arius' thoughts concerning Jesus Christ.
3. Why is it important to salvation to confess that Jesus is God?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.18; 13.33; 14.35, 36
Canons of Dort, II.1-4
Nicene Creed; Athanasian Creed

ARTICLE 11: THE HOLY SPIRIT TRUE AND ETERNAL GOD

ARTICLE 11

We believe and confess also that the Holy Spirit from eternity proceeds from the Father and the Son. He is neither made, created, nor begotten, but He can only be said to proceed from both.¹ In order He is the third Person of the Holy Trinity, of one and the same essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God, as the Holy Scriptures teach us.²

Scriptural Evidence

The question of the Holy Spirit's identity is as important as the identity of Jesus Christ. Typically, when the divinity of Christ has been denied, the divinity of the Spirit has been denied also. So too, in fact, is His personhood denied; those who deny His divinity consider the Holy Spirit to be no more than a power going out from God (see Article 8, concerning the Adoptionists). Holy Scripture, however, presents the Holy Spirit as true God, a divine Person.

We can list the evidence concerning the Spirit's divinity under the same headings as used in relation to Christ's divinity.

The Holy Spirit has Divine Names

David prays to the Lord in Psalm 139: "*O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off*" (vs 1,2). In the following verses he continues to confess how well the LORD knows him. Then it is as if in vs 7 he suddenly changes topics to the Holy Spirit: "*Where can I go from your Spirit?*" Yet this is not a change of topic, as the second part of vs 7 makes clear: "*Or where can I flee from Your presence?*" Hebrew poetry frequently says the same thing twice, with the second part of a verse repeating in different words the sentiment of the first part of the verse. So it is here. David interchanges 'LORD' and 'Spirit', and thereby reveals that the Holy Spirit in fact is God, Yahweh.

In line with David's prayer in Psalm 139, Peter can describe the Holy Spirit as God in his words to Ananias. "*Why,*" Peter asked him, "*has Satan filled your heart to lie to **the Holy Spirit** You have not lied to men but to **God***" (Acts 5:3,4). Note here how Peter interchanges the words 'Holy Spirit' and 'God', though still talking about the same 'person'. This is because Peter knows the Holy Spirit to be God.

The Holy Spirit has Divine Attributes

The Holy Spirit is EVERYWHERE.

David asks, "***Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there***" (Psalm 139:7,8). David's point is not only that the Spirit is God (see above), but also that the Spirit is everywhere; nowhere is he able to get away from God's presence.

Jesus intimated the same thing when He assured His disciples on the day of His ascension that He would be with them always (Matthew 28:20). Christ ascended into heaven, but returned on Pentecost in His Holy Spirit (cf Romans 8:9). This Spirit is not limited to one town or to one person, but is present with God's people wherever they are. That is because the Spirit is divine.

The Holy Spirit KNOWS ALL THINGS.

No creature is able to search or comprehend the depths of God. But the Spirit is able to do so for He is God. Says Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:11: *“For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”* Paul’s argument is that the Spirit knows God’s thoughts exactly because He is divine, is God Himself – just as a man alone knows his own thoughts. No separation is to be made between God and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is Involved in Divine Work

CREATION

The Holy Spirit was involved in the creation of the world. In Genesis 1:1,2 we read, *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”* Elihu states that *“The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life”* (Job 33:4). Yet creation is distinctly not the work of a creature (how could a creature create!), but the work of God alone.

In the same vein, one can mention the Spirit’s work in relation to Mary’s pregnancy. *“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God”* (Luke 1:35). God has so established creation that no woman can become pregnant without the involvement of a man. Yet in this case no man is involved, and that is to say that God Himself intervenes in the normal order of things to achieve pregnancy in a fundamentally different way. Here is a work of creation.

RECREATION

The Holy Spirit is also busy with the work of recreation. In Psalm 104:30 we read how it is the Holy Spirit who renews creation, causing seeds to sprout anew each year and plants to develop new buds. *“You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth.”* This renewal is not the work of a creature.

The same is to be said of human rebirth. Because of the fall into sin, people need to be born again, as Jesus told Nicodemus: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). He added, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God”* (vs 5). So too Paul to the Corinthians: *“No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 12:3). That people dead in sin are made alive can only happen through the work of One who is God.

The Holy Spirit Receives Divine Honor

In Matthew 28:19, the Holy Spirit is placed on a level with the Father and the Son. *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* The same is done in 2 Corinthians 13:14, *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.”*

Consequences of the Holy Spirit’s Divine Identity

That the Holy Spirit is true and eternal God leads to particular consequences. They can be listed as follows:

Give Him Honor

It will not do to think or speak of the Holy Spirit as if He were simply a power, be it a great power from heaven. The Spirit is not an ‘it’, not a ‘thing’, not even a ‘power’; He is true God on a level with the Father and the Son. So, as we speak of the Spirit we need to be conscious of the fact that we stand on holy ground.

It is true that at the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit appeared “*like a dove*” (Luke 3:22). That single episode of His appearing in the form of a dove does not justify portraying Him as a dove. On Pentecost His presence was indicated by the flame of fire on the head of each believer – and fire repeatedly depicts the presence of God in the Old Testament (think of the burning bush, Mt Sinai, and the Elijah’s altar on Mt Carmel). Exactly because He is God, no creaturely depiction can do justice to His identity. He deserves the same respect, honor and devotions as the other Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Characteristics of God belong to the Holy Spirit

All we confessed concerning God is true also of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, like the Father and the Son, is eternal, almighty, just, wise, good, etc. This explains why David could confess that He could not get away from the Holy Spirit (Psalm 139:7). It also explains why men “*full of the Holy Spirit*” could give leadership befitting the people of *God* (Acts 6:3). Through the Spirit of God who indwells them, these men could give good, wise, and just counsel to the church.

This Holy Spirit came to Earth

This Holy Spirit, true and eternal God as He is, has been with the Father and the Son in the glory of heaven from all eternity. This is the One, however, whom the Son sent to earth on Pentecost, and who –in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the tabernacle and in the temple– made His home in the hearts of God’s people. This is He of whom Paul could say to the saints of Corinth: “*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?*” (1 Corinthians 6:19). What an awesome thought: none less than the Holy Spirit –true and eternal God!– has made His home in human hearts, in **our** hearts! How astounding the gospel; God is not far off! And therefore how great the responsibility: “*Therefore honor God with your body*” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Heresies Concerning the Spirit’s Divinity

Arius said that Christ was not true God. In the very same struggle concerning the deity of Christ, Arius said that the Holy Spirit is not true God either. When the early church corrected Arius’ teaching concerning Christ’s divinity in the Nicene Creed (*Book of Praise*, pg 437), it also corrected his errors concerning the Holy Spirit’s divinity. Concerning the Holy Spirit the Apostles’ Creed had simply said: “*I believe in the Holy Spirit.*” Over against Arius the Nicene Creed expanded that simple statement with the addition of the words, “*the Lord and Giver of life.*” With that addition, the early church sought to confess the Spirit’s divinity.

This addition however, did not rid the church of misconception concerning who the Holy Spirit really was. So the church years later, in the Athanasian Creed (*Book of Praise*, pg 438) reinforced the confession of the Nicene Creed with this statement: “*such as the Father is, such is the Son, such is also the Holy Spirit. The Father is uncreate, the Son uncreate, the Holy Spirit uncreate. The Father is infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite.... In the same way the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, the Holy Spirit almighty.*” And: “*Thus the Father is God, the Son God, the Holy Spirit God.*” It concludes its section on the Trinity (and thus on the Spirit’s divinity) with this word: “*So he who desires to be saved should think*

thus of the Trinity.”

Necessity of the Spirit's Godhead

Is, then, confessing the divinity of the Holy Spirit so important? Is anything truly lost if one were to insist that the Spirit were but a power coming from God? Simply put: if the Spirit were not God, there would be no Bible, no faith, no Christianity, no church.

No Bible

Jesus told His disciples, “*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come*” (John 16:13). If the Holy Spirit were not God, He would not be able to guide us into the truth of God. Nor would we have any certainty that the word He speaks would in fact be the Word of God. But as it is, true and eternal God Himself, the Holy Spirit, has given us the Bible. It was the Holy Spirit who inspired men to write Scripture (see Article 3 – 7). It is the Author's identity that makes this book so valuable!

No Faith

Through His sacrifice, Christ obtained salvation for sinners – no less, and no more. The ointment you picked up from the pharmacy does not help you until it is *applied*. In the same vein, vital though Christ's work on the cross is for our salvation, it does not help us as long as it is not applied to us. We are not in a position to apply it ourselves since we are dead in sin (see Article 14). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to apply that salvation. In applying that work, the Spirit must first make the dead alive. He could not do that if He were not Himself true God.

No Christianity

As it is, the Spirit is mighty to work great *change* in dead sinners. The earth God created in the beginning was formless and void (Genesis 1:1,2). It wasn't until the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the deep that *change* came about, and God created light, sky, land, etc. Man was gifted to build remarkable structures, including an ark, the tower of Babel, cities, etc. But it wasn't until the Holy Spirit came upon the craftsmen of Israel that man was enabled to build a dwelling place for God on earth in Israel's tabernacle (Exodus 31:1ff). Season follows season, but it is the Holy Spirit who works the change we call new growth in spring (Psalm 104:30). So it is too with people dead in sin. Since the fall into sin, people produce the works of the flesh: “*sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy...*” (Galatians 5:18,19). But when the Holy Spirit makes His home in a sinner, He *changes* that person so that he produces the fruits of the Spirit: “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*” (Galatians 5:22,23). A careful look at those two lists highlights the contrast between the two, with the first characterized by love for self, and the second characterized by love for God and the neighbor. The *change* God the Holy Spirit works is no small change, but is a radical one – as radical as the change between the formless and void world of Genesis 1:2 and the ordered world of Genesis 1:31 concerning which God said it was “*very good*”. That's not to say that the work of the Holy Spirit in regenerating sinners is complete or perfected; though the change is radical, even the holiest of saints “*have only a small beginning*” of the obedience God requires (Lord's Day 44.114). Nevertheless, the change is real and is radical. Dead people are made alive, and so Christianity is a real thing in this fallen world – thanks to the mighty work of the Holy Spirit.

No Church

It is not just so that the change the Spirit works produces Christians – and nothing more. As a result of the fall into sin, people became alienated from each other; witness Adam's haste to blame Eve for the fall (Genesis 3:12), Cain's hatred of his brother Abel (Genesis 4:8), Lamech's readiness to kill another in response to a small offence (Genesis 4:23), etc. But scarcely was the Holy Spirit poured out on Pentecost Day, and people who by nature looked after their own skin "*were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need*" (Acts 2:44,45). The Holy Spirit gathered together the individuals in whom He worked faith so that they were one body, a body that functioned as a body ought to function – in self-denying care for other members. Through the Spirit Christ gathers His church. See also 1 Corinthians 12.

Focus on Christ

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Divine Trinity. In the pages of Scripture we do not find the Spirit drawing attention to Himself. Rather, the Spirit continually draws attention to Jesus Christ, the glorious Victor over sin and Satan, and the Sovereign Ruler over today's world. Jesus, for example, told His disciples of the persecution that was sure to come on those who believe in Christ crucified (John 15:18-16:4). To encourage His disciples Jesus promised to send "*the Helper..., the Spirit of truth*" (15:26). Yet this Spirit would not draw the disciples' attention away from the Christ on whose account they would be persecuted and have them focus on Himself instead; rather, the "*Spirit of truth*" would "*guide you into all truth*" (16:13), meaning (says Jesus) that "*He will take of Mine and declare it to you*" (vs 15). The Spirit, then, will impress on the disciples (and on all God's people) the things of Jesus Christ. That is why the first Christians on Pentecost day did not devote themselves to speaking in tongues and doing miracles (as if the focus should be on the Holy Spirit and His gifts), but they "*continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine*" (Acts 2:42) – which, as Peter shows in his Pentecost sermon, is about Christ crucified for sinners (Acts 2:22-33; see also 1 Corinthians 2:2).

The Holy Spirit, then, may be compared to a floodlight. A floodlight does not draw attention to itself, but wants passersby to notice the building upon which the floodlight shines. The Holy Spirit does not draw attention to Himself, and does not ask us to question whether we have the Holy Spirit. Rather, the Spirit wants us to look at the Christ and to believe that He is the Savior of the world. Salvation is in Christ, not in the Spirit, and so the Spirit directs us to Christ and to Christ alone.

Pentecostalists and charismatics would have us wonder whether we have the Spirit, whether we are filled with the Spirit, whether we are in tune with the Spirit. Similarly, New Age mystics and Asian gurus would have us consider whether we are listening well to the spirit within us. But the Holy Spirit does not draw attention to Himself. He dwells in our hearts in order to draw our attention time and again to Jesus Christ. So the question is not: do you have the Holy Spirit? The question is instead: do you believe in Jesus Christ? Then the focus lies not on something inside yourself, but on a specific event accomplished 2000 years ago on Calvary's cross and on the Victor's current work on the Throne of heaven and earth. A focus fixed on Jesus Christ gives immeasurable comfort in the struggles and doubts of this broken life.

Points for Discussion:

1. Do the characteristics of God mentioned in Article 1 apply also to the Holy Spirit? Why or why not? If they do, how does this affect (or perhaps alter) your perception of who the Holy Spirit is?
2. Explain Arius' thoughts concerning the Holy Spirit.
3. Why is it important to salvation to confess that the Holy Spirit is God?
4. Ought a Christian to focus on Jesus Christ or on the Holy Spirit? Why?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 20

Canons of Dort, III/IV.11, 12

Nicene Creed; Athanasian Creed

ARTICLE 12: THE CREATION OF ALL THINGS, ESPECIALLY THE ANGELS

ARTICLE 12

We believe that the Father through the Word, that is, through His Son, has created out of nothing heaven and earth and all creatures, when it seemed good to Him, and that He has given to every creature its being, shape, and form, and to each its specific task and function to serve its Creator. We believe that He also continues to sustain and govern them according to His eternal providence and by His infinite power in order to serve man, 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 these have fallen from the exalted position in which God created them into everlasting perdition, but the others have by the grace of God remained steadfast and continued in their first state. The devils and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and of all that is good. With all their might, they lie in wait like murderers to ruin the church and all its members and to destroy everything by their wicked devices. They are therefore by their own wickedness sentenced to eternal damnation and daily expect their horrible torments.

Therefore we detest and reject the error of the Sadducees, who deny that there are any spirits and angels; and also the error of the Manichees, who say that the devils were not created, but have their origin of themselves, and that without having become corrupted, they are wicked by their own nature.

WHO GOD IS

The confession concerning who God is leads logically to a discussion of His work, the first of which is His act of creating the world. The mighty, faithful, wise God of whom DeBrès made confession in earlier articles is not idle; this God worked to create the world, and continues to work today to uphold it. These works of God give us greater understanding of who this God really is. This is evident from the opening verse of the Bible, for Genesis 1:1 does not begin with words like, “This is God speaking...,” as if God needs to introduce Himself to His readers. Rather, the verse relates action – “*In the beginning God **created** the heavens and the earth*” – and therein displays for the readers who God actually is.

GENESIS 1

Scripture’s opening words quoted above indicate that God created a world made up of two distinct parts, “*the heavens and the earth*.” The Lord gives us no details about how He went about creating the heavens, or its inhabitants the angels. Instead, He tells us in detail how He created the earth (Genesis 1:3-2:4), that portion of His handiwork which “*He has given to the children of men*” (Psalm 115:16). We relate to the earth, see it, touch it, smell it; we know our home so well. God reveals information about Himself (as Creator and Sustainer of life) with reference to the world that we are so familiar with. Paul puts it this way, “*His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead*” (Romans 1:20).

WORLDVIEW

Just *how* did God go about creating the universe we can see and explore? How are we to understand the revelation of God found in Genesis 1? Numerous answers exist:

- The days of Genesis 1 are not comparable to our (24-hour) days, but represent large eons of time. The Lord God, then, let the world develop (be it under His guidance) through a process of evolution spanning millions upon millions of years.
- A large stretch of time is assumed between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:3. The point then is that after God called the world into existence, He let it evolve over countless years before He organized it (in one week) into a habitable home for the human race. The fossils found on earth today are remnants of animals and even civilizations that existed before God organized the world according to Genesis 1:3ff. Adam, then, was not the first man.
- The description of God creating the world as found in Genesis 1 must not be understood literally. It is a poetical reconstruction of God's work, retold in a framework of 2 times 3 days each (there are parallels between Days 1 & 4, Days 2 & 5, and Days 3 & 6). How the world actually came to be is then a matter for science to discover, not for the Bible to disclose.
- The creation account of Genesis 1 is to be seen as Moses' (inspired) reaction to popular (heathen) theology in the days Israel was delivered from Egypt. The nations around Israel insisted that the divinity existed in nature itself – and so the Canaanites worshiped trees or fertility, etc. Over against this perception, Moses wrote an account of creation presenting God as separate from creation, in fact as Master over creation. Moses' account is not to be understood literally, but as a polemical defense over against heathen thinking; one is not to worship trees since God created trees.

The list can be lengthened. They have in common the thought that the Lord God could not have created the world as Genesis 1 describes. That is: this God is not *sufficiently God* to call into existence that which does not exist – and then do it in such a way that its secrets and complexities baffle even modern scientists. If there was in heaven a God *sufficiently God* to create a world as Genesis 1 describes, then this God must of necessity be *acknowledged* today and *worshiped*. That is the logical consequence of taking Genesis 1 literally. But then the human race no longer has 'freedom' to set its own rules for living. To leave room for man to make his own rules for living, God's act of creating the world as described in Genesis 1 is denied or disemboweled. At bottom we are dealing with a *worldview*: is God really the almighty, wise, holy God we confessed earlier?

BY FAITH

An increasing number of secular scientists today doubt that the world came into being through a process of evolution. New discoveries have convinced many that nature is simply too complex to come into being 'by itself'. Instead, the world shows evidence of intelligent design. Somebody, somehow, somewhere, must have planned and then made this world as we see it today.

This theory of Intelligent Design is definitely an improvement over the theory of Evolution. It is, however, not to be confused with the Biblical doctrine of Creation. Intelligent Design accepts the theory that there is a great mind (or Mind) behind the formation of the world. But Intelligent Design deliberately hesitates to say that this Designer is the God who revealed Himself in the Bible, the God who is our Father through Jesus Christ. Rather, one may fill in the blank as to who this Designer may be, whether the God of the Bible or the Great Spirit of aboriginal religions, etc.

The Lord Himself tells us that one cannot scientifically or empirically prove that the God of the Bible created the world in the manner described in Genesis 1 – no more than one can

scientifically or empirically prove that the Son of God laid down His life to pay for my sin. The apostle to the Hebrews puts it this way, “**By faith** we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (Hebrews 11:3). The eternal God who is so highly exalted above His creatures told us that He created this world, ourselves included. It is simply impossible that the creature man in turn subject the almighty Creator to his experiments or the logic of his creaturely mind, and then produce scientifically indisputable proof that God’s account of His work as recorded in Genesis 1 is accurate. Let people recognize we are but creatures – and therefore be humble in the face of God’s revelation about Himself and His work.

HOW DID GOD CREATE?

The above quote from Hebrews 11:3 catches the Biblical revelation: “...*the worlds were framed by the word of God.*” It’s the refrain of the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1: “*Then God said, ‘Let there be...’*” (see vss 3, 6, 9, etc). The Almighty gave a command, and instantly His command was obeyed; even what did not exist responded to God’s word and came to be! “*He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast*” (Psalm 33:9). No wonder the angels burst forth into songs of praise to this God who does such wonders (Job 38:7)! How awesome and how glorious is He!

Our vantage point today is different from that of the angels of Job 38. They *witnessed* God’s work of creation, while we may observe the results of God’s creating work. Yet even those results today give ample reason to sing along with the heavenly choirs. David gazes at the stars and the moon, and it hits him, “*The heavens declare the glory of God*” (Psalm 19:1). Paul says the same: “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen..., even His eternal power and Godhead*” (Romans 1:20). Wherever we look, whatever we smell or taste or hear, all exists because of God’s creating work, and therefore gives reason to praise and glorify this God so mighty and wise. No scientist in the world can create a leaf out of nothing, or the aroma of a flower or the song of a bird. We see, we investigate, we study God’s handiwork in the bush and in the garden, and can rightly only praise this awesome Creator. There once was a day when no horse and no river existed; He spoke *and they were there* – how delightful!

PURPOSE OF CREATION

God Himself has existed from eternity; He has always been, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (see Article 1), and never had a need. Why did this God create? In various passages of His written revelation, He tells us the reason.

- Proverbs 16:4: “*The LORD has **made all for Himself.***” The world is here for God.
- Isaiah 43:7: “*Everyone who is called by My name, whom **I have created for My glory**; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.*”
- Revelation 4:11: “*You are **worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created.***” The twenty-four elders before the throne respond to their confession with worship for this glorious Creator.

Here is the theme of the first petition of the prayer Jesus taught us to pray: “*Hallowed be Your Name*” (Matthew 6:9). The entire world exists for the glory of God. Stronger: God created the entire world so that His creation might praise Him. What the angels did on the day of creation (Job 38:7) is fitting for all creation to do; each creature is to praise Him according to gifts received.

One is tempted to argue that God was selfish, and therefore acted morally incorrectly, in creating a world for the sake of His own glory. However, one cannot rightly use the word ‘selfish’ in relation to God – as if we creatures can judge our Creator, let alone find a flaw in Him. God alone is **God**, and therefore worthy “*to receive glory and honor and power; For You created all things*” (Revelation 4:11). For me to live for myself is an act of selfishness, is sin, because I am created for God. I am selfish, and therefore wrong, precisely when I detract from God’s honor. My purpose is to glorify Him. God is there for Himself, and because He is God all of His creation is geared to Him.

DeBrès echoes this revelation from God in Scripture in Article 12: God created (and still upholds) the world “*to the end that man may serve his God.*” God’s creation, and hence man’s existence too, is **God centered**. That is why Psalm 148 (and so many other Psalms) calls on all of creation to “*Praise the LORD,*” including the heavens, the angels, the sun, moon and stars, the creatures of the seas, the wind, the mountains, the trees, the animals on the land, the birds, and all people. It is simply because God is **God** that all of His creation should praise Him.

That also explains why each creature is the way it is. We may well consider a slug to be ugly, harmful, a pest, and we may well question why God made slugs as they are. However, each animal’s unique characteristics, including its looks, its habits, its abilities, fulfill the purpose of serving God the Creator. That is why DeBrès could say, “*He has given to every creature its being, shape, and form, and to each its specific task and function to serve its Creator.*” True, we live after the fall into sin, and we cannot today determine what effect the fall into sin had on the habits of the animals. That takes nothing away, though, from the fact that God created every creature as He did, in order that each with its particular characteristics might give glory to God. We today may have but little appreciation for a spider or a snake, but God’s holy and perfect evaluation of each of His acts of creation –including the snake and the spider and the slug!– is this: “*And God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good*” (Genesis 1:31).

GIVEN TO MAN

When the Lord God created the world, He also put a structure in place, a hierarchy (see Figure 12.1). In the first five and a half days of creation, the Lord prepared the stage for the climax of His creating work: man, that creature formed to image Him (see Article 14). Man was charged to “*have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth*” (Genesis 1:26). Whatever God created on the first five and half days was placed under man; animals and plants, stars and rocks are so many props on the stage of creation upon which man is the chief actor. That is to say: all creatures exist for man’s sake so that man might in turn praise God. Hence David could exalt as he did in Psalm 8: “*What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? ... You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his*

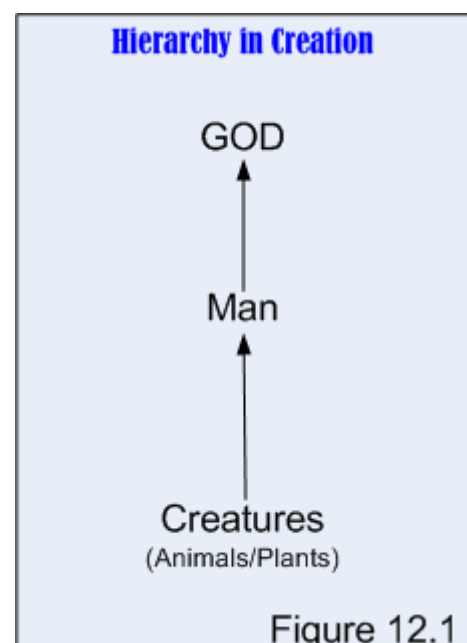


Figure 12.1

feet, all sheep and oxen – even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:4-9). So DeBrès could in turn confess that God created, sustains and governs all creatures *“in order to serve man, to the end that man may serve his God.”*

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

The Bible refers repeatedly to God’s act of creation in order to encourage God’s people in the circumstances of their lives. In Isaiah 40, for example, we read of Israel in exile, complaining that God had forgotten them, no longer cared about them, didn’t look after them. *“My way is hidden from the LORD,”* they said, *“and my just claim is passed over by my God”* (Isaiah 40:27). In order to comfort and encourage Israel, Isaiah must remind Israel of who God is. God, he says, is not just a ‘nobody,’ but He is the LORD, the God of the covenant, eternal, who never *“faints or is weary.”* To emphasize the point, Isaiah reminds Israel that their God is *“the Creator of the ends of the earth”* (vs 28). We understand that there is great encouragement for the exiles in the reference to their God being the Creator; their God is obviously *mighty*.

Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah also makes reference to God the Creator. The LORD instructed Jeremiah to buy a field. This was a perplexing instruction for Jeremiah, because the city of Jerusalem was about to fall to the superior army of the king of Babylon and its inhabitants taken into exile. So it made no sense *now* to purchase land. As Jeremiah struggles to come to grips with God’s command, he approaches God in prayer. The way he begins his prayer is striking: *“Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You”* (32:17). If Jeremiah’s God is the Creator, who spoke and things were there, then He also has the might to deliver Israel from the Babylonians and restore His people. What an encouragement for Jeremiah in his difficulties!

Psalm 148 speaks of God’s work of creation. Repeatedly the psalmist calls upon persons and creatures to praise God, *“for He commanded and they were created”* (vs 5). But here, too, the doctrine of creation does not stand on its own. The psalm concludes with a reference to the Creator being the God who adopted a people for Himself. Verse 14 speaks of God’s saints as being *“A people near to Him.”* That’s to say: the people of Israel were a people *near to the Creator!*

No, the doctrine of Creation does not just stand on its own. It rather reaches into the lives of each of God’s children, in whatever circumstance they find themselves. Our God is none less than the world’s Creator, the One who spoke and this world came to be! This God has become our Father in Jesus Christ, and we *His* children! Aptly does the Apostle’s Creed confess the faith of the church of all ages, *“I believe in God the **Father** almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.”* How wonderfully personal; even *I* belong to this God! In the trials and tribulations of this broken life there is so much comfort for me in the doctrine of creation!

Then it becomes clear to us, too, why people in the world around us live uncomforted, for they see their lives as the products of chance. Since they do not believe in a God *sufficiently God* to create all things at a word, they lack the comfort that comes with trusting in this God.

FURTHER CONSEQUENCES OF THIS DOCTRINE

Aside from the comfort that comes from the conviction that my God is none less than the Creator of all things, some very practical consequences follow on from the fact that God

created the world.

1. The doctrine of creation determines what my relation with God must be. The doctrine of creation is fundamental to all religious and ethical questions. If He formed me, it follows that I am to acknowledge Him, serve Him, obey Him. We are not our own, but belong to the One who made us. It is therefore simply illegitimate and rebellious to live without Him.
2. The doctrine of creation determines what my relation with other persons and creatures must be. God made us all, and therefore we all belong together. I am then to give room and place to the other. There is no room for racism or for enslaving or exploiting others.
3. The doctrine of creation determines what my relation with the entire created world must be. The human race forms part of the created world, but at the same time has a unique place in this world. Though we have received dominion over all creatures, we are not to exploit the world selfishly (and possibly short-sightedly). *“The earth is the LORD’s, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein”* (Ps 24:1). So it is for us to treat all creation with respect. The doctrine of creation makes the child of God *environmentally friendly*.

THE CREATION OF THE ANGELS

THE HEAVENS

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Though the Lord gives much detail about the creation of the earth (including what He made and how He did it), He has told us very little about the creation of the heavens. God did tell us, however, of a throne in heaven, and a floor (or firmament) upon which the throne stands (see Ezekiel 1:22,26; 10:1; Revelation 4:2,6). Details are so sketchy that little more can be said; we shall need to wait for the return of the Lord to learn more.

Meanwhile, the Lord has told us of certain creatures He fashioned to inhabit the heavens. The apostle Paul writes concerning Jesus Christ, *“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers”* (Colossians 1:16). The *“thrones or dominions or principalities or powers”* describe the angels, whether good or evil. We do not know precisely when God created them, but they were certainly there already when God *“laid the foundations of the earth”* (Job 38:4-7). God tells us details about these inhabitants of heaven because they have a direct bearing on our lives on earth.

DETAILS CONCERNING THE ANGELS

Several particulars can be gleaned from the Scriptures about the angels God created.

- God created them in large numbers. The apostle to the Hebrews speaks of *“an innumerable company of angels”* (Hebrews 12:22). John heard in Jesus’ revelation to him *“the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands”* (Revelation 5:11).
- Unlike creatures on this earth, these angels do not multiply. Nowhere in Scripture do we read of the number of angels growing. Instead, we read Jesus’ word about marriage on the new earth: *“in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven”* (Matthew 22:30).

- There appear to be classes of angels, with Scripture speaking of cherubim (Genesis 3:24; Exodus 25:18), seraphim (Isaiah 6:2), and archangels (1 Timothy 4:16; Jude 9). The difference between these classes is not clear. Some angels have names, including Gabriel (Luke 1:26) and Michael (Daniel 10:13,21; Jude 9; Revelation 12:7).
- As residents of heaven, they are not confined to a limited area as we are. A legion of angels had made their home in one man, according to Luke 8:13. In the Roman army, a legion consisted of about 6000 soldiers. Angels can move from heaven to earth and back again, as Jacob witnessed in the dream of the ladder (Genesis 28:12). Angels do not have bodies as we do, and are not usually visible – though they can present themselves in visible form from time to time (see Genesis 18).

GOD'S PURPOSE IN CREATING ANGELS

As with any other aspect of God's creation, He formed the angels so that they might glorify their Maker. (See above, re Purpose of Creation.) So, when God "*laid the foundations of the earth*", the angels were not silent bystanders; instead they "*shouted for joy*" (Job 38:4-7) – and so gave praise to their Maker on account of His wonderful handiwork. Isaiah is permitted a peak into heaven and sees angels (seraphim) surrounding the throne of God, repeatedly calling out to each other that "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!*" (Isaiah 6:3). It's not a once-off song they sing, but an unending litany of praise for the Sovereign One. John hears the same song still being sung when he was allowed to look into heaven (Revelation 4:8). Indeed, as the Lord reveals to John the things that will happen in the course of world history between Christ's ascension and His return, he keeps hearing the angels singing songs of praise to the Lord God and to the Lamb (Revelation 5:12; 7:12; 16:5; 19:1-10).

As attendants around the throne of God, the angels do more than worship and praise the Lord. When the Lord God wants to reveal to His people something of His holy majesty, He comes to Ezekiel in a vision. Yet Ezekiel, finite and mortal creature that He is, cannot see God and live (see Exodus 33:20). Instead, the Lord God let Ezekiel see something of the splendor of those around God, the company God keeps. Ezekiel sees angels in the form of living creatures, bright in color, filled with eyes and wings, even carrying the throne of God (Ezekiel 1, 10). Their being and their appearance and their conduct all point up how awesome is the God whom they serve!

As it is, these angels do more than praise God. They are also God's servants. When the Holy Spirit has David instruct the angels to "*bless the LORD*", David describes angels as "*ministers of His, who do His pleasure*" (Psalm 103:21). The Hebrews are assured that angels are "*all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation*" (Hebrews 1:14). When the Lord had a message for a child of His on earth, He repeatedly sent an angel to convey that message. So angels appeared to Lot one evening in the gate of Sodom (Genesis 19:1), and another came to Zechariah and to Mary with news of children (Luke 1:11,26). An angel came to strengthen Jesus before He went to the cross (Luke 22:43), and another came to encourage Paul in the face of the opposition he encountered as preacher of the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 27:23).

In their capacity as servants of God ministering to His elect, Jacob saw angels "*ascending and descending*" on that ladder stretched between heaven and earth (Genesis 28:12). These angels were carrying out God's commands for His people, and ascending again from earth to heaven to report in heaven what was happening on earth. That is why the dream gave such encouragement to Jacob. The psalmist also delights in God's care through His angels. "*For*

He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11,12). As a concrete example of their work, one can think of the time Elisha was in Dothan (2 Kings 6:14-17). The king of Syria was anxious to lay his hands on Elisha, and “*therefore he sent horses and chariots and a great army [to Dothan], and they came by night and surrounded the city.*” In the morning the prophet’s servant was desperate with anxiety on account of the enormous army surrounding the city. Elisha’s answer is striking: “*Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.*” Then Elisha asked the Lord to open the lad’s eyes so that he saw a reality human eyes do not normally see. “*Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of **horses and chariots of fire** all around Elisha.*” Those “*horses and chariots of fire*” are the angels of God, the army of the LORD of hosts. Though one does not normally see those divine soldiers, they nevertheless continually pervade the air around us as they guard and protect the children of God.

THE FALL OF THE ANGELS

God ordained before creation that some of the angels He fashioned were elect, and others not. So Paul can mention “*elect angels*” (1 Timothy 5:21). Not long after God created angels some rebelled against God. Through Jude the Holy Spirit tells us of “*angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode*” (Jude 6). Peter refers to the same event when he mentions “*the angels who sinned*” (2 Peter 2:4). Jesus says of the devil that “*he was a murderer from the beginning*” (John 8:44). The Lord has not told us why, how or when these angels fell into sin. It is sufficient for us to know the *fact* of their fall, and its consequences. For these fallen angels are the demons of today, who seek to dethrone God Himself. The name of their leader is Satan, a term that means *Adversary*. Ever since his rebellion against God he opposes God and all that is good. So he came to Eve in the Garden of Eden with his wicked temptation (Genesis 3).

SATAN

Though the human eye does not ordinarily see angels (and therefore not fallen angels –that’s the demons– either), these demons play a critical role in the history of the world. Directly after man’s fall into sin, God declared a cosmic war wherein the seed of the serpent (that’s the devil and his followers, demons and apostate people) would strive to destroy the seed of the woman – that’s Christ and God’s chosen ones (Genesis 3:15). The Seed of the Woman would ultimately triumph, but God’s pronouncement of victory has not and does not stop the devil from doing his utmost to prevail. In the Old Testament Satan (and his demons?) could access heaven and seek to turn God against His own. The book of Job tells us that “*the sons of God (the angels) came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them*” (Job 1:6). Yet Satan’s intent was surely not honorable, for he faulted Job for serving God to personal advantage, and sought to incite God to turn against Job: “*Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? ... But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!*” (1:10,11; see also 2:4). Similarly, Zechariah was permitted to see what transpired in heaven. He saw Israel’s representative, “*Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him*” (Zechariah 3:1). Given the high priest’s filthy garments (representing sin), Satan’s accusations against Joshua will have been factually correct. The Lord God, however, did not recognize the legitimacy of Satan’s accusations because His Son would pay for sin (see vs 4). Instead, “*the LORD who has chosen Jerusalem*” rebuked Satan. Here, we realize, was foreshadowed the glorious effect of Christ’s coming victory over sin and Satan on the cross.

THE GOD OF THIS AGE

After Christ's victory on the cross and ascension into heaven, "*the great dragon was cast out*" of heaven; "*he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him*" (Revelation 12:9). No longer can he accuse us before the throne of God! No wonder heaven is told to rejoice! But the devil, angered and embittered by his defeat, now persecutes the people of God on earth. "*The dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ*" (Revelation 12:17). Hence the warning of Peter: "*your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*" (1 Peter 5:8). Paul describes what we are up against. "*We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 6:12). Each of those four terms (principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this age and spiritual hosts of wickedness) describe demonic powers as they express themselves through governments or through godless leaders of culture or even media. The world of demons, like the angels, is unseen but very real. Bombs or pesticides cannot destroy them. They are a powerful army that one ignores to his own peril. It is not without reason that Jesus calls Satan "*the ruler of this world*" (John 12:31) and Paul calls him "*the god of this age*" (2 Corinthians 4:4). In the midst of the struggles and persecution of his day, DeBrès took the world of demons and the rage of the devil seriously: "*The devils and evil spirits are so depraved that they are enemies of God and of all that is good. With all their might, they lie in wait like murderers to ruin the Church and all its members and to destroy everything by their wicked devices.*"

ENCOURAGEMENT

At the same time, we do well not to take the devil and his demons too seriously. Satan and his demons remain but creatures; never may we consider Satan to be on a level with God. More, this Satan and his hosts are defeated. Jesus Christ has triumphed, and has ascended to that throne on God's right hand where He is exalted as "*Lord*" (Acts 2:36). So John, after he has seen a vision of Satan's rage (Revelation 12), may see Jesus Christ astride a white horse, conquering the world through the word that goes out of His mouth (Revelation 19:11-16). So victorious is the "*King of kings and Lord of Lords*" that the birds of heaven may gorge themselves on the beast and the false prophet (Revelation 19:17-21) – those images of Satan and his henchmen. This world is with devils filled, all threatening to undo us; but we will not fear for God has willed His truth to triumph through us – as Luther exalted in his famous hymn. So the children of God may be confident in their service of God, specifically in the face of the devilish attacks they experience daily.

Having said this we thus reject the error of the Manichees, as stated in the last paragraph of Article 12, who claim that the devils are gods on a level with God. This is incorrect. Angels, both elect and fallen, were created and are therefore but creatures. Similarly, we reject any witchcraft, and recognize it as diabolically inspired.

Points for Discussion:

1. How does the doctrine of evolution undermine the reality of God's *God*-ness?
2. Do you think the 'days' of creation were normal, 24-hour days, or may we understand them to have been long stretches of time? Why? What impact does the latter position have on the doctrine of God? And the reliability of His Word?

3. Why did God create this world? How does this purpose for creation determine the way you live?
4. Should a Christian be at the forefront of efforts to preserve the environment? Why or why not? How you're your answer compare to the actual habits of your lifestyle?
5. Discuss vegetarianism in the light of the Creator's word in Genesis 1:29,30 and Genesis 9:3.
6. Does our society do well to be afraid of over-populating Planet Earth? Why or why not? What does the Creator's instruction in Genesis 1:28 mean for the average size of the Christian family?
7. How does the doctrine of creation provide you with comfort for this life? How does the doctrine of evolution take comfort away?
8. What task has God given to angels? Are these angels active and present today? What comfort is there for you in the task and presence of angels?
9. Where are the demons? What do they try to do? Ought we to be afraid of the devil and his demons?
10. Is Frank Peretti's depiction of angels and demons in his novels *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Dark* helpful to a Scriptural understanding of the world of angels? Why or why not?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 9.26; 10.28; 46.120; 49.124
 Form for the solemnisation of Marriage, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 13: THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

ARTICLE 13

We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction. Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them. For His power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And as to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transgressing these limits.

This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not one hair of our head - for they are all numbered - nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father (Matthew 10:29,30). In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without His permission and will.

We therefore reject the damnable error of the Epicureans, who say that God does not concern Himself with anything but leaves all things to chance.

CENTRAL

The doctrine of God's providence forms the cornerstone of reformed, Biblical thinking. The God in whom we believe (see Article 1) is not far away or uninterested in the world He once created. Instead, this God is so close by and so intimately involved in the world He made that not a traffic light turns red without the direct involvement and will of this God. He is not interested only in salvation, but for Jesus' sake cares for His children (and the world in which they live) so totally that every hair and every flea is completely in His control. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism: "God's providence is His almighty and ever present power, whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures, and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand" (Lord's Day 10). The doctrine of God's providence makes the reality and presence of almighty God so inescapable; each leaf I see and each insect I hear –rightly understood– confront me with evidence of the nearness and the mightiness of *my* God.

Since the topic of God's providence touches upon the daily, ongoing works of *Almighty God*, there will be much in this topic that I cannot understand. I am but a finite creature, broken too as a result of the fall into sin, and so I shall never understand the Creator's omnipotence and omniscience as it becomes evident in His providence. So we need to consider God's revelation on the subject with humility, and respectfully repeat after God what He tells us in Scripture.

DEBRÈS AND US

As with all the other articles of this Confession, Guido DeBrès himself penned the material of Article 13. This observation gains added color when we remember the circumstances in which DeBrès lived. He was greatly hated by the Roman Catholics, and persecuted much. He had to visit his congregation in the secrecy of darkness, and constantly concern himself with the question of safety. Yet he penned the words of this Article, and included them in the confession he prepared for his congregation. The article gives no hint of frustration on his part with the uncertainty of each day, but rather breathes an atmosphere of peace and comfort. Here's a sense of being perfectly safe in the hands of his gracious, wise and sovereign God – even as the eye saw much danger and DeBrès constantly had to be on the alert for those who sought his harm.

This God has not changed. In the covenant He established with believers and their children – including us– this God has promised to “*provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit*” (“Form for Baptism”, *Book of Praise*, pg 584). This promise assumes His sovereignty, and His total control over every creature and event that will intersect with my life. To appreciate the comfort God gives in this promise, I need to learn to repeat after God what He tells me about His providence.

PROVIDENCE: GOD UPHOLDS HIS CREATION

What did God do after He had completed His creating work? Did He return ‘home’, desert His creation, and busy Himself with another project? The Scripture is emphatic that that is not the case. In fact, the world God made is dependent on God for existence itself. If the Lord were to withdraw His supporting hand, the earth and all that's on it would collapse again into the nothingness it was before God called it into existence. Elihu says it like this: “*If He should set His heart on it, If He should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, All flesh would perish together, And man would return to dust*” (Job 34:14,15). The Psalmist makes the same point: “*You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth*” (Psalm 104:29,30). Paul tells the men of Athens, “*in Him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17:28). God's world is dependent daily on God for existence itself!

Over the years there have been those who deny the world's dependence on God. Some who will grant that God in fact created the world insist that the Lord deserted the world He made, and lets it run according to laws He once built into it. These are called ‘Deists’, and follow in the tradition of the Epicureans mentioned in Article 13. They compare God to the clockmaker who has completed a new clock, winds it up, and then leaves it on the shelf to tick by itself while he himself goes home. One hears echoes of this sentiment in today's Intelligent Design theory – where it's argued that the world shows evidence of intelligent design at its inception, but the Designer is not credited with upholding it today. DeBrès rejects this sentiment as a “*damnable error*”, because it contradicts what he reads in the Bible. “*We believe that this good God, after He had created all things, did not abandon them or give them up to fortune or chance, but that according to His holy will He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction.*”

PROVIDENCE: GOD GOVERNS HIS CREATION

Sovereign God not only keeps the world in existence, but also keeps causing things to move and to happen. Indeed, unless this God wills something to happen, it simply will not occur;

such is the far-reaching extent of His sovereignty (see Psalms 93, 95-99). The Holy Spirit insists that before God began creating in Genesis 1 He had already determined all that would happen. He moved Paul to speak of “*the eternal purpose*” which He accomplished in the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:11). David worded the same sentiment like this: “*My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them*” (Psalm 139:15, 16). From eternity the Lord determined who David’s parents would be, determined that he would be a shepherd, that he would kill a lion, that Saul would persecute him, that he would sin with Bathsheba, that Absalom his son would rebel against him. In David’s life God governed in such a way that whatever He planned in fact *did* happen. Nothing came upon David by chance, and nothing in David’s life surprised God either. That is why Job could challenge his friends, “*But now ask the beasts, and they will teach you; And the birds of the air, and they will tell you; Or speak to the earth, and it will teach you; And the fish of the sea will explain to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this, In whose hand is the life of every living thing, And the breath of all mankind?*” (Job 12:7-10). Inasmuch as God does not change, DeBrès could echo the same sentiment in relation to the world of his day: “*according to His holy will He so rules and governs (all things) that in this world nothing happens without His direction.*” That’s why DeBrès could write those heart-stirring words in his letter to his wife shortly before his execution, “*Remember too, that it was not by chance that I fell into the hands of my enemies, but through the providence of my God.... My God, You have let me be born at a time and hour determined by You, and through all the time of my life You have preserved and protected me in the face of unimaginable dangers, and You have fully delivered. And now, if the hour has come in which I must leave this life in order to go to You, Your will be done*” (see further Article 1).

CHALLENGES TO THE DOCTRINE OF PROVIDENCE

All in the western world once acknowledged the doctrine of God’s providence. Since God was acknowledged as being the Almighty, no one denied that He upheld and governed the world He made. Our day no longer believes the doctrine of God’s providence. This is due to a combination of factors, two of which are most significant.

- 1) The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the development of science and technology, so that people began to understand why such things as thunderstorms or earthquakes happened. The modern mind looked to science for answers, and the doctrine God’s providence was judged unnecessary.
- 2) The twentieth century has witnessed much evil. One need only think of the horrors of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Nagasaki. Advanced communications technology lets today’s people see an almost unlimited amount of gross evil occurring in the farthest corners of the globe – be it the ravages of war or of tsunamis or of sickness or of demented minds, etc. In the face of so much suffering, people have concluded that a God of love is obviously not in control; otherwise all this evil would not happen.

It is not only unbelieving people who stumble over the evil we witness and experience in our day. Godly people, too, puzzle over a sovereign God letting bad things happen to good people. There are devout Christians who are confused about whether God is really sovereign – or good, or both. Add to the puzzle the role of human responsibility, and the matter becomes seemingly impossible to unravel. So we do well to examine Scripture more carefully on the point.

GOD CONTROLS ALL

The Holy Spirit moved David to speak of rain, growth and crops. *“You visit the earth and water it, You greatly enrich it; The river of God is full of water; You provide their grain...”* (Psalm 65:9). Elsewhere the Holy Spirit says, *“He gives snow like wool; He scatters the frost like ashes; He casts out His hail like morsels; Who can stand before His cold? He sends out His word and melts them; He causes His wind to blow, and the waters flow”* (Psalm 145:15-18). Solomon picks up on what we consider the flukiest thing: *“The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD”* (Proverbs 16:33). That’s why Jesus could say, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father’s will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered”* (Matthew 10:29,30). How amazing: not a hair got stuck in the comb this morning without the will of our heavenly Father!

Does God’s control, though, extend also to presidents’ palaces and terrorists’ lairs? Young Joseph was on the receiving end of considerable jealousy on the part of his ten brothers. They conspired against him in an effort to be rid of this scourge in their lives (Genesis 37:18), and finally agreed to sell him to slave traders (Genesis 37:25-28). It takes but little imagination to appreciate that Joseph, as he trudged behind his new masters across the sands to Egypt, felt totally used and abused. His brothers had distinctly done the dirty on him; their actions and motives were evil beyond words. Yet, when the brothers twenty years later had to purchase grain in Egypt, and Joseph as ruler recognized his brothers, he had but one word for them. *“Do not ... be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here,”* he told them, *“for God sent me before you to preserve life.... So it was not you who sent me here, but God...”* (Genesis 45:5-8). After father Jacob died, Joseph explained the matter further to his brothers, *“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive”* (Genesis 50:20). His point: the reality of human evil takes nothing away from God’s sovereignty. As Joseph trudged to Egypt and agonized in prison there, he learned by God’s grace to see and confess the sovereign hand of a wise and faithful God – a God without whose will not a plan was made or carried out.

The prophet Isaiah must confront Israel with the same reality in their distressing circumstances. The dreaded Assyrians had surrounded the city of Jerusalem, the same terrible armies that had captured and looted and pillaged and raped so many cities around them. In the midst of the people’s anxiety, the Lord sent Isaiah to instruct His people. *“Woe to Assyria,”* the prophet had to say, *“the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge ...”* (Isaiah 10:5,6). How striking the formulation! Assyria is but a stick in God’s hand, sent to punish straying Israel? Granted, Assyria doesn’t admit they are but a stick in God’s hand. Vs 7: *“Yet he does not mean so, Nor does his heart think so.”* As far as this superpower is concerned, they act independently of any divine control, and Jerusalem is just another city to subjugate, as happened to Damascus and to Samaria and to Carchemish and to so many more.... But God lets Israel know the truth: *“Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him who saws with it?”* (10:15). No, the superpower of Isaiah’s day is in God’s hand as an ax is in the lumberman’s hand; neither the ax nor Assyria ultimately have anything to say. The people of Jerusalem, then, were not to worry their minds about Assyria the ax; they were to busy their minds with the One who swung the ax – and take God seriously.

A third example drives the point home. Peter on the day of Pentecost gives God’s version of

what happened on Good Friday. It's not simply so, he tells the Jews, that "*you have taken [Jesus] by lawless hands, have crucified, and put [Him] to death*"; no, Jesus was "***delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God***" (Acts 2:23). Behind their murderous deed was the sovereign hand of God Most High.

EVEN EVIL?

The texts quoted above require us to say more than that God controls all things. Through passages as these the Lord teaches that even evil does not happen without His involvement. That Joseph's brothers sold him to slave traders was manifestly evil. But Joseph confessed the hand of God in the evil actions of his brothers. The brutality of the Assyrian army was fearsomely grotesque, but this barbaric army was a tool in God's hands to accomplish His purpose. The Jews' act of crucifying righteous Jesus was lawless to the extreme, but it all happened according to "*the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God*" (Acts 2:23). In the same vein God Himself says concerning Pharaoh that "*I will harden his heart, so that he will not let My people go*" (Exodus 4:21; cf 7:3; 9:12). Behind Israel's oppression in Egypt and the need for the devastating plagues upon that land lay the hand of God; not even evil happened without His will and permission. That some people believe the gospel is because of the will of God, and that some people do not believe is also because of the will of God. "*He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens*" (Romans 9:18). DeBrès puts it this way, "*He so rules and governs them that in this world **nothing** happens without His direction. Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed....*" This last sentence makes clear that DeBrès includes 'sins' when he confesses that "***nothing*** happens without His direction."

UNDERSTAND?

We seek to understand how a holy and righteous God can control all things totally, and yet permit evil to occur in our lives. Given that He hates sin, and loves His children, ought He not to pull out all stops to prevent bad things from happening to His people?

The Holy Spirit tells us that God-fearing people wrestled with this question many centuries ago. Job "*was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil*" (Job 1:1). He also had "*a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East*" (1:3). In one day this righteous man lost all his material possessions and his children also. On another day this impoverished man lost his health and even his wife; his helpmeet told him to "*curse God and die*" (2:9). On a third day his friends sought to rattle his faith, for they insisted that God would never let evil happen to a good man, and so it follows that Job must confess his hidden sins (Job 4,5,8,11). Alone and forsaken Job struggles to come to grips with how the Lord can let so much evil wash over a God-fearing man. "*Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, That I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him, And fill my mouth with arguments. I would know the words which He would answer me, And understand what He would say to me. Would He contend with me in His great power? No! But He would take note of me*" (Job 23:3-6). It's Job's conviction: God's actions in Job's life are not fair, and God will have to answer to Job for permitting all this evil to beset him.

How remarkable, then, is God's reply. God's answer (Job 39-41) is notable for what it does *not* say. For the Lord does *not* give Job an explanation for why the evils happened in his life! Rather, the Lord's answer draws out His greatness and His majesty, and contrasts it starkly with human finitude. God challenges Job to consider his contribution to the creation of this world, and to consider whether he is able to reorganize the stars or to make clouds appear and determine where and when it will rain (Job 38). God sets before Job the habits and

characteristics of mountain goats and wild donkeys, oxen and ostriches, battle horses and hawks, and questions whether Job can control these creatures, let alone determine when they will bear their young and how they will feed them (Job 39). When Job begins to recognize that he's too small to challenge God (40:3-5), the Lord confronts Job again with His majesty: *"Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me: Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like God?"* (40:7-9). God paints for Job a picture of His majesty; before this God even the largest of creatures are but so many playthings. Job would dare to challenge the actions of such a God?? Job wants such a God to give an account of His decisions to puny man?? It hits Job like a brick: *"I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.... I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... Therefore I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes"* (42:2-6). That Job place himself above God and insist that God explain to him why He permits evil to happen in Job's life is sin, arrogance. *"But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?'"* (Romans 9:20).

God told Adam in Paradise already that if he would eat of the forbidden tree death would enter the world (Genesis 2:17). Despite God's warning, our forefather ate of the tree, and died spiritually. God pronounced the curse, telling the human race that pain and suffering, thorns and thistles, sweat and tears would characterize their existence from now on. In moments of adversity let no one fault God for bringing about in our lives what He announced in response to our disobedience in Paradise. We are in no position to call God on the carpet.

MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

What, then, of man's responsibility? If God is one hundred percent sovereign, if He controls all things totally, did Joseph's brothers have no blame in selling their brother to slave traders? Were the Assyrians free of guilt when they pillaged cities and ravaged women? Were the Jews not responsible for crucifying Jesus since their actions occurred *"by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God"*? (Acts 2:23).

My finite mind tells me that if God controls totally all that happens, people have no more responsibility than a puppet; the puppet's actions are the responsibility of the puppet master. Total sovereignty on God's part rules out total responsibility on people's part.

The Lord, however, speaks differently. He created man in the beginning to be responsible for what he does, and gave him the wherewithal to make responsible decisions. He could take care of the Garden's plants and animals, and do it in a way that reflected what the Lord God was like (see Article 14). There would be no tension between the sovereignty of a good and holy God, and the conduct of the free and upright creature man. The human race would accurately reflect what God was like.

The human race fell into sin, and so became sinful. Despite our self-inflicted depravity, however, sovereign God continues to hold us responsible for all we do. In fact, so great is His majesty that there is no more clash today between the sovereignty of holy God on the one hand and our evil conduct on the other than there would have been before the fall into sin. We cannot get our minds around how a good God can let people do unspeakable evil to other people. We cannot comprehend how God is totally sovereign over all that happens, and man is at the same time totally responsible for all he does. It is good that way, for a God we were able to understand is not worth serving.

We need to let those two realities –God’s total sovereignty and man’s complete responsibility– stand side by side. Despite our fall into sin God continues to hold us responsible according to the gifts with which He created us in the beginning. That is why we need to give account before God for all the sins we have ever committed – even though not one of them occurred outside God’s eternal plan. It equally is why Joseph’s brothers were guilty before God (and they knew it!) for the evil they did to their brother. It is why the Lord God declared to Israel through Isaiah that *“it shall come to pass, when the LORD has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, that He will say, ‘I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks’”* (Isaiah 10:12). Indeed, all whose sins are not forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ will taste eternally the weight of God’s judgment on their evil deeds. Holy God always holds people responsible for all their deeds!

That is why vengeance is not for people to mete out. *“Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time,”* God had Moses say to Israel (Deuteronomy 32:35). Paul repeats the matter: *“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to [God’s] wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord”* (Romans 12:19). God is sovereign, and at the same time each person is responsible for his conduct. When another hurts me, then, I need not take retribution into my own hands. God holds the other responsible, and so He will punish – perhaps in this life (maybe through the government – Romans 13:1-7), perhaps in the life to come, perhaps through the suffering Jesus endured on the cross. However that may be, I may believe that God takes people’s responsibility seriously. My responsibility is that I respond humbly and obediently to whatever God in wisdom sovereignly puts on my path.

IS GOD RESPONSIBLE FOR EVIL?

Another question arises. If the Lord God is indeed sovereign so that nothing happens without His will, must we somehow insist that God is responsible for the evil that happens in this world – or at least shares responsibility with people for the evil that happens?

The question has already been answered in part through the observation made above about the fall into sin. God created man good, and able to reflect perfectly what God was like. God did not create evil; it is we, through our disobedience, who brought sin into the world. One cannot blame God for that.

Further, we need to remember God’s answer to Job. When Job challenged God to explain why He let evil happen in Job’s life, the Lord did not explain to Job; instead, He paraded His majesty. The point is that with this question we come to the limit of what we can ask and understand. A number of facts are clear:

- Evil happens in our lives.
- God is fully sovereign and therefore evil does not happen without His will and permission.
- God is good, and does no evil.

No, we cannot grasp what the exact interplay is between these points. Though we are curious and wish to understand, at the end of the day there is no need for us to understand. The matter is in God’s hands, and His ways –thankfully!– are beyond our ways. If I could understand this God, if I could grasp the interplay of the points above, I would have no reason anymore to entrust myself to His care – for He would not be such a great God after all.

DeBrès chose his words carefully as he sought to echo in his confession what he learned on the matter from God's Word: *"...He so rules and governs them that in this world nothing happens without His direction. Yet God is not the Author of the sins which are committed nor can He be charged with them. For His power and goodness are so great and beyond understanding that He ordains and executes His work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly. And as to His actions surpassing human understanding, we will not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us. But with the greatest humility and reverence we adore the just judgments of God, which are hidden from us, and we content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ, who have only to learn those things which He teaches us in His Word, without transgressing these limits."*

COMFORT

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, upholds and governs the world He once made. He resolutely moves history forward according to His eternal plan adopted before the foundation of the world. In that plan He had place for Auschwitz and Hiroshima, had place too for 9/11 and other terrorist plots. Yet I need fear no evil. This God has given His Son to pay for my sin, so that I might today be –and always remain– His child. All things are so fully in His hands that He will never permit *"death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing ... to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38,39). Such is the providence of my God!

That is why I eagerly, day after day, cling to DeBrès' inspiring formulation of the gospel of Scripture: *"This doctrine gives us unspeakable consolation, for we learn thereby that nothing can happen to us by chance, but only by the direction of our gracious heavenly Father. He watches over us with fatherly care, keeping all creatures so under His power that not one hair of our head –for they are all numbered– nor one sparrow can fall to the ground without the will of our Father. In this we trust, because we know that He holds in check the devil and all our enemies so that they cannot hurt us without His permission and will"* (Article 13). Indeed, here is comfort!

Points for Discussion:

1. Explain the philosophy of the Deist. To what degree do you think of God as actually involved in every detail of what happens in your life? Would you see God's hand behind the fact that there is a slow driver in front of you when you're running late? How does the reality of God's providence color your attitude to that slow driver?
2. In Lord's Day 10 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the church confesses that the doctrine of God's providence leads to patience in adversity and thankfulness in prosperity. Discuss and explain how providence leads to such patience and gratitude.
3. Explain what miracles are in relation to God's providence.
4. If all things are totally in God's hands, I can't do anything that has not already been determined by God. Does that not mean that I should not ultimately be held responsible for my deeds? Explain.
5. We all know of terrible things that have happened to decent people. Is God's hand behind such disasters? If yes, is God 'not good'? Why does He allow an evil to happen?

6. Much pastoral work results from evil things people have experienced in the past, e.g. abuse. How can an elder or other caring person use God's revelation about providence to comfort the afflicted, and help them cope with the wounds they have received?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 9.26; 10.27, 28; 46.120, 121
Prayers #2,7,8,9,11,12, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 14: THE CREATION AND FALL OF MAN AND HIS INCAPABILITY OF DOING WHAT IS TRULY GOOD

ARTICLE 14

We believe that God created man of dust from the ground and He made and formed him after His own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy. His will could conform to the will of God in every respect. But, when man was in this high position, he did not appreciate it nor did he value his excellency. He gave ear to the words of the devil and wilfully subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse. For he transgressed the commandment of life which he had received; by his sin he broke away from God, who was his true life; he corrupted his whole nature. By all this he made himself liable to physical and spiritual death.

Since man became wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had once received from God. He has nothing left but some small traces, which are sufficient to make man inexcusable. For whatever light is in us has changed into darkness, as Scripture teaches us, The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5); where the apostle John calls mankind darkness.

Therefore we reject all teaching contrary to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin (John 8:34) and no one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven (John 3:27). For who dares to boast that he of himself can do any good, when Christ says: No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him (John 6:44)? Who will glory in his own will, when he understands that the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God (Romans 8:7)? Who can speak of his knowledge, since the unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:14)? In short, who dares to claim anything, when he realizes that we are not competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but that our competence is from God (2 Corinthians 3:5)? Therefore what the apostle says must justly remain sure and firm: God is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). For there is no understanding nor will conformable to the understanding and will of God unless Christ has brought it about; as He teaches us: Apart from Me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

WHO IS MAN?

Article 14 revolves around the creature Man. A very large proportion of the human race today is unsure of who man is, where man comes from or what man's purpose is. In the western world, riddled as it is with the teaching of evolution, man is seen as just an accident, a product of chance – and hence without purpose or meaning. Similarly, since there is no Creator who stipulates in absolute terms what one may or may not do, there are no rights and wrongs. The result is that people can destroy themselves (drug abuse, homosexuality) and each other (abortion, euthanasia) without fear of legal repercussions.

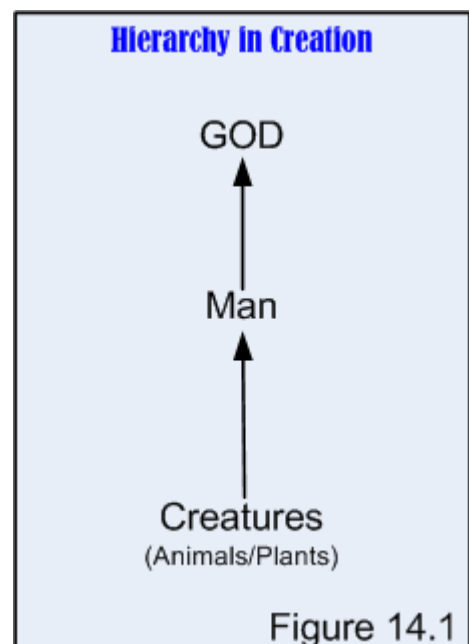
TO BE MAN IS TO BE IMAGE OF GOD

In this context the modern Christian listens to the Word of God, and repeats after God what God tells us about the human race. Mankind (like the rest of the world) is not the chance product of evolution, but is instead the crowning work of God's creation. After God had

created all the world in six days, when the stage was prepared for the climax of His works, God fashioned a unique being, one with a unique purpose and therefore with unique gifts and abilities. God consulted within Himself, and determined to “*make man in our image, according to our likeness*” (Genesis 1:26). The reason for making this image-of-God was so that this creature might “*have dominion over the fish of the sea*” God had completed on the day before, and “*over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth....*” God turned His intent into action; “*so God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*” We are to take note here of the fact that God speaks of creating man as male and female in the context of creating man in His own image. Though God created two genders, both the man and the woman are equally created in the image of God, and both have dominion over God’s world.

TO IMAGE GOD IS TO ACT LIKE GOD

To be made in the image of God does not mean that mankind looks like God. Rather, the point of the expression ‘image of God’ means that man *acts* as God would act. Man is God’s representative. The earth God created cannot see God, for God is in heaven. God, however, desires that the creatures He made should be able to see something of what God is like. God the Creator governs the world He fashioned, and does so with care, goodness, love, holiness, justice, etc. The people God created in His image are to have dominion over God’s world, are to govern it with the same care, goodness, love, holiness, justice, etc, that characterizes God’s governance. As image of God people are to reflect in their conduct what God is like. One could compare this to the office of Governor General, the Queen’s representative in Commonwealth countries, whose role it is not to look like the Queen but rather to portray her care, compassion, authority, etc. This means that irrespective of gender, race, age, gifts or capacities, every person has been made to image God so that in turn other creatures –including other people and even angels (1 Corinthians 4:9)– see what God is like and praise Him (see Figure 14.1).



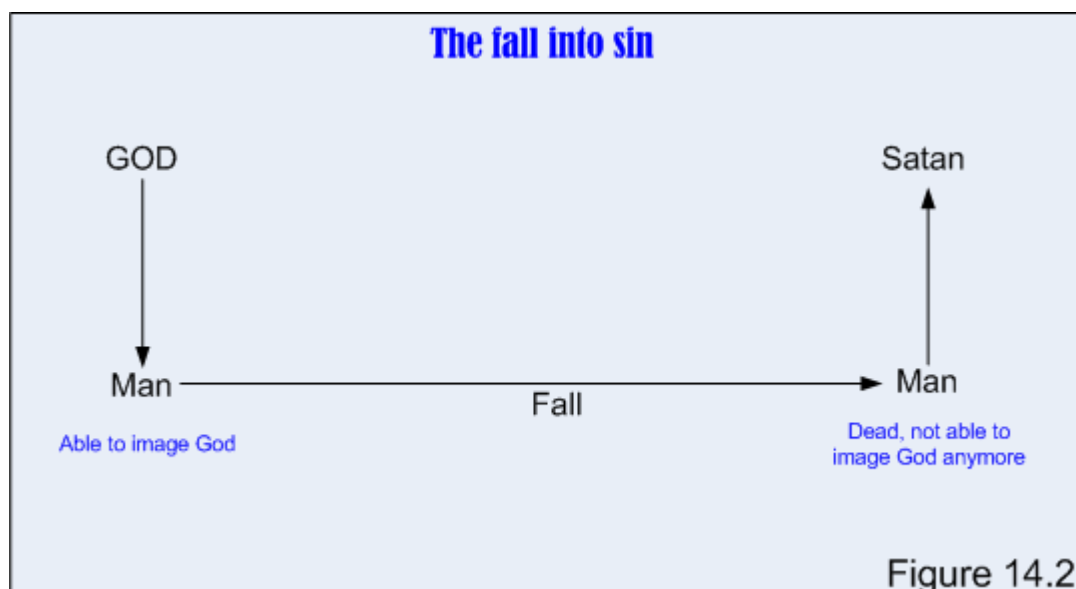
Man is to image God in the way he rules over the creatures. Man is to have dominion in the same way as God would have dominion. Not only are the creatures on earth for man, but man is also on earth for the creatures, to have dominion over them. This is clearly pointed out in Psalm 8. On close observation of God’s creation, David is struck by man’s comparative insignificance and he says to God, “*When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you visit him?*” (vss 3,4). Man is but small and insignificant in comparison to God’s created world in which he lives. But see now what God has made man to be: “*For You have made him a little lower than God⁴, and you have crowned him with glory and honor*” (vs 5). God has made man distinctly different from all creatures, and has placed him in a class near to God, just a little lower than God; 9 in a scale of 1 to 10! David goes on to laud the noble task that God has given man: “*You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet,*

⁴ As the preferred translation reads, contrary to the NKJV.

all sheep and oxen – even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!” (vss 6-9). To give man such a high calling in His creation; what a privilege!

THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL INTO SIN ON MAN’S ABILITY TO IMAGE GOD

Before the Fall into sin, people imaged God accurately. When we fell into sin (and so deserted God’s ‘side’ in favour of Satan’s; (see Figure 14.2) we did not become pigs or plants; we remained *people*, and our task to image God remained also. However, we lost our ability to image God. When we fell into sin we became dead, as we read in Ephesians 2:1, “*And you He made alive, **who were dead in trespasses and sins.***” *Dead* is what we became with the fall, depraved, sinful. So Solomon, at the dedication of the completed Temple, could confess “***there is no one who does not sin***” (1 Kings 8:46). David admits the same in Psalm 130: “*If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, **who** could stand?*” (vs 3). Solomon and David echo what God Himself said when He looked down on earth in the days of Noah, before the Flood: “*... And indeed it was corrupt; for **all flesh** had corrupted their way on the earth*” (Genesis 6:12). It is clear from Scripture that sin touched everyone. See also Psalm 14.



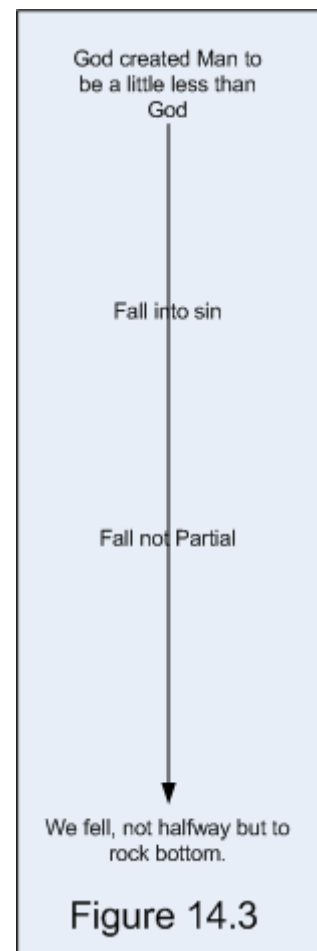
How evil has man become? “*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was **great** in the earth, and that **every** intent of the thoughts of his heart was **only evil continually***” (Genesis 6:5). Here the depth of man’s depravity is described in very strong language; superlative after superlative is required to expose it for what it is. Not only are man’s actions, thoughts and words totally and continually evil, but the *whole* intent and *every individual* intent behind man’s actions, thoughts and words is only and continually evil. This does not only describe man at a certain stage in the course of his life, but it characterizes fallen man from the day of his birth to the day of his death. In response to Noah’s burnt offering after the Flood, “*... the LORD said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although **the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth***” (Genesis 8:21). The imagination: the driving force behind man’s thoughts is evil for the whole duration of man’s life. In Romans 8:7 we read that “*... the carnal mind is **enmity** against God.*” Man is not just indifferent to God, but he is an enemy of God, he *hates* God.

Scripture certainly uses powerful language to describe the extent of man's depravity. What's more, what Scripture says concerning the extent of man's depravity applies to *every* individual. Paul leaves no room for the notion that some people are less sinful than others; he insists that all are equally and totally depraved. Are Jews better than Greeks? Are we better than anyone else? Says Paul most emphatically in Romans 3:9, "**Not at all.**" Jews and Greeks are equally guilty of sin. Paul then quotes a most condemning list of Old Testament texts, which in no uncertain terms testify to the universality and depth of man's depravity. *"As it is written: 'There is **none** righteous, no, not one; There is **none** who understands; There is **none** who seeks after God. They have **all** turned aside; they have **together** become unprofitable; There is **none** who does good, **no, not one**'"* (Romans 3:10-12).

Nor Paul does not stop here. Not only must all people admit to the fact of being depraved, but all people must also admit the great *depth* of their depravity. Says Paul: all people are to admit that *"their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes"* (Romans 3:13-18). So deeply has man fallen that all he can do is speak evil, deceive, lie, threaten, curse, hurt, kill, destroy. Man totally lost any regard for God, and his actions and thoughts reflected this.

Where does that leave me? What kind of a person can I say that I am? The 'word picture' Paul painted of sinful man is a picture of myself. In Paradise *I* was able to image God perfectly – but I fell into sin, and consequently *I* became sinful, depraved, dead. I had been created to image God, to reflect His characteristics. Yet all that *I* can do is demonstrate unrighteousness, unholiness, unfaithfulness, foolishness, hatred; the exact opposite of God's characteristics. Instead of imaging God I now reflect what the devil is like! How deep was my fall from the noble and glorious position God created me to fill! (See Figure 14.3. The fall is not partial, but from glorious top to absolute bottom.)

How evil am I? Am I able to kill my own child? Am I capable of selling my own brother to foreign slave dealers? Do I have it in me to betray my parents and hand them over to death? Would I hand over a perfect man to the authorities? We'd like to answer such questions with an emphatic 'NO'! Yet Scripture does not permit that answer. The Lord is condemning in His evaluation of the human race: *"every intent of the thoughts of his heart was **only** evil **continually**"* (Genesis 6:5). Because people are so terribly depraved, ten sons of Jacob sold their own flesh and blood, brother Joseph, to Midianite traders (Genesis 37:28). The Jews, God's chosen people, were honored in their day to have a perfect man in their midst, and yet with one voice they called out to crucify Him (Matthew 27:22, 23). God made man noble, but man fell as low as he could possibly fall, rendering himself capable of doing the most atrocious deeds. Says Article 14, *"... he transgressed the commandment of life which he had received; ... he corrupted his whole nature. ... Since man became **wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways**, he has lost all his excellent gifts which he had once received from God."*



FALLEN MAN REDEEMED BY CHRIST

But here is displayed the glorious marvel of redemption! Though I willfully threw away the ability to image God and made myself totally depraved, God sent Christ to the Cross for me (see Figure 14.4, Point 1). In so doing, God reached down into the gutter to pull me out. The great depth into which God had to reach spells out all the more the great extent of God's mercy and kindness in saving a wretched sinner like me.

God sent Christ: *true man*. As true man Christ is also the image of God. As Scripture says: “... *Christ, who is the image of God*” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Likewise, Colossians 1:15 states concerning Christ, “*He is the image of the invisible God.*” As perfect man, Christ images **perfectly** what God is like. Philip once asked Jesus, “*Lord, show us the Father,*” to which Jesus replied, “*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*” (John 14:8,9). Jesus, without sin, as perfect as we were in Paradise, reflected God perfectly in His words and deeds during His time on earth. Christ never lied, but rather showed God to be a God of truth. He never hated in a way different from the way God hates. He never coveted, thus reflecting God to be a God who shows care to, and supplies for, His children. Christ imaged God's holiness and God's righteousness; Christ imaged God totally, reflecting all of God's characteristics perfectly (Figure 14.4, Point 2).

REDEEMED MAN REGENERATED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

In paying for sin by His sacrifice on the cross, Christ took the elect from Satan's side and brought them back to God's side: justification (Figure 14.4, Point 3). However, were it not for the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, redeemed man would have remained dead, paralyzed in sin. As Lord's Day 3.8 states, man is so corrupt and only capable of evil “*unless (he is) regenerated by the Spirit of God.*” God gave the Spirit to recreate man, to transform man so that he might once again be the image of God, just as God had created man to be in the beginning (Figure 14.4, Point 4).

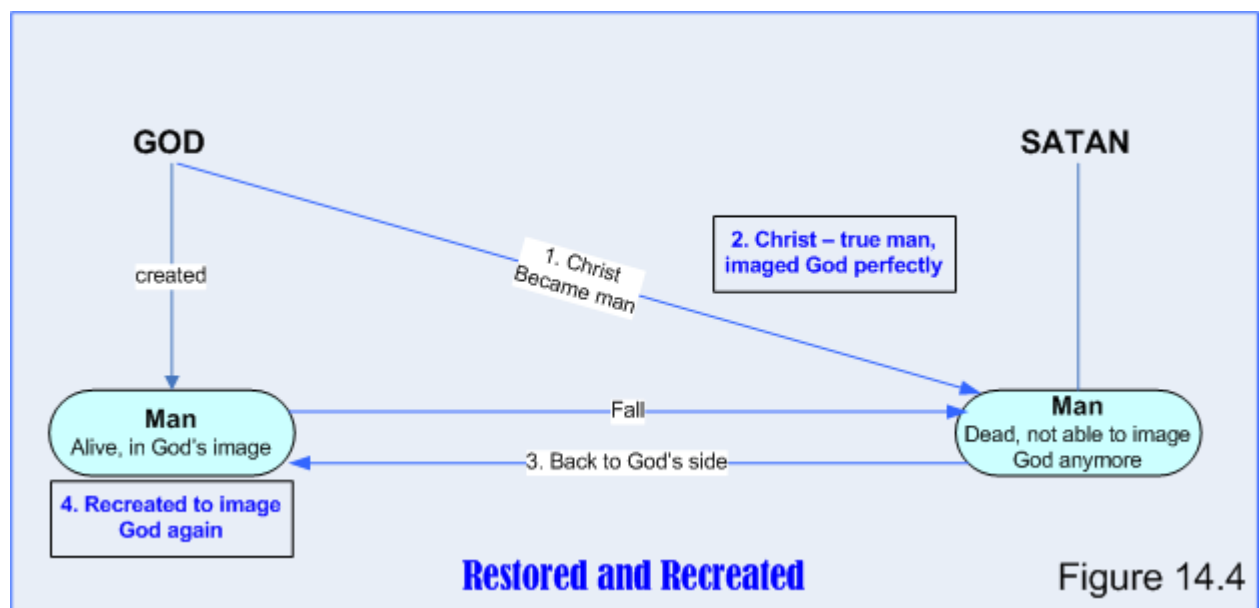


Figure 14.4

To the believers in the Church at Corinth, Paul writes that they “*are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord*” (2 Corinthians 3:18). The recreating work of the Holy Spirit is also mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians, “*Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on*

the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (3:9,10). The ‘new man’ or recreated man has been recreated according to a ‘pattern,’ a ‘mould,’ namely, the image of God. Paul mentions the concept again in his letter to the Ephesians, “... *that you put on the new man which was **created according to God**, in righteousness and true holiness*” (4:24). Recreated man is enabled to show something of God’s righteousness and holiness in his thoughts, words and actions. So Lord’s Day 32.86 can summarize Scripture in this way: “*Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image.*”

Yet recreated man is not enabled to image God perfectly again. In the text quoted above from 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul had spoken of “*being transformed*”. This means to say that the Spirit’s work of regeneration is not an instantaneous action complete in one hit, but is an ongoing process in the course of man’s life. Lord’s Day 33.88,89, in describing what conversion and the dying of the old nature means, explains it in terms of *more and more* hating and fleeing from sin. It is not until the final day that we shall be totally restored to the image of God.

Meanwhile, we are enabled to image God again. Thanks to the powerful renewing work of the Holy Spirit, sinners are able to produce the fruit of the Spirit: “*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*” (Galatians 5:22,23). By exuding such qualities in the dirt and dust of daily living, we show to others something of what God is like. So, by imaging God in our daily living we in effect evangelize. That is: evangelism does not simply mean that one speaks of Christ at an opportune moment (though life does present such opportunities and one should make use of them), but rather evangelism is all about reflecting God through my attitudes, words and deeds. It means always to live Christ, reflecting in my life what He is like. The Ten Commandments serve as a guide in this respect. Since God’s characteristics are pointed up in them, a life of obedience to them will reflect God’s characteristics and will image God.

Since I am allowed to be a child of God, I am allowed also to have again the task God gave to all mankind in the beginning, namely, to have dominion over God’s world. In my work I am ruling over God’s world, and I am reflecting what God is like. Awareness of this privilege determines *why* I work and *how* I work. I am no accident, am not here by chance, just filling in time and earning a crust; I am here by God’s will, to image Him!

MAN DOES NOT HAVE A FREE WILL

DeBrès repeated after God that man is “*wicked and perverse, corrupt in all his ways.*” Consistent with that confession, DeBrès also rejected “*all teaching contrary to this concerning the free will of man, since man is but a slave to sin and no one can receive anything except what is given him from heaven.*”

Before the Fall, Adam (and in him all mankind) did have a free will to do good or evil. He could choose to stay with God or could rebel against God and join Satan. With the Fall, Adam (and so we all) chose to rebel against God and join Satan. Was Adam after the fall (and in him the whole human race) now free to rebel against Satan and revert back to God’s side? The texts quoted above about the radical extent of our depravity dictate that the answer is No. Persons spiritually “*dead in sin*” (Ephesians 2:1) are not able to revert to God’s side – simply because the dead can do nothing.

Yet within the realm of Satan’s domain, sinful humans still had the freedom to choose what

to do on a Friday evening or what vocation to follow or which tool to purchase. By way of analogy, consider a car on a hill without brakes. The descent is inevitable (on this point there is no free will); all one can do is steer to the left or the right (on this point the driver can exercise his will). Once Adam (and so we all) chose for Satan, Adam had lost the free will to choose for God. Given our depraved nature, we can only make choices that please Satan.

In His plan of salvation, God sent Christ to bring the elect from Satan's side back to God's side. Those who have been returned to God's side, however, do not receive a free will again. Sin remains within them, and so the saved are totally dependent on God to do any good. Man can decide to sin, can even decide to obey Satan, but God in His grace holds on to His elect and brings them back to Himself. The good that God's redeemed children do is not the result of their free will to do good, but is purely the result of God's work in them. As a redeemed child of God it is my duty to do good and so I try, but I have only the Lord to thank, and not myself, for what He enables me to do in service to Him. Paul puts it this way, "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:12,13).

Points for Discussion:

1. What is meant by the phrase "image of God"? What does it not mean?
2. What does Evolution say about the identity and task of man? What effect follows for practices as abortion and euthanasia?
3. Explain the effects of the fall into sin on the notion of "image of God".
4. Are you able to sell your brother to a slave dealer? (See Genesis 37:28). Explain why you answer as you do.
5. How does the renewing work of the Holy Spirit affect the notion of "image of God"? At your work today, did you observe others reflecting something of what God is like? Do you think others saw from you something of what God is like? What specific sort of conduct would image God to your observers?
6. Paul relates in Ephesians 4:25-5:7 what a regenerated person looks like. How much place does the conduct Paul discourages in these verses have in your life? In your family's life? In your church's life? What can you do to encourage in yourself, your family, your church a manner of living that reflects the fruit of the Spirit described in these verses?
7. Discuss what a free will is. Does a person on Satan's side have a free will? Does one regenerated by the Holy Spirit have a free will?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 3.6, 7, 8; 4.9; 5.3
Canons of Dort I.1; III/IV.1-6; V.2, 3
Prayers #1, 2, 3, 9, 19, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 15: ORIGINAL SIN

ARTICLE 15

We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has spread throughout the whole human race. It is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin. It is, therefore, so vile and abominable in the sight of God that it is sufficient to condemn the human race. It is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism, for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source. Yet, in spite of all this, original sin is not imputed to the children of God to their condemnation but by His grace and mercy is forgiven them. This does not mean that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin, but that the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.

SIN REMAINS

Article 15 takes us back to our Fall into sin as related in Genesis 3. It is true that the believer, by God's grace and mercy, has been forgiven of original sin. Yet, in spite of this forgiveness, sin remains a very real component of the believer's life on earth. The child of God experiences sin as an inescapable reality of daily life, and this bothers the child of God. DeBrès has learned from Scripture that God's forgiveness "*does not mean that the believers may sleep peacefully in their sin, but that **the awareness of this corruption may make them often groan** as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.*"

WHAT IS SIN?

Sin is not simply a misdeed. Such a definition is much too innocent, and makes the God who "*cannot look on wickedness*" (see Habakkuk 1:13) into an ogre. Sin is *rebellion*, rebellion against God's **God-ness**, rebellion against my needing to submit to Him as God. Sin is that I push God aside and decide that *I* determine what is right in my circumstance. Sin, then, is not just an outward deed, but *sin is an attitude of the heart*, arrogance over against God. This arrogance is not occasional or sporadic, but pervasive; "*we have turned, every one, to his own way*" (Isaiah 53:6), and continually act as if we can make the rules ourselves.

WHERE DOES MY SIN COME FROM?

After David acknowledged his transgression before the Lord in his affair with Bathsheba, he asked himself where his sin came from. His words have been recorded for us in Psalm 51:5. "*Behold, I was **brought forth in iniquity, and in sin** my mother **conceived** me.*" David confesses that sin was present in him from the moment of his birth, yes, from the moment of his conception.

David does not say here that sin is just one more characteristic inherited genetically from one's parents, just like one inherits eye and hair color. One cannot be held responsible for the color of his eyes or the color of his hair with which he was conceived. Yet the Bible definitely does hold each individual responsible for his sinfulness. Romans 5:12: "*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, **because all sinned***—". According to Paul it was not just Adam who sinned (and so sin entered the world), but "*all sinned*". Here is an explanation of David's words in Psalm 51:5. David was sinful from the moment of conception because he had sinned in Paradise

with Adam already. So, too, ourselves: when Adam sinned, we all sinned. This matter of personal responsibility for sin (and being sinful) underlies the Bible's revelation concerning God's punishment upon sin. If I were not responsible for being sinful, if I could blame my parents for my being sinful (as I can trace the color of my eyes to them), then God would not be just in punishing me for sinning. Hell would then be unjust for all but Adam and Eve.

ORIGINAL SIN

The term 'original sin' is a reference to the sin described in Genesis 3, and contrasts with 'actual sins,' ie, the sinful acts we commit day by day. Romans 5:12 (quoted above) refers to original sin, and teaches that *we* fell into sin in Paradise. This thought is basic to the Bible's doctrine of sin and the doctrine of redemption. If I am not responsible for sin in the first place, then I am not in need of redemption either.

How then must I imagine or understand that I am responsible for the sin of Genesis 3? Two different approaches attempt to answer this question, as follows:

1. The Realist Approach

This approach insists that I was actually present in Paradise, and appeals to a passage as Hebrews 7:1-10 for explanation. Hebrews 7 recalls the episode of Genesis 14, where Melchizedek received from Abraham one tenth of the booty he had acquired after defeating the four kings in battle, and argues that in effect the Levites paid tithes through Abraham. "*Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him*" (Hebrews 7:9,10). The Realist explanation for my involvement in the fall in Paradise says that as Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek through his being present in Abraham's loins (though born years later), so we were present in the loins of Adam when he sinned and so we partook in that act of sinning.

2. The Federalist Approach

This second approach reasons that Adam was the head of the human race, and when he followed a particular course of action, the whole human race followed suit. This can be compared to a Head of State declaring war on another country. As a result of his declaration not the Head of State only is at war with the other country, but every resident of his land is at war. The decision of the one is a decision from all and for all.

Neither of the above two approaches answer all the questions that can be raised about how I can be held responsible for an act I cannot recall (and occurred even before I was born!). The important point is that the Bible *insists* that *each of us* is responsible for being sinful. I cannot comprehend how I am personally responsible for my fall in Paradise (my sinful, limited mind cannot grasp it), but I am to admit it and confess it: my sinfulness is my own fault; *I* am guilty of original sin.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Since I am responsible for original sin, I am also worthy of God's judgment on sin. It would be perfectly just of God to send me to hell. Even before birth I deserved nothing else, because I already sinned in Genesis 3. Knowing that each person is worthy of damnation points out how great a marvel it is that God does not cast all people into hell. It is God's good pleasure to save some and leave others subject to damnation. Given our own responsibility for sinfulness, it will not do for me to complain if I should find myself in hell, nor am I to complain if someone else goes to hell. Every one justly deserves hell. See Lord's Day 4.11.

At this point consideration should be given to the matter of children who die in infancy. Take for example all the victims of abortion. Can some or all of these babies, themselves victims of sin, who have not even had the opportunity to commit a sin, be sent to hell? This does indeed sound rash and harsh to our minds. However, we do well to remember that our minds are but sinful and that our feelings and emotions can stand in the way of a correct perspective on this. The issue here is, ‘what does *God* think?’ God *hates* sin. What is it that all people have in common? They are all totally sinful. Where do sinful people deserve to go? All deserve His sentence of hell. Where *do* people go unless Christ saves them? All go to hell. This is true for people of all ages, for infants as well as the elderly. No single person after the fall stands on some neutral ground before God, but all have deserted God and joined the devil; *all*, whether born or unborn, have sinned – and the wages of sin is death, eternal, spiritual death (Romans 6:23). I am to understand, then, that all people (myself included) rightly deserve hell – regardless of whether or not we have committed so-called ‘actual’ sins. My sinful emotions may not hinder me from humbly acknowledging the sentence God rightfully may pronounce on every human being, regardless of age. Only when it is clear in my mind what I and all people by nature deserve, can I be amazed that God has actually reached out to save *some*. It is then that I can also truly marvel at the fact that He even saved *me*!

THE EFFECT OF SIN

The result of the fall into sin was total depravity. The radical effect of the fall into sin is clear from the chapters that follow directly after Scripture’s account of the fall. Genesis 4 relates how the first child ever born let jealousy and hatred govern his heart, so that he killed his brother. Genesis 6 tells us that “*the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*” (vs 5). The effect of the fall into sin is that the heart has become depraved, corrupted. Jeremiah 17:9 states the matter most graphically: “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?*” Jesus describes some of the evils found in the human heart: “*For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these things come from within...*” (Mark 7:21-23). There is not a single good thing left in man; he is totally depraved. This does not mean that all people all commit all the most radical, horrendous sins possible. Nevertheless, the fact remains that sin has so totally corrupted the human heart that, no matter what I do, the heart remains totally depraved. To the human eye one sin is worse than another, but in God’s eyes sin is sin.

Sin affects everything we do; it touches *all* of life. We were not ‘little innocents’ at birth; even at birth we were already totally depraved and hence inclined to all evil. When our parents had us baptized, they confessed concerning us that we were “*conceived and born in sin, and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation*” (*Book of Praise*, p 587). It is on account of this reality of sin in children’s hearts that Solomon tells the parents and young people of his realm to appreciate discipline. “*A wise son heeds his father’s instruction, But a scoffer does not listen to rebuke*” (Proverbs 13:1). “*He who spares the rod hates his son, But he who loves him disciplines him promptly*” (Proverbs 13:24). Biblical parenting takes seriously the reality of depravity.

Western society does not believe that children are inclined to all evil. The thought is not new. Long ago already, Pelagius (c. 355 – c. 425) taught the early church to think positively of people. According to Pelagius children are born sinless. It is only, he said, through what

children see others do that they learn to do evil. Let a child grow up with no negative example, and it will become a perfect adult. DeBrès summarized Pelagius' position in our article: "*sin is only a matter of imitation.*" The church has soundly condemned Pelagius' positive evaluation of mankind, yet his teaching remains attractive to sinful people – and therein supplies further evidence of how insensitive we have become to our sinfulness. At heart his teaching is embraced today by social constructionists who would have us believe that the answer to improved conduct lies in providing a child with a good context in which to grow up. As if the heart is not inclined to all evil to begin with....

The Lord, though, has revealed something much different concerning our identity. To know what we are, and to know what our children are, leads us to an attitude of humility. If my sinfulness is my own fault, as a result of my own transgression in Paradise, there remains no room for me to challenge God concerning anything He does in my life. On account of my own transgression, I deserve only evil – and I readily acknowledge this humbling reality. More, to accept the reality of original sin is to open the way for marveling at the great gift God has given in Jesus Christ. Given my depravity, this gift of salvation is indeed the *great surprise* of the Gospel, and it moves to hearty praise for a God of such mercy.

FORGIVEN AND RENEWED, BUT NOT YET PERFECTED

In unfathomable mercy God has given His only Son to pay for my sins, both original and actual. He has also given me the Holy Spirit and so renewed me (see Article 24). However, the Spirit's renewing work does not mean that I have already been made perfect. Even today I am still corrupt and inclined to all manner of evil. As DeBrès says it in Article 15, sin "*is not abolished nor eradicated even by baptism,⁵ for sin continually streams forth like water welling up from this woeful source.*" Should I then be surprised if I would commit David's sin? Or Peter's? No, I should not be surprised at all. Dismayed, yes; but surprised, no. I should not be surprised because my heart remains so sinful.

Paul knew this well. Consider what he writes in Romans 7:18,19. "*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practise.*" Paul writes this *after* his conversion, after he became a Christian; else he could not say that "*to will is present with me.*" Like Paul, I can desire to do what is right, but I just do not have what it takes to carry it out. I am forgiven and renewed, but I am not yet made perfect. That is why Jesus taught His disciples (and so all of us) to pray for forgiveness of sins and to ask God not to lead us into temptation. Though regenerated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we remain "*so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment*" (Lord's Day 52). Or, as Lord's Day 51 says it with Paul in Romans 7:24: we remain "*wretched sinners*". So the Heidelberg Catechism can summarize Scripture in Lord's Day 44 like this: "*In this life even the holiest –think, for example, of David or Peter– have only a small beginning*" of the obedience God requires. David committed adultery and Peter denied the Lord Jesus three times. They, too, wanted to serve the Lord, but could not rise above sin. Nor should I think that I could do better. Of course, this is no reason to cease struggling against sin. In Lord's Day 44 the Christian confesses that "*with earnest purpose [the Christian does] begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.*" Yes, I must fight sin zealously, but I must not delude myself that I can get above sin.

⁵ Baptism is mentioned here because DeBrès is quoting from one of the Church Fathers (who laboured centuries earlier). Baptism here is a reference to Christ's work of forgiveness and the Spirit's work of renewal.

That is also the reason why I am to be so very cautious in passing judgment on another. My neighbor is no better than I am, and I am no better than my neighbor. I can fall into gross sin, and so can he. Dismay at sin is never to be confused with surprise. Let us stay humble in relation to our abilities.

The radical extent of our sinfulness is something we so badly need to acknowledge. We live in a time when not only the world, but also Christianity in general thinks positively of the person. Evangelicalism has taken on a heavy strain of Pelagianism/Arminianism; man (it is said) is not all the way down on the bottom rung, but somewhere higher up the ladder. We do well, however, to echo the unflattering terms Scripture uses concerning what man is, what I am. In the words of our article, “... *the awareness of this corruption may make (believers) often groan as they eagerly wait to be delivered from this body of death.*” This is what Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 15:53-57. He longs to be released from this body of death, when the power of sin shall be totally removed. “*For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

There comes a day –any day now!– when we will be relieved from the clutches of sin! Who is not impatient?!

Points for Discussion:

1. Explain what sin is. What actually makes a particular action (or attitude) ‘sin’?
2. Where does sin come from?
3. Is it just of God to send heathens, regardless of age, to hell? Why or why not?
4. Should you be surprised to find grievous sin in your (regenerated) life? Why or why not?
5. Will sin always remain a part of us? Explain.
6. How would you describe yourself to God? Is the language of the Prayers in the *Book of Praise* (pg 641ff, esp Prayer 1 & 3) too self-condemning? Explain your answer.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 2.5; 3.7, 8; 4.9, 10, 11; 23.60; 26.69, 70, 71; 44.114; 51. 126; 52.127

Canons of Dort III/IV.1, 3-6; V.2, 3

Form for baptism of infants, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 16: DIVINE ELECTION

ARTICLE 16

We believe that, when the entire offspring of Adam plunged into perdition and ruin by the transgression of the first man, God manifested Himself to be as He is: merciful and just. Merciful, in rescuing and saving from this perdition those whom in His eternal and unchangeable counsel He has elected in Jesus Christ our Lord by His pure goodness, without any consideration of their works. Just, in leaving the others in the fall and perdition into which they have plunged themselves.

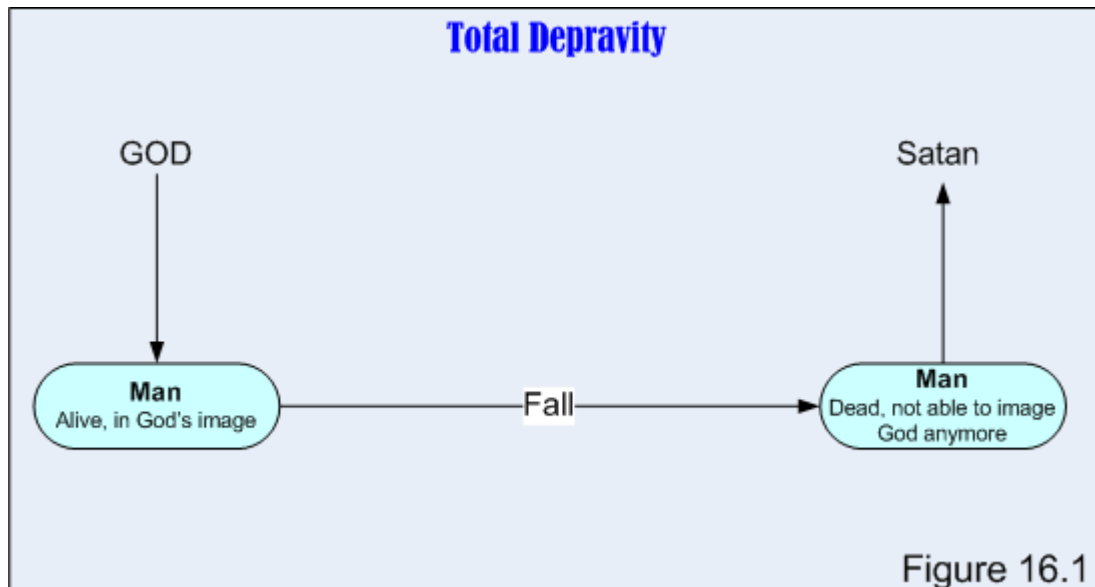
NOTE: to understand the material confessed in Article 16, the reader is encouraged to read the *Canons of Dort*. In that confession, the material of Article 16 is explained and defended in detail in the face of heresy. An explanation of that confessional form is available in my *Notes on the Canons of Dort*.

ORIGINAL SIN

Article 15 confessed that all people are guilty of original sin. God had created man “very good” and capable of performing God’s will perfectly. However, with the fall into sin, man fell from his exalted position. Through the fall man broke the bond with God and established a bond with Satan. Man’s fall was not due to a deficiency in the way the Creator had fashioned him. Man’s fall was not due either to some compulsion exerted on man that was too great for us to handle. Rather, man fell into sin by his *own free will*. The blame for the fall lies with man alone; all people are guilty before God on account of our fall.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

As a result of the fall into sin, man lost all the good qualities with which God created him. This condition of ‘sinfulness’ is termed in Scripture ‘dead in sin’. “*And you He made alive, who were **dead in trespasses and sins***” (Ephesians 2:1). Though his heart still beat, fallen man was spiritually dead, void of the God-directed life granted in Paradise. As the dead can do nothing, so fallen man was not capable of carrying out the tasks for which he was created, and certainly could not give glory to his Maker. In fact, because of his ‘deadness-in-sin,’ man had made himself odious to God. In not a single person was there anything positive which motivated God to say, “I’ll save that person.” Rather than imaging God, all men imaged Satan. The *Canons of Dort* use the phrase ‘Total Depravity’ to describe man’s state of being after the Fall (see Figure 16.1).



This spiritual death rendered man even incapable of reaching out to God for help, for a dead man cannot reach out for help. The surprise of the Gospel, now, is that *God reached out to man* – to the very creature that snubbed Him! This is **mercy** indeed! What makes this mercy even more profound is that God showed His mercy to *ME*! I am no better, or more attractive to God, than any of the other millions upon millions of sinners on this earth; in my deadness I am as odious to God as the next sinner. Yet God showed mercy to *me*, reached out in Jesus Christ to save *me*! How inexplicably marvelous is this gospel! I cannot begin to appreciate its wealth unless I first acknowledge my guilt in falling into sin and making myself ‘dead in sin.’ That is: I cannot appreciate this mercy unless I first acknowledge my total depravity.

ELECTION

God sent His only Son into the world to save people from sin, to deliver people from Satan’s side and return them to God’s side. But *whom* does Christ save? After the fall into sin, the entire human race was on Satan’s side. Did Christ deliver the entire human race from Satan? No, He did not. Concerning the baby in Mary’s womb, the angel said to Joseph, “*you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save **His people** from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). We do not read here that Jesus will save *people*, or *good people*, or *all people*; no, He will save **His people**. Hence *some* people will be saved, while others will not be saved. This is the doctrine of election: that **those may be saved whom the Father has given to Jesus** (John 17).

To elect is to choose. In the context of our fall into sin, the term refers to God choosing for salvation some from the total world population that had joined Satan through their fall into sin. The Scriptural foundation for confessing election is as follows:

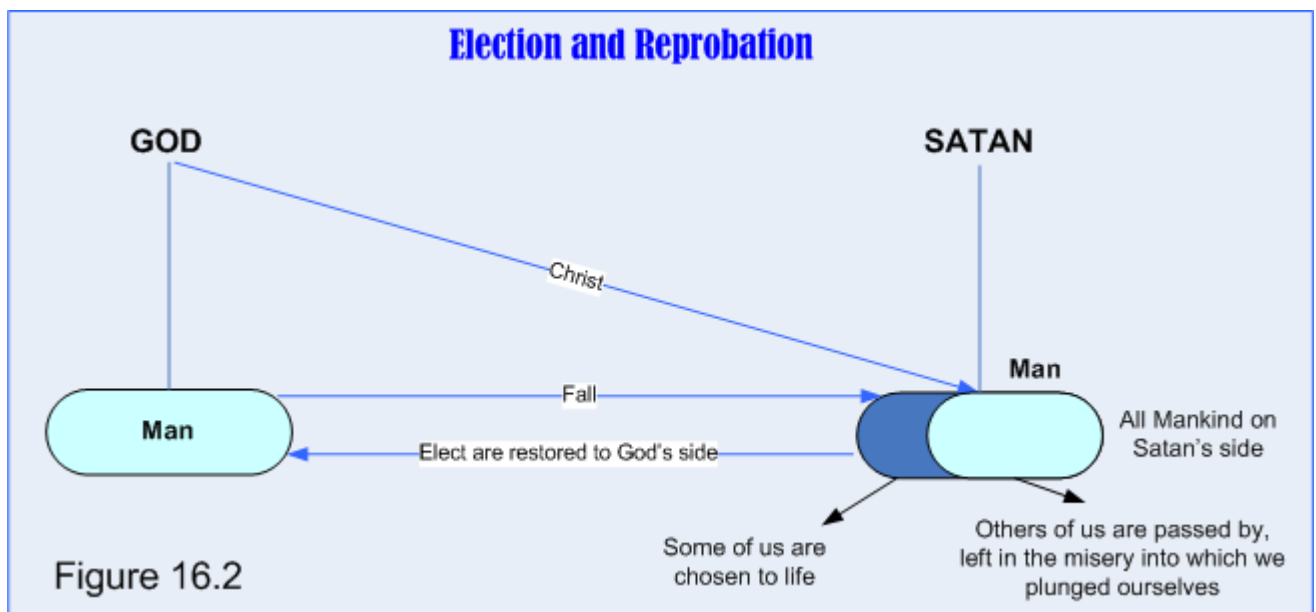
- In Ephesians 1:4,5 we read that God has chosen certain persons. “*Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... having predestined us...*”
- Likewise, in Romans 8:28-30 we read about “*those who are called according to His purpose ... **whom** He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son ... **whom** He predestined, **these** He also called; **whom** He called, **these** He also justified; and **whom** He justified, **these** He also glorified.*” In these verses we repeatedly read what God does for some, not for all.
- Similarly, in Acts 13:48 we read that not all in Antioch believed the Gospel delivered to them by Paul and Barnabas, but only “*as many as had been appointed to eternal*

life believed.” Only as many believed as God had previously designated to receive eternal life.

The *Canons of Dort* gives us a workable description of election. “*Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby ... He has ... chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of persons*” (I.7). Election is God’s deed of choosing **some** from the millions on Satan’s side, with the purpose of returning these limited number of persons back to His side.

REPROBATION

Whereas election is God’s act of choosing and taking some from Satan’s side and returning them to Himself, reprobation refers to God passing others by. These persons are consequently left in the misery into which they had plunged themselves through their fall into sin in Paradise. “*Holy Scripture ... further declares that not all men are elect but that some have not been elected, or have been passed by in the eternal election of God. Out of His most free, most just, blameless, and unchangeable good pleasure, God has decreed to leave them in the common misery into which they have by their own fault plunged themselves, and not to give them saving faith and the grace of conversion*” (*Canons of Dort*, I.15). Whereas election is God’s active deed of choosing, reprobation is God’s passive act of leaving people, passing them by (see Figure 16.2).



Although our salvation is a consequence of our election, we cannot argue that people are lost *because* they are reprobate, or that some are destined for hell *because* God sent them there. We are not to imagine mankind on neutral ground and God (for reasons of His own) sending the one to heaven and the other to hell. Rather, we are to acknowledge that all mankind through our willful disobedience in Paradise placed ourselves squarely in Satan’s camp. So we *all* put ourselves on the road to hell. God in turn determined to *save* some from Satan’s side (that’s election), and *leave* others there (that’s reprobation).

Article 16 speaks in terms of “*mercy and justice.*” Election, that God chose some, is mercy. Our fall into sin was our own doing, and so God did not have to save any of us. That He nevertheless chose some for salvation and restored them to Himself is mercy most profound. On the other hand, that God left others with Satan is justice, is the sentence rightly deserved.

We of our own accord rejected the Creator in favor of Satan, and there is no compulsion on the Creator to rescue us. We would have only ourselves to thank if God had passed us by and left us with Satan, but the credit for ending up back with God is God's alone, for it is He that brought us back.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE FOR REPROBATION

That God leaves some sinners in the misery into which they plunged themselves is shown by passages of Scripture as the following:

- Revelation 13:8, "*And all who dwell on the earth will worship him (the beast), **whose names have not been written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.***" The book of life contains only the names of the elect, those chosen to life. The fact that some names do not appear in the book of life means nothing else than that these persons shall not receive life. They have been passed by. This book is mentioned also in Revelation 17:8.
- In 1 Peter 2: 8 we read of people being offended at the gospel of Christ. In connection with this offence, Peter quotes from Isaiah, saying, "*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner-stone,*" and "*A stone of stumbling and a rock of offence.*" Why do they stumble? Says Peter, "***They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.***" That they should stumble at the Gospel was God's divine will for them; God appointed that reaction. This is reprobation.
- Romans 9:22, "*What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering **the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.***" Verse 23 on the other hand speaks of "*vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory.*" The imagery of "vessels" refers to persons created by God for purposes of His own choosing, be it for salvation or for damnation.

IS THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION FAIR?

In Romans 9 we read, "*Jacob have I loved, but Esau I have hated*" (vs 13). Yet, Paul says, this election of the one on God's part does not mean that there is unrighteousness with God (vs 14). To prove the point, the apostle quotes the words God spoke to Moses (in Ex 33): "*I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion*" (vs 15). The credit for salvation does not belong to the saved; it belongs rather to the "*God who shows mercy*" (vs 16). That all is geared to God's glory (Paul continues) is pointed up in what Scripture says concerning Pharaoh: "*For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be declared in all the earth'*" (vs 17). Through Pharaoh hardening his heart so stubbornly that it wasn't broken until ten plagues had devastated Egypt, God's name was praised the more. The lesson of Scripture, then, says Paul, is this: Sovereignly, God "*has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens*" (vs 18). We are left with the conclusion: God is God, and so may do with guilty sinners what He wills.

Romans 9:14 expresses our very own question of whether or not election and reprobation is fair. We ask, "Isn't God unfair in taking one and leaving the other?" "*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!*" Why not? Verses 20 and 21 direct us to consider **Whose** ways and counsel we are questioning and challenging. "*O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?*" Were man on a level with God, man might be in a position to challenge God. But if God is **God**, and I a mere creature

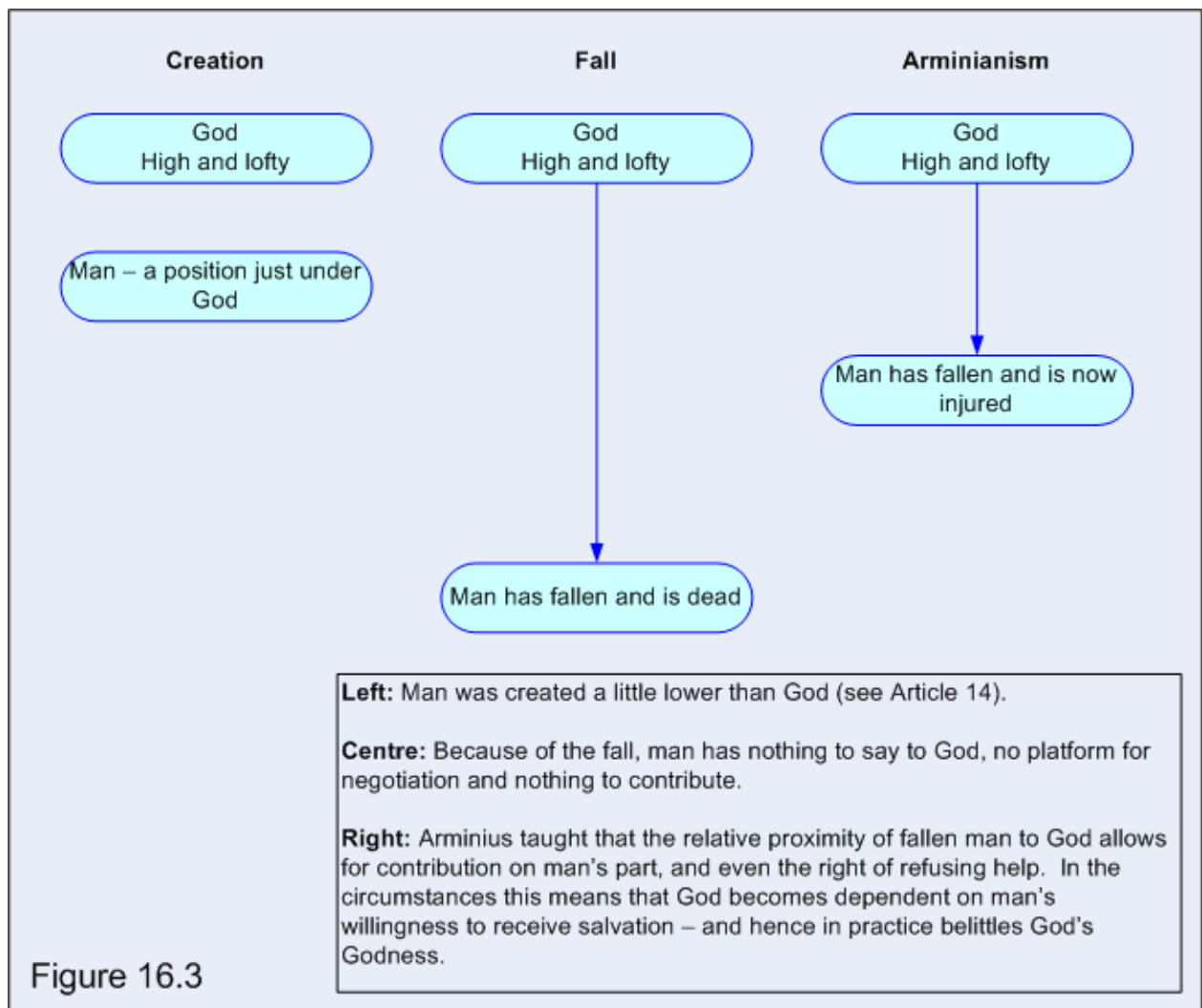
(sinful too yet!), then it is not for me to challenge God. I am to know my place in relation to God. It will not do for me to complain that God chose me but not another. It was I who protested against God in Paradise, I who broke the bond with God, I who rejected God. The attitude of Job after God displayed to him His majesty is so appropriate for me: “*Job answered the Lord and said: ‘Behold, I am vile; What shall I answer You? I lay my hand on my mouth...’*” (Job 40:3f). It simply is not fitting for me to challenge why God saves the one and not the other.

As it is, the Lord tells us why He chose the one and passed the other by. The grounds for His actions lie not in man at all. Romans 9:11 states this in the context of explaining why God loved Jacob and not Esau: “...*for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, **not of works** but of Him who calls.*” God’s grounds are simply His good pleasure. “*He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, **according to the good pleasure of His will**, to the praise of the glory of His grace...*” (Ephesians 1:4-6). One is elect and the other is not simply because **God wanted it so**. I will never understand why God chose me and not my neighbor. However, the fact that God did choose me leads me to a deep sense of humility and gratitude. For what am I, that I should receive such grace?! Yet God was pleased to make me, a mortal sinner, His child. Surely it will take us an eternity to give to God the honor He is due on account of such saving work!

ARMINIANISM

The question of where God and man stand in relation to each other is central to the doctrine of election. This is highlighted by the errors of Arminian theology, which forms the background to the defense of the faith as found in the *Canons of Dort*.

Arminian theology says that man is not dead, but rather is injured. Man, we’re told, did not fall from a 70-story building (so that he lies crushed and broken on the sidewalk, very dead); man fell instead from a three-story building, and now lies injured on the ground. His injuries still permit him to call out for help, even permit him to decide what kind of help he’ll receive, and perhaps even contribute to getting himself on the stretcher. This presentation of things, however, does not do justice to Scripture’s teaching of man as dead in sin. More, it does not do justice to the radical distance the Bible presents between the sovereign, holy Creator and finite, sinful man. To speak of man as injured (or sick) instead of dead shrinks the infinite distance between God and man, and denies the reality of man’s total dependence on God for salvation. Instead, man is elevated (and God proportionally reduced) so that man’s thoughts and contributions amount to something before God, and God is ultimately dependent on man’s *willingness* to be saved. See Figure 16.3.



If I am only injured or sick (not totally depraved), I can have input into the question of whether or not I shall be helped. Hence Arminius said that *election* is *conditional*; God's decision to elect me is conditional on whether or not I choose to receive help – which is to say that I decide to believe. God, Arminius taught, saw before hand that I would believe, and so He chose me – knowing that I would eventually come to faith. Christ's death, he continued, was not meant for a fixed number of persons only. Since the individual can choose whether or not he will believe, God intended Christ's death for anybody and everybody – all who would choose to believe: *universal atonement*. Again, since a person can choose whether or not he will believe in Christ (and so be saved), he can also choose to refuse God's gift of salvation. Then God can plead with the sinner to take hold of God's offer, but God may be disappointed – for the decision is up to man. *Grace*, then, is *resistible*, for I can choose to refuse God's offer. Once more, the believer can decide, after believing for many years, to reject God's offer of the gospel, and fall away from the truth; the *saint* does not necessarily *persevere*.

Arminianism gives to man the credit for salvation. God has to wait for man to grab hold of what He offers. It is even possible, Arminius taught, that no man wishes to receive what God gives and that heaven will be empty on the last day. Arminianism has shrunk the distance between God and man so that the population of the New Jerusalem depends ultimately on man's decision to accept God's offer of salvation. This is distinctly contrary to Scripture. At

the heart of Reformed thinking is the conviction that God is **God** and I but a sinful creature, and so I am completely *dependent* on the grace of sovereign God. It all comes down to *who I think God is* and *who I think man is*.

THE COMFORT OF ELECTION

What comfort do we receive in the doctrine of election? Why would DeBrès, in his time of persecution, devote an article of his confession to election?

Timothy and Paul both knew what it was to suffer on account of the Gospel. 2 Timothy 1:3-10 relates that life was far from easy for them. Yet Paul encouraged Timothy with these words, “*share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and **called us with a holy calling**, not according to our works, but **according to His own purpose and grace** which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began*” (vss 8-10). It is of election that Paul reminds Timothy here, the comfort being that if God calls, there is absolutely no one who can tear God’s own away from Him. Despite the fury and rage of Satan and hell on account of God’s work of election, God will bring to completion the work He began when He chose sinners for Himself. Satan cannot take anyone away from God (see also John 10:27,28). We appreciate that here was encouragement for Timothy in the midst of his suffering.

Again, in Romans 8:28-39 Paul draws out the comfort believers may experience in the knowledge of election. Paul describes the golden chain of salvation, beginning with the reality of election: “*And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are **the called according to His purpose**. For **whom He foreknew, He also predestined** to be conformed to the image of His Son.... Moreover **whom He predestined, these He also called**; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified*” (vss 29,30). Consider the comfort of Paul’s statement:

- He dares to write that the predestined of Rome were not just called, but also justified *and glorified*. We can understand that the word ‘justified’ is in the past tense, for Paul writes to saints who believed the gospel and so stood righteous before God. But how do you account for the past tense of the word ‘glorified’? The term describes the crown the saints receive after they die or after Christ’s return! Though Paul’s reference is to the future, he puts the word ‘glorified’ in the past tense in order to drive home for the Romans the absolute certainty of God’s saving work. Though the saints do not yet have this glorification, they may without a doubt consider it theirs already because God invariably completes the work He began. Election guarantees glorification.
- Similarly, Paul can be bold in his conviction: “*If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall bring a charge against God’s **elect**? It is God who justifies*” (vs 31, 33). If God chose me, no one can sustain a charge against me!
- Again, “*who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*” (vs 35). The Old Testament is emphatic that troubles shall assail those whom God has chosen (for Satan does not readily let his slaves go!) “*As it is written (in Psalm 44), ‘For your sake we are killed all day long: We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter’*” (vs 36). But in spite of how things may look at times, the assurance of all believers may be that “*yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other*

created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vss 37-39).

Here is great comfort for the child of God living in a world with devils filled. God has *elect*ed, and so my salvation is assured, no matter the assaults of the devil and the weaknesses of my own flesh.

Should it, then, come to pass that I might stray from God at any time in my life, if God has called me, He *will* hold on to me. David, too, once went astray and refused to acknowledge his sin before God. Consequently he felt so alone, and so distant from God (see Psalm 32). Yet God was there all along, and He caused David to feel His heavy hand upon him in order that He might repent and once again live as God’s child in restored communion with Him. Once God is there in the life of His elect, He is *always* there. This is something I may believe at all times, even though I may not always experience it. At times it may feel as though God is so very far away. But here, too, it is ultimately a matter of *what I think about God*. Who do I believe God to be? If *God* claimed me for Himself, may I fear He will change His mind? No, for God does not change. God certainly knew when He chose me that I was a miserable wretch. Yet He chose me. I may at times feel alone; yet I may know myself to be safe with this God.

THE CERTAINTY OF ONE’S ELECTION

One thorny question remains. How do I know if I am among the elect? Can one even know?

The elect of God, those whom He has chosen and brought back to His side, were totally dead in sin when they were with Satan (see Figure 16.1). God justified the elect while they were still in this state of death. These justified persons, brought back to God’s side, do not remain dead but are raised to new life (see Article 24). *“Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love”* (Ephesians 1:4). The elect were chosen in order that they might be renewed, made holy. The evidence of this renewal lies in the presence of faith in the elect, and the presence of the fruits of the Spirit. The Lord does not work this faith or the fruits of the Spirit in those who are still on Satan’s side and doomed to hell; God only works this faith in the elect. Therefore Jesus could say in Matthew 7:16-20, *“You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. ... Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”* So, if I am to find out whether I am among God’s elect, I must ask myself: do I see evidence of Christ’s renewing work in my life? Do I see fruits of faith? Do I have a love for righteousness, a hatred for evil, a sorrow for sin? Do I delight in doing God’s will? If I can answer these questions in the affirmative, then I have evidence of God working in me by His Holy Spirit, and hence I have evidence of being chosen. For God does not work such evidence of election in the hearts of those destined for hell.

Not, let me hasten to add, that we can be assured of our election only when the fruits of faith within us are perfect. That day will not come as long as we live in this broken life. Rather, one recognizes that the tree is still an apple tree (and not a plum tree) not only when it produces unblemished apples, but also when its crop is infested with worms or been hit by hail. Those whom the Holy Spirit has renewed do not bring forth perfect fruit, but their fruit is distinctly that of the Holy Spirit and not of the devil. See further Article 24.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* asks in Lord’s Day 32, *“Why must we yet do good works?”* The

answer is this: "...that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits ..." The *Canons of Dort* state the matter even more strongly: "*The elect in due time, though in various stages and in different measure, are made certain of this their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation ... by observing in themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight, the unfailing fruits of election pointed out in the Word of God – such as a true faith in Christ, a childlike fear of God, a godly sorrow for their sins, and a hungering and thirsting after righteousness*" (I.12).

THE FRUIT OF ELECTION

Possibly the *Canons of Dort* puts into words most aptly what the fruit of election invariably is. Chapter I.13 reads as follows:

"The awareness and assurance of this election provide the children of God with greater reason for daily humbling themselves before God, for adoring the depth of His mercies, for cleansing themselves, and for fervently loving Him in turn who first so greatly loved them."

What a God this is! That He would choose to salvation persons who deserted Him in favor of Satan, and even number *me* among His chosen: how glorious this God! "*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!*" (Romans 11:33).

Points for Discussion:

1. What does 'dead in sin' mean?
2. Did Christ come into the world for all men? Explain your answer.
3. What is election? Consult *Canons of Dort* I.7.
4. What is reprobation? Consult *Canons of Dort* I.15.
5. Can we fault God with discrimination when He leaves some to perish eternally? Why or why not?
6. The difference between Arminian thinking and reformed thinking revolves around the doctrine of Who God is and who man is. Explain. Evaluate Janet Oke's depiction of God as described in her numerous novels. Can you think of other writers who describe God in a less than Biblical fashion?
7. Do you receive comfort from the doctrine of election? Explain your answer.
8. Are you certain that you will receive life eternal, and not damnation? Explain the grounds of your answer.
9. What are the fruits of election?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 4.11
Canons of Dort I.1-18; II.1, 2

ARTICLE 17: THE RESCUE OF FALLEN MAN

ARTICLE 17

We believe that, when He saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him. He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman (Galatians 4:4), to bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15) and to make man blessed.

MAN'S NEED FOR REDEMPTION

Article 17 concerns itself with God's actions towards man after he had fallen into sin. To set the context for God's work of redemption, DeBrès first describes man's sin and misery, and how desperately man needed to be rescued. DeBrès describes this sin and misery with these words, "*man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable.*" The word 'thus', of course, serves as the link to DeBrès' confession in Articles 14 and 15 about the fall into sin and its effects. Man was spiritually dead, alienated from God; he was also as good as physically dead in that the grave was his inevitable destiny. Death was in his bones, and characterized his being. The proverb has it that "'can't' is a dead man's word," and 'can't' indeed typified what fallen man could do: absolutely nothing; he *could not* reach out to God for help, or even cry for help – for the dead can do nothing.

DeBrès depicts the context of redemption in sharper colors still. It was not just that man found himself in a state of physical and spiritual death; no, says DeBrès, "*man **plunged himself** into physical and spiritual death and **made himself** completely miserable.*" The blame is fully our own. We made ourselves repulsive to God, bankrupt, with nothing at all to offer God. Worse still, when God approached fallen man, we (in Adam) "*trembling fled from (God).*" Man did not want God; we did not want God's mercy. DeBrès' description of man is far from attractive. Yet this realistic portrait of man is so essential to our understanding and appreciation of redemption. Nothing makes white so white as a background of black; nothing makes the glory of God's redemption so praiseworthy as the background of man's self-inflicted wretchedness. That is why DeBrès begins this article on redemption with a statement repeating man's sin and misery.

Here is now the marvel: God knew well that we had sinned and fallen so terribly to our spiritual deaths. He knew well that His holiness tolerated no evil, that His justice permitted no respite. Yet God –of all things!– sought us out in order to save us! Adam and Eve "*heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'*" (Genesis 3:8,9). How absolutely amazing: though Adam and Eve had joined Satan's side and now were hiding from God, God yet sought them out! How thrilling the gospel!

GOD'S MOTIVATION FOR REDEEMING MANKIND

What motivated this God –my God!– to seek out such wretches? Why did God call out to us in the face of our fleeing? Says Article 17, "... *our **gracious** God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him.*" Scripture speaks graphically of God's graciousness. In Luke 1:78, for example, the Scriptures describe God as

moved to the pit of His stomach on account of the plight of the human race. Zechariah speaks of “*the remission of their sins through the **tender mercy** of our God.*” In Greek, the words translated as ‘tender mercy’ literally mean “bowels of mercy”. The Lord is presented as having no appetite on account of the misery into which we had plunged ourselves, pained to His stomach on account of our wretchedness. This is what drove the offended Creator to seek us out after the fall into sin; He was so moved by compassion for the creature He had made that He set out to bring about his redemption.

Article 17 speaks also of God’s *wisdom* and *goodness* with regard to God setting out to seek man. See the discussion in Article 1 for the meaning of these terms.

PROTEVANGEL: GENESIS 3:15

After the Lord caught hold of fleeing man and confronted him with his transgression, the Lord addressed the serpent that instigated the fall and had won the human race over to his side. Said God to the serpent in the hearing of Adam and Eve: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.*” Here was a delightful word of gospel! God would put a strain on the bond the fallen human race had forged with Satan. More, God would place friction and strife between the devil and the seed of the woman. Though Satan would be successful in bruising Christ’s heel (the woman’s seed, Christ, would die on the cross), God would ensure that in the process Satan’s head would be bruised. In these words is the whole gospel in a nutshell. (Genesis 3:15 is often referred to as ‘the Mother Promise.’ This is a literal translation of the Dutch term ‘Moeder Belofte’ for which ‘protevangel’ is the common English term; ‘prot’ means first, and ‘evangel’ means ‘Gospel’). In this First Gospel God told fallen man what He was going to do to deliver him from his misery.

The rich revelation captured in Article 17 points up again *who my God is*. This God does not change, ever. When Adam so long ago ran to hide from God, God yet sought him out. Likewise, God, moved to the pit of His stomach at my plight, seeks me out. To me He said, “You are My child; I have given Christ to make payment for your sins.” In the midst of the struggles of my daily life, I am much comforted by the awareness that God loved me so much that He Himself sought me out in order to save me. God Himself has declared me precious in His divine eyes. Such a thought is humbling and at the same time so exceedingly rich. This awareness of God’s grace gives each of us the encouragement we need in the face of life’s struggles.

THE COVENANT

God’s act of seeking sinners out was and is done in the context of the covenant.⁶ The Covenant is a relation of love from God to man whereby God binds man to Himself (in Christ).

1. The covenant is one-sided in its origin.

That a covenant arises between God and man is not due to man’s initiative, nor is it because man gave his permission. The depravity into which we plunged ourselves through the fall into sin makes any initiative or action from man’s side impossible. A bond of love between God and man can come only from action on God’s side. So we hear God declare to Abraham, “***I will establish** My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants*

⁶ The covenant receives further attention in the explanation on Article 34.

after you” (Genesis 17:7). There is no discussion with Abraham as to whether Abraham wants this bond of love; God instead simply **imposed** this bond of love on him.

2. The content of the covenant.

In the same verse God explains the content of this bond of love He imposes: “***to be God to you and your descendants after you.***” God states ‘I am going to be your God.’ With these words God returns to the situation of Genesis 1. When God made man in the image of God, and therein gave the mandate to reflect what God was like, God placed a bond of love between Himself and Adam (and Eve); He was *their* Father, and they *His* children. The child was to reflect to all creation what qualities the Father had, so that in turn creation might glorify God the more. That father/child relation of Genesis 1 involved the notion of tender care, as was also demonstrated by the abundance of the Garden of Eden into which God placed man in the beginning. Adam and Eve in Paradise were fully safe in the hands of their almighty, loving covenant Father.

That God sought out sinful man after his terrible fall, and established with him again His covenant of love, makes fallen man so exceedingly rich: God will again be *our* God! When God re-established His covenant with Abram in Genesis 17, He reaffirmed that same bond of love He re-established after the fall. This same bond He imposed (again) upon Israel after their exodus from Egypt; at Mt Sinai God said, “***I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage***” (Exodus 20:2). No matter how much Israel resisted, God bound Himself to Israel, bound Israel to Himself; God imposed a relation of love between this people and Himself; ‘I am *your* God, you are *My* people; I care for you.’ Israel’s unworthiness to be included in the covenant was pointed up by their identity as a nation of slaves. Yet God was sovereignly, mercifully pleased to be *God* for this sinful people, to restore with them the relation of the beginning. Truly, this speaks volumes about God’s identity!

After the fall, God’s declaration to “*be God to you*” is rooted in His gift of His only Son. In Paradise the Lord had told Adam that if he should disobey God’s command, if he would break God’s covenant, “*you shall surely die*” (Genesis 2:17). God determined that the full depth of this covenant penalty should fall on His Son Jesus Christ, who would bear God’s righteous punishment in place of sinners. Because the Son of God would certainly succeed in satisfying the justice of God, God continued His covenant even with sinners, even sought out sinners to be His covenant children. “*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*” (Romans 11:33).

3. The covenant is two-sided in its existence.

Once the covenant is there, imposed and established by God, then God **and** the people with whom He made the covenant are to keep it going. The continuation of the covenant is dependent upon both parties in the covenant honoring their respective commitments to the promises and obligations upon which the covenant was founded. God was obligated to continue to be Israel’s God because He had promised at Mt Sinai to be their God, and Israel was permitted to appeal to God to remember and fulfill this promise to them. Likewise, Israel was obligated to act as God’s people, which they would demonstrate by obedience to God’s Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20: 3-17). God could therefore appeal to Israel to remember and fulfill their promise to Him. Said Moses in his farewell sermon to Israel, “*This day the LORD your God commands you to observe these statutes and judgments; therefore you shall be careful to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul. Today **you have proclaimed the LORD to be your God**, and that you will walk in His ways and keep His*

statutes, His commandments, and His judgments, and that you will obey His voice. Also today the LORD has proclaimed you to be His special people, just as He has promised you, that you should keep all His commandments” (Deuteronomy 26:16-18). Here we read of two parties each making a proclamation to the other. In response to God’s proclamation that Israel was His special people, Israel made a profession of faith, professing that the Lord who proclaimed them to be His special people was their God, and that this obligated them to do His will. Both God and Israel were to be faithful to their covenant promises. Here we see two sides in the covenant, and hence promises and obligations to be honored from two sides.

4. God’s Covenant began in Paradise

The word ‘covenant’ does not appear in Genesis 1 & 2. Nevertheless, given what the Scriptures later reveal about God’s covenant, we understand that the covenant was already in existence in Paradise. That is: when God made man in the beginning, God treated man differently than He treated the monkeys and the mountains. For He placed a bond between Himself and man – as is pointed up in the notion of ‘image of God’ (see Article 14). This bond is God’s covenant with us. It is because the covenant existed in Paradise already that the fall into sin was so very tragic, for the fall was man’s act of breaking the covenant. Man’s covenant breaking, which landed him on Satan’s side, was deserving of God’s wrath. Yet what did God do? Though man broke his covenant with God, God did not break His covenant with man! Rather, God remained faithful to His obligations in the covenant, and so maintained what He had promised, namely, that ‘you are My people.’ Hence God sought us out, and came to us with Christ who would take upon Himself the curse we had brought upon ourselves (Genesis 3:15: *protevangel*). God re-established the covenant with us, promised to be our God still, promised to give a Savior who would carry the burden of God’s covenant wrath, and so reconcile us to God. On the last day the full wealth of the covenant will be apparent for us to see, for we read in Revelation 21:3 these words: “*And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.’”*” Here Jesus Christ uses covenant language, terms found in passages as Genesis 17:7, Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 26:16,17.

5. Only One Covenant

After man’s fall into sin God re-established His covenant with mankind. This covenant was not a new covenant, but a continuation of the very same covenant of Genesis 1 & 2, *with the added dimension of Christ*. Though we read in Scripture of God establishing covenants with Noah (Gen 9:9), Abraham (Gen 17:7), and Israel (Ex 20:2), these were not new, different or separate covenants, but re-establishments or affirmations of God’s original covenant with Adam in Paradise. Each time God renewed His covenant the bud of the covenant opened a little more – until, finally, in the New Covenant established in Jesus Christ the full flower of God’s mercy and love became apparent (see Hebrew 8). Always His one covenant stood, as God moved history along till the time of Christ’s arrival.

Though we can speak of different stages or time periods in the history of the covenant, it was, and is, always one and the same covenant. Therefore we cannot say that Christ un-did the covenant, or negated the obligations of the covenant; rather, Christ fulfilled and perpetuated the covenant. God’s covenant can be seen as a continuum, where God has this relation of love with people through the ages. Granted, in the days of Adam and Noah God made His covenant with *all* those who lived at the time, while His covenant with Abraham was limited to Abraham and his seed. Nevertheless, despite differences in the various administrations of the covenant, God’s covenant is essentially one. Hence we cannot *contrast* our days (in the

New Testament era) on the time line of covenant history with, for example, the days of the Old Testament – characterized though they were by the ceremonial laws. Though we live in a different era, we, together with God's people of the Old Testament, are members of the one covenant. Always the one condition applies in the covenant, namely, God imposes His relation of love on His people, and we in turn are to express faith in God through obedience to Him. This was true for the people in Abraham's days and it is true for us today.

Points for Discussion:

1. What word in this article would you consider most central? Explain your answer.
2. What moved God to "seek" fallen man?
3. What does it mean that "the covenant is one-sided in origin"?
4. What does it mean that "the covenant is two-sided in its existence"?
5. What is the content of God's covenant with you? Consider the *Form for Holy Baptism*, as quoted on page 1 of this book.
6. Consider what your response has been and continues to be to this covenant.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 4.11; 27.74
Canons of Dort I.17
Form for baptism of infants, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 18: HE INCARNATION OF THE SON OF GOD

ARTICLE 18

We confess, therefore, that God has fulfilled the promise He made to the fathers by the mouth of His holy prophets when, at the time appointed by Him, He sent into the world His own only-begotten and eternal Son, who took the form of a servant and was born in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:7). He truly assumed a real human nature with all its infirmities, without sin, for He was conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit and not by the act of a man. He not only assumed human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, in order that He might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should assume both to save both.

Contrary to the heresy of the Anabaptists, who deny that Christ assumed human flesh of His mother, we therefore confess that Christ partook of the flesh and blood of the children (Hebrews 2:14). He is a fruit of the loins of David (Acts 2:30); born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Romans 1:3); a fruit of the womb of the virgin Mary (Luke 1:42); born of woman (Galatians 4:4); a branch of David (Jeremiah 33:15); a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1); sprung from the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14); descended from the Jews according to the flesh (Romans 9:5); of the seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:16), since the Son was concerned with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore He had to be made like His brethren in every respect, yet without sin (Hebrews 2:16,17; Hebrews 4:15).

In this way He is in truth our Immanuel, that is, God with us (Matthew 1:23).

AT GOD'S APPOINTED TIME

Article 17 confesses how God came to seek out fallen man, came with the Gospel of the promise of the seed of the woman who would bruise the head of Satan (Genesis 3:15). Article 18 continues this confession by stating that God sent the seed of the woman at a very specific point in time. Says our article, “... **at the time appointed by Him**, (God) *sent His one and only eternal Son into the world.*” That this in fact echoes God’s revelation in Scripture is clear from passages as Galatians 4:3-5, where the Holy Spirit has Paul write, “... *we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.*” Here ‘bondage’ is a reference to man being on Satan’s side after the fall into sin. At the time God judged to be right, He sent His only Son from heaven to earth.

GOD GAVE UP HIS SON and CHRIST GAVE UP HIS GLORY

From eternity God had one only Son. This Son was God’s dearly beloved (Luke 3:22). Together they enjoyed eternal glory, and ever since the creation of the world in the beginning the angels sang up the glory of the Father and the Son. Jesus describes the splendor to which He was accustomed when He prayed in His high-priestly prayer, “*And now, O Father, glorify Me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was*” (John 17:5).

At a given moment God in heaven instructed His beloved Son to leave heaven’s splendor. That’s the implication of Jesus’ words in John 5:24, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life.*” Sending His only Son

out of His glorious presence in heaven involved self-emptying on the part of the Father, for He *gave away* what was dearest to Him. When Jesus describes the gospel He words it like this: “*For God so loved the world that He **gave** His only begotten Son*” (John 3:16).

From this heavenly glory the eternal Son of God moved to the squalor of an animal shed. His bed was a feeding trough, His blankets swaddling cloths, His company animals – and sinners. We scarcely give the marvel of Christmas a second thought, but we do well to stop and consider what Christmas really involved, consider what self-sacrifice there was on the part of the Father and the Son. What glorious display of what *love is all about!*

In itself, there was nothing dishonorable about the Son of God becoming man, for man was created in that most exalted of positions as image of God (see Article 14). The Son of God, though, did not become a man as the human race was before the fall into sin; the Son of God instead became one of us as we became with the fall. So Jesus too could be sick, could suffer pain, could experience hunger and toothache and sleeplessness and every other effect of our fall – though without sin. The apostle Paul called this *humiliation*. Said he in Philippians 2:5-8, “...*Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he **humbled** himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*” One could find no better example of self-denial than for the Son to leave His heavenly glory to join fallen man and die on the cross for their sake. God gave *everything*, even His own Son; and the Son willingly went. This is a gospel that cannot leave one cold. That in the crib of Bethlehem should lay the Son of God: words cannot capture the depth of that marvel!

THE MOTIVE FOR THE INCARNATION

Why did the Son leave the splendor of heaven and come to earth? He came for the *benefit* of lost sinners. The angel explained the motive to Joseph, “*And (Mary) will bring forth a son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people **from their sins***” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus repeated the thought in His words to Zaccheus: “*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to **save** that which was **lost***” (Luke 19:10). The Nicene Creed echoes this sentiment of Scripture with the confession that the Son of God “***for us men and our salvation**, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man*” (*Book of Praise*, p. 437). I had deserted God, joined Satan, broken the covenant with God. Yet God did not leave me in my predicament, but sent His only Son to earth **to save me**. God, who does not change, did in Bethlehem what He had promised to do so many years earlier in Genesis 3. To *me*, in my particular circumstances and with my particular strengths and weaknesses, He has given Christ so that I might be brought back from Satan’s side to God’s side. It is this knowledge that makes Christmas so indescribably rich for me – so much so that I accept nothing in the Christmas season that would distract my attention from that gospel. This glorious Gospel I carry with me in all the highs and lows of life, for all is well if God in fact loves me this much!

This self-emptying on the part of the Son exposes the love that must characterize all Christians. Paul writes to the Philippians of Christ’s self-emptying in order to correct a selfish attitude prevalent in that congregation. The Christians of Philippi, Paul says, were busy with self, each seeking to build up his own reputation and kingdom (Philippians 2:2-4). Paul condemned that self-centeredness, and insisted that the Christians of Philippi follow the example of Jesus Christ – who did not insist on the glory of heaven, did not stand on any divine rights He might have, but emptied Himself to serve the unworthy. Paul insists that

Christ's example at Christmas is one all Christians must reflect. This is radical instruction to people perennially busy with Self, always by nature seeking to further Self. It is radical instruction also for people who naturally gravitate to tit-for-tat conduct and revenge behavior. Though we rejected God in Paradise and offended Him greatly, He did not respond in kind or seek revenge upon us; He instead gave the gift of His only Son and so smothered the unworthy with love. The more that Christians live that lifestyle (in family, work and community nearby and far away), the more a revengeful world will see how unique and glorious the living God actually is.

ANABAPTIST HERESY CONCERNING CHRIST'S INCARNATION

DeBrès had to defend the incarnation of Christ over against the heresy of the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists did not deny that Christ was born of Mary, but they compared Mary to a funnel, in that Christ merely passed through her and hence did not take on human nature. According to the Anabaptists Christ was not true man but only true God. Yet DeBrès confessed, in agreement with Scripture, that it was imperative for Christ to be true man in order to be able to save man. The curse had fallen upon man, and therefore the curse had to be paid by man. Christ, true God and true man, was the only man able to pay for sin (Lord's Day 6).

Points for Discussion:

1. Why is Christmas so marvelous?
2. Was there humility in the Son of God coming as a baby in a manger (cf 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:3-8)? What was it? Consider what sort of impact Jesus' example at Christmas was to have amongst the Christians of Philippi.
3. Does it make any difference to your salvation whether or not Christmas really happened? Explain.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.16, 18; 13.33; 14.35, 36
Nicene Creed; Athanasian Creed

ARTICLE 19: THE TWO NATURES IN THE ONE PERSON OF CHRIST

ARTICLE 19

We believe that by this conception the person of the Son of God is inseparably united and joined with the human nature, so that there are not two sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person. Each nature retains its own distinct properties: His divine nature has always remained uncreated, without beginning of days or end of life (Hebrews 7:3), filling heaven and earth. His human nature has not lost its properties; it has beginning of days and remains created. It is finite and retains all the properties of a true body. Even though, by His resurrection, He has given immortality to His human nature, He has not changed its reality, since our salvation and resurrection also depend on the reality of His body.

However, these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not even separated by His death. Therefore, what He, when dying, committed into the hands of His Father was a real human spirit that departed from His body. Meanwhile His divinity always remained united with His human nature, even when He was lying in the grave. And the divine nature always remained in Him just as it was in Him when He was a little child, even though it did not manifest itself as such for a little while.

For this reason we profess Him to be true God and true man: true God in order to conquer death by His power; and true man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.

CONTEXT

Guido DeBrès wrote the Belgic Confession in a time of intense persecution. DeBrès was repeatedly forced to flee for his life, was compelled to labor ‘underground’, was never sure of his safety or his life. The same was true for the believers amongst whom he labored. Yet, when DeBrès wrote his Confession, he included also an article concerning the divine and human natures of Christ. One may well wonder why DeBrès would do so. Was the issue of Christ’s two natures truly relevant to the tensions DeBrès experienced in his day? Is the topic of the two natures of Christ not strictly academic and foreign to the daily struggles of the believer??

It was DeBrès’ responsibility, as a minister of God, to instruct his congregation in the truths God revealed in Holy Scripture. This revelation of God included Christ’s incarnation, the doctrine that God the Son became man, was born as a baby in Bethlehem. That Christ became man was not denied or disputed in DeBrès’ day. What was disputed, though, was the *relationship*, the interaction between the divine and human natures of Christ. *How* was Jesus true God and true man at the same time? It was this that DeBrès sought to explain and defend in Article 19. It was his conviction that the truth of God’s Word had to be laid before the people, and be rightly confessed – even though the subject might, at first reading, appear so theoretical and difficult.

SCRIPTURE CONCERNING THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST

1. Jesus is True God

The Scriptural need to believe that our Lord Jesus Christ was true God while He lived on earth has already been set forth in our discussion of Article 10. This evidence need not be

repeated here.

2. Jesus is True Man

In the course of history, the reality of Christ's human nature has never been seriously challenged. That Jesus of Nazareth was truly human was as obvious and as logical as our humanity. Bible readers also understood that the Scripture clearly taught Jesus' humanity. He was born in Bethlehem of a human mother, born as any other child is born. He grew up in a specific town (Nazareth), as others grow up in specific locations. As other children, He grew in wisdom and in stature (Luke 2:52).

As an adult, Jesus knew from experience what exhaustion was (Mark 4:38), what hunger was (Matthew 4:2), and what thirst was (John 4:7). He could be happy, and could also be angry and grieved (Mark 3:5) and even cry (John 11:35). Those who lived with Jesus and knew Him did not doubt His humanity for a moment. *"When He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogues, so that they were astonished and said, 'Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?'"* (Matthew 13:54-56). Jesus' humanity was beyond dispute.

ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST

After the adoption of the Nicene Creed in the fourth century, much discussion arose in the church concerning *how* Jesus was both God and man at the same time.

1. Eutyches

Eutyches (c. 378-454) stressed the *one* nature of Christ, arguing that the combination of Godhead and manhood in Jesus Christ formed something new. His position may be compared to the result one gets when you mix cold water with hot; the result is neither cold nor hot but somewhere in between. In Jesus, he said, the divine and human natures were combined in such a way that the human nature took on characteristics of the divine nature, and the divine nature took on the characteristics of the human. Jesus, then, was neither true God as God is true God, nor was He true man as man is true man. Rather, Jesus was a 'mixture' of God + man = 'Godman'.

2. Nestorius

Over against Eutyches, Nestorius (who became bishop of Constantinople in 428) taught the *division* of Christ's two natures. According to Nestorius, the person of Jesus was (as it were) made up of two distinct persons, the one being human and the other divine. His position may be compared to having oil and water in one container. Just as oil and water do not mix, the oil floating on the water remaining distinctly oil and the water underneath the oil remaining distinctly water, so, he said, God and man do not mix. The Son of God, said Nestorius, came to live in the man Jesus as in a temple. So Jesus was made up of two separate persons: God and man.

After a period of much struggle and confusion, the church refuted these two positions at the Council of Chalcedon (451). This Council formulated a new creed that strengthened the contents of the Nicene Creed, stressing that Jesus Christ, one Person, was both true God and true man: unmixed, unchanged, undivided, inseparable. The *Athanasian Creed* reflects this progress in understanding God's revelation on the point correctly: *"He is God from the Father's substance, begotten before time; and He is man from His mother's substance, born in time. Perfect God, perfect man composed of a human soul and human flesh, equal to the*

Father in respect of His divinity, less than the Father in respect of His humanity. Who, although He is God and man, is nevertheless not two, but one Christ. He is one, however, not by the transformation of His divinity into flesh, but by taking up of His humanity into God; one certainly not by confusion of substance, but one by oneness of person” (see Articles 30-35). Notice: the Creed does not attempt to rationalize how Christ is both God and man in one Person. This is as beyond our comprehension as the structure of the Trinity is beyond our comprehension.

3. Martin Luther

During the Great Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther picked up on Eutyches’ teaching. Luther taught that Jesus’ divine nature permeated His human nature, so that the characteristics of His divine nature extended also to His human nature. It is characteristic of divinity to be everywhere present. So, Luther said, Jesus’ human nature has taken onboard this divine characteristic of omnipresence. So Jesus’ body is everywhere present.

This understanding on Luther’s part had repercussions for his teaching concerning the bread of the Lord’s Supper. If Jesus’ human nature is omnipresent, then Jesus is also bodily present in the bread. Luther referred to Luke 22:19, where we read that Jesus, at His institution of the Lord’s Supper, said to His disciples concerning the bread: “... *This is my body...*” DeBrès’ community of Doornik knew of this teaching of Luther.

How we receive the bread of the Lord’s Supper depends on how we view the relationship between the two natures of Christ. Hence DeBrès saw it as his duty to explain to his congregation what God had revealed concerning this. Said DeBrès, “*We believe that by this conception the person of the Son of God is inseparably united and joined with the human nature, so that there are not two sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person. Each nature retains its own distinct properties.... However, these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not even separated by His death.*” No, DeBrès does not explain for us how the one Person of Christ has two natures simultaneously. Yet he clearly implied the error of Luther’s teaching in stating, “*Each nature retains its own distinct properties.*”

Scripture tells us that Jesus is true God and true man. How Jesus is at once true God and true man we cannot understand. Here again we are confronted with the limitations of the human mind, and so are called to humbly acknowledge that our God is much beyond our comprehension. That is no problem for the child of God, and gives reason to trust this God the more and praise Him for who He is.

THE TWO NATURES OF CHRIST CRUCIAL FOR MAN’S SALVATION

DeBrès concludes this article with a statement as to the importance of confessing the two natures of Christ. “*For this reason we profess Him to be true God and true man: true God in order to conquer death by His power; and true man that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh.*” Well does the church confess in Lord’s Day 6 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* that one undermines salvation itself when one denies either Christ’s Godhead or His manhood, or when one maintains that He is half God and half man (‘Godman’). The justice of God requires that the same human nature that sinned in Paradise must pay for sin, and so any possible Savior must be a true man. At the same time, since God’s wrath against sin is greater than any human can bear, a possible Savior must also to be true God. That the Lord God would, then, provide a Mediator able to stand in the breach between us and God is such a marvel of His grace! Had Christ not possessed the two natures of divinity and

humanity in His one person, I would be without salvation.

Was it necessary for DeBrès, in a time of persecution and unrest, to defend the doctrine of the two natures in the one person of Christ? Given what was at stake, it certainly was necessary – despite the circumstances. It remains necessary today, too, to stay close to everything that God has revealed in His Word, His Gospel of salvation for sinners.

Points for Discussion:

1. Explain why DeBrès considered it necessary, in the midst of his persecution and daily struggles, to confess the two natures of Christ. Are there not more important issues than this? How strongly must one today insist on getting all doctrine just right?
2. Explain how Jesus is both God and man at the same time.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.16, 17, 18; 13.33; 14.35, 36
Nicene Creed; Athanasian Creed

ARTICLE 20: HE JUSTICE AND MERCY OF GOD IN CHRIST

ARTICLE 20

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent His Son to assume that nature in which disobedience had been committed, to make satisfaction in that same nature; 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 iniquity on Him, and poured out His goodness and mercy on us, who were guilty and worthy of damnation. Out of a most perfect love He gave His Son to die for us and He raised Him for our justification that through Him we might obtain immortality and life eternal.

SALVATION IS GOD'S WORK

After DeBrès confessed in Article 19 what the Scriptures teach concerning the person of Christ, he moved on in subsequent articles to make confession of the *work* of Christ (Articles 20-26). He begins His treatment of Christ's work with *God*. "*We believe that God... sent His Son to assume that nature in which disobedience had been committed.*" The accent is on God because salvation is His initiative. Salvation did not begin with man, nor did it begin with the Son offering Himself to the Father. "...*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). And: "*the Father has sent Me*" (John 5:36). Salvation begins with God. See further Article 17.

GOD'S JUSTICE AND GOD'S MERCY

In the first sentence of this article, God is described as "*perfectly merciful.*" We accept such a description quite readily, for it certainly is mercy that God sent His Son to bring sinners from Satan's side back to His side. We confessed that already in Article 17 when we spoke of "*our gracious God*". We find it more difficult to accept that God is "*perfectly just*". That God sent His Son to pay for *our* sin does not strike us as justice. It seems to us that there would have been greater justice on God's part if He had told fallen man that his misery was his own fault, and he should now himself fix up what he broke, or suffer the consequences. As it is, the Lord God knew of our inability to repair what we had broken, and at the same time did not wish to have man suffer the eternal consequences of his fall. Hence He in mercy sent His Son to suffer the consequences of our fall *in our place*. To use the words of DeBrès, "*God therefore manifested His justice against His Son when He laid our iniquity on Him.*" What I the sinner deserved, God poured onto Christ.

Perhaps we say: if God is going to punish His Son in order to spare us, why does He not directly spare us – without punishing His Son? God could not leave our sin unpunished because God is always faithful to His Word. Already in Paradise the Lord had told Adam that "*in the day that you eat of [the forbidden tree] you will surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). Since Adam transgressed God's command, God's promise had to be carried out. God kept His Word by pouring out His justice on the Second Adam. In the words of Lord's Day 4, Q & A 11: "*His justice requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God also be punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting, punishment of body and soul.*" As many (all mankind) fell from God's grace through the transgression of the First Adam, so many (the elect) tasted the justice and the mercy of God through the judgment poured out on the Second Adam.

As a just God, then, God did not leave sin unpunished. At the same time God displayed His

infinite mercy in that He poured on Another the wrath we deserved. This is mercy, that those “*who were guilty and worthy of damnation*” should receive goodness and forgiveness instead. Christ was sent to the cross to bear the wrath of God against my sin, and the result is that my sins are paid for; God is angry with me no longer! Christ stood *in the place of* the sinner, bore the wrath of God *for us* so that the sinner is set free: that is God’s mercy.

NO CONTRAST

The one characteristic of God cannot be played off against the other. It is incorrect to say that God’s love cancels out His wrath, or that God’s justice cancels out His mercy. Both God’s justice and His mercy need to receive full attention. It is because God is just that His wrath had to be poured out, and it is because God is merciful that His wrath was not poured out on all sinners, but on Christ *in place of* sinners. It is the two together that point up Who my God really is.

The God of the Old Testament is often understood as the God of anger, whereas the God of the New Testament is perceived as the God of love. This is incorrect. God demonstrated His justice and His mercy equally in Genesis 3 when He sent man out of Paradise (justice) and at the same time came with the protevangel (mercy). Equally, God in the New Testament displayed His mercy to us by sending Christ to earth (Luke 2) and His justice by sending Christ to the cross (Luke 23). In His mercy God is just and in His justice God is merciful.

Points for Discussion:

1. Explain why it was necessary that salvation begin with God instead of with man.
2. How did salvation begin with God? That is, what did God do?
3. Explain how God is both merciful and just at the same time. Do the two not contradict?
4. What do you think of the distinction that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, and the God of the New Testament a God of love?
5. When you speak with others about Scripture, would you speak first of God’s justice or of His mercy?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 4.11; 6.16, 18; 15.37, 39; 16.40

Canons of Dort, II.1-4

Form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 21: THE SATISFACTION OF CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST

ARTICLE 21

We believe that Jesus Christ was confirmed by an oath to be a High Priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek. He presented Himself in our place before His Father, appeasing God's wrath by His full satisfaction, offering Himself on the tree of the cross, where He poured out His precious blood to purge away our sins, as the prophets had foretold. For it is written, Upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole and with His stripes we are healed. Like a lamb He was led to the slaughter. He was numbered with the transgressors (Isaiah 53:5,7,12), and condemned as a criminal by Pontius Pilate, though he had first declared Him innocent. He restored what He had not stolen (Psalm 69:4). He died as the righteous for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18). He suffered in body and soul, feeling the horrible punishment caused by our sins, and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground (Luke 22:44). Finally, He exclaimed, My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me (Matthew 27:46)? All this He endured for the forgiveness of our sins.

Therefore we justly say, with Paul, that we know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). We count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus our Lord (Philippians 3:8). We find comfort in His wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which the believers are perfected for all times (Hebrews 10:14). This is also the reason why the angel of God called Him Jesus, that is, Saviour, because He would save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

CHRIST: HIGH PRIEST ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

As DeBrès draws out God's work of redemption through His only Son, He highlights first Christ's office as High Priest. A priest in Israel had a place between holy God and sinful man; it was the priest's function to offer sacrifices from the people to God (Exodus 28:1) and speak God's word to the people (Leviticus 10:11). This was particularly true of the High Priest.

God is particular in how He is served. Not just anybody, then, could be priest in Israel (let alone High Priest), but only those whom God appointed to that office. In His good pleasure He appointed Aaron and his sons (of the tribe of Levi) to be priests amongst His people (Exodus 28:1). More, God appointed Aaron to the position of High Priest (Leviticus 8:7-12), and ordained that his oldest son would succeed his father as High Priest through the generations (see Numbers 20:22-29).

Jesus of Nazareth was born into the tribe of Judah, not into the tribe of Levi (let alone of the family of Aaron). By the laws God had given to Israel, He could, then, not be a priest. Yet Christ's task on earth was to present Himself as a sacrifice for sin (see below). So God ordained Him as priest, not after the 'order of Aaron', but after the 'order of Melchizedek'. The concept "order of Melchizedek" comes from Hebrews 7 (and Psalm 110; see also Genesis 14:18-24). The author of Hebrews echoes God's revelation in Genesis 14 concerning Melchizedek, that he was "*king of Salem, priest of the most high God.*" This man, both king and priest, was "*without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually*"

(Hebrews 7:1-3). Melchizedek, then, did not receive his priesthood through birth. Here is the parallel for Jesus Christ. Jesus could never be priest after the order of Aaron (ie, with genealogical credentials befitting the priesthood), but only after the order of Melchizedek (ie, without genealogical credentials). It is because God ordained Him as priest after the order of Melchizedek that He could function as our Mediator on the cross of Calvary and is our Intercessor in heaven today.

SIN OFFERINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Leviticus 16 we read of God's stipulations for the annual Day of Atonement. Aaron had to place both his hands on the head of a live goat, "*confess over it all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, concerning all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat*" (vs 21). By so doing Aaron (as High Priest representing the people) transferred the sins of the people to the goat. The goat, now laden with the sins of the people of Israel, was then sent into the wilderness. In Scripture the wilderness is symbolic of the domain of Satan. The wilderness is a place in total contrast to the Garden of Eden: a Garden of Plenty versus a place of nothing. (Hence it was not without significance that Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, there to be tempted by the Devil – Matthew 4). Sending the sin-laden goat into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement was a symbolic casting into hell. Sin had to be removed; the goat being sent away was a symbolic removal of sin.

The notion of the transferal of sin from the sinner to another is also evident in the sacrifices the Israelites themselves had to bring on account of sin. When any person in Israel –be it the anointed priests or the whole congregation or the ruler or anyone of the common people– committed a sin unintentionally, or became aware of having sinned, the guilty person had to offer an unblemished young bull or male kid of the goats as a sin offering (Leviticus 4). He had to bring his sin offering to the priest, lay his hands on the head of the animal, and then kill it. God had decreed in Genesis 2 that death was the penalty of sin (vs 17; see also Romans 6:23). By rights, then, the sinner ought to die. But the animal was killed instead because *the sin was transferred* from the sinner to the animal. Here is pointed up the justice of God: sin must be punished, there must come death, the animal died. Here is pointed up also the mercy of God: God allowed the sinner to transfer his sin to the bull or the goat, and the animal died *in the place of* the sinner. Since sin was transferred to the animal, that animal became the sinner's *substitute*. Through His requirement of the sin offering, God taught His people Israel that they had to take sin seriously; even one's unintentional sin necessitated that one collect a choice sheep from his flock and make a trip to the priest. At the same time God taught His people that they would not have to die on account of their sins; Another would die in their place. Here the seriousness of sin and redemption from sin were placed side by side.

CHRIST: OUR SUBSTITUTIONARY LAMB

In Isaiah 53:4-6 we read how Christ became *the* substitutionary sacrificial Lamb for sinners. Here the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophet Isaiah about the Man of sorrows (and from a New Testament perspective we understand this Man of Sorrows to be the Savior Jesus Christ) with these words, "*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded **for our transgressions**, He was bruised **for our iniquities**; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and **by His stripes we are healed**. All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And **the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.**"*

God told Adam in Paradise (and so told all mankind) that death had to follow on sin. "*From*

*every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat the fruit of it **you shall surely die***” (Genesis 2:16-17). The Holy Spirit verbalizes the same thought in Romans 6:23, “*For the wages of sin is **death**.*” But Isaiah 53 speaks of a *transferral* of sin. Just as the Lord instructed the people of Israel to lay their sins on the goat, God likewise took my sins and laid them on Jesus. The coming Savior is here portrayed as suffering *in the place of the sinner*, as the **Substitute**. This is what the angel said to Joseph in Matthew 1:21, “*And she (Mary) will bring forth a son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.*” Jesus came to take away my sin by substituting Himself in my place! How remarkable the gospel!

The following texts are further evidence of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice, whereby my sins are transferred to Christ so that I may benefit from what He achieved. Said Jesus concerning Himself, “... *the Son of Man (came) to give His life (as) a ransom **for** many*” (Matthew 20:28). At the institution of the Lord’s Supper Jesus said to His disciples, “*For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed **for** many for the remission of sins*” (Matthew 26:28). To the Romans Paul wrote: “*For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died **for** the ungodly*” and “*God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died **for** us*” (Romans 5:6,8). To the Corinthians too, Paul said, “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not imputing their trespasses to them**, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.... For **He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us***” (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). In all the above texts, the operative word is the little word ‘**for**’. That little word ‘for’ brings us to the very heart of the gospel: Christ died *in place of sinners*.

THE LAMB IS THE PRIEST

The High Priest sacrificed the Old Testament Lamb on the Day of Atonement. Christ Himself became “*the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). No High Priest of Israel, though, could present this Lamb to God, for each High Priest needed redemption for his own sins. He, then, who was the Lamb of God come to pay for sin had to function also as the High Priest, and so present Himself to God. The author of Hebrews explains Jesus’ work: “*But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption*” (Hebrews 9:11-12). “*For this reason,*” the author continues, “*He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance*” (Hebrews 9:15).

SINNERS MAY REJOICE

Small wonder Paul could get so excited about this Gospel! “*We ... **rejoice** in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation*” (Romans 5:11). A Gospel such as this cannot leave one untouched. I am no longer on the receiving end of God’s terrible anger! Christ bore God’s wrath, and so God’s wrath is there for me no more! True, there are those times when I feel as though God is angry with me on account of my sins, perhaps when I’m confronted with the troubles of this life, or when I find it difficult to forget my sins of the past. Yet God lays before me the wonderful news that His only Son bore His dreadful wrath **for** me, so that my sins are gone and I need never face the awful wrath of holy God! DeBrès confessed it this way: “*He presented Himself **in our place** before His Father, appeasing God’s wrath by His full satisfaction.*” Article 20 concluded with these words, “*Out of a most perfect love (God) gave His Son to die **for** us.*” Yes, this little

word ‘for’ captures the whole Gospel in a nutshell: Christ died *in my place!* As I focus on that reality, I can only be thankful to God and rejoice day by day on account of such a rich Gospel. What a God, that He should prepare such redemption!

DeBrès concluded Article 21 with these words, “*Therefore we justly say, with Paul, that we know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. We count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus our Lord.*” DeBrès, in fear of his life, without a bed safe from his persecutors, without a house free of concern about being found out, confesses the one thing that matters most in life: “*Christ and Him crucified*” (I Corinthians 2:2). To DeBrès, house and family and peace and security are nothing in light of “*the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord*” (Philippians 3:8). He is prepared to give up anything in his life for that which is most important: with his sins removed by Christ he enjoys reconciliation with the Creator. “*We find comfort in His wounds and have no need to seek or invent any other means of reconciliation with God than this only sacrifice, once offered, by which the believers are perfected for all times.*”

Such a Savior was DeBrès’ everything. He is ours too, no matter the situation.

Points for Discussion:

1. What does it mean that Christ was ‘priest after the order of Melchizedek’? Why did Jesus need to be a Priest?
2. What is the significance of Aaron placing his hands on the head of the one goat on the Day of Atonement? What does this say about the legitimacy of contrasting the law and the gospel?
3. What does it mean that Christ is our ‘substitute’?
4. What response must follow from such a gospel? Why?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 15.37, 38, 39; 16.40, 44

Canons of Dort, II.1-4

Form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 22: OUR JUSTIFICATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST

ARTICLE 22

We believe that, in order that we may obtain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts a true faith. This faith embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, makes Him our own, and does not seek anything besides Him. For it must necessarily follow, either that all we need for our salvation is not in Jesus Christ or, if it is all in Him, that one who has Jesus Christ through faith, has complete salvation. It is, therefore, a terrible blasphemy to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something else is needed besides Him; for the conclusion would then be that Christ is only half a Saviour.

Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works of law (Romans 3:28). Meanwhile, strictly speaking, we do not mean that faith as such justifies us, for faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness; He imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place. Therefore Jesus Christ is our righteousness, and faith is the instrument that keeps us with Him in the communion of all His benefits. When those benefits have become ours, they are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.

JUSTIFICATION

The fruit of Christ's work as High Priest is caught in the term 'justification'. The term 'Justification' means literally "to make just" (from two Latin words meaning 'just' and 'make'). Justification is a judicial act of God the Judge by which He declares a sinner just, righteous, innocent – despite God being fully aware of the sinner's sinfulness.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE OF JUSTIFICATION

The notion of justification is so profound and precious that we do well first to consider a couple of choice Scripture passages.

- Romans 3:23-26: "... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

Here the apostle Paul is adamant that all God's elect have sinned, all people on the face of the earth fall short of the glory of God, so that not one of us can appear in God's court without deserving condemnation. Yet, Paul insists, all God's elect are justified! God does the unexpected: for Christ's sake He receives the guilty. This is grace in its exciting splendor!

- 2 Corinthians 5:18-21: "Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ ... God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them ... For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

We do not make ourselves presentable to God, but God makes us presentable to Himself

through Jesus Christ. God made Christ our substitute, crediting our sins to His account so that we in turn could be declared righteous, innocent.

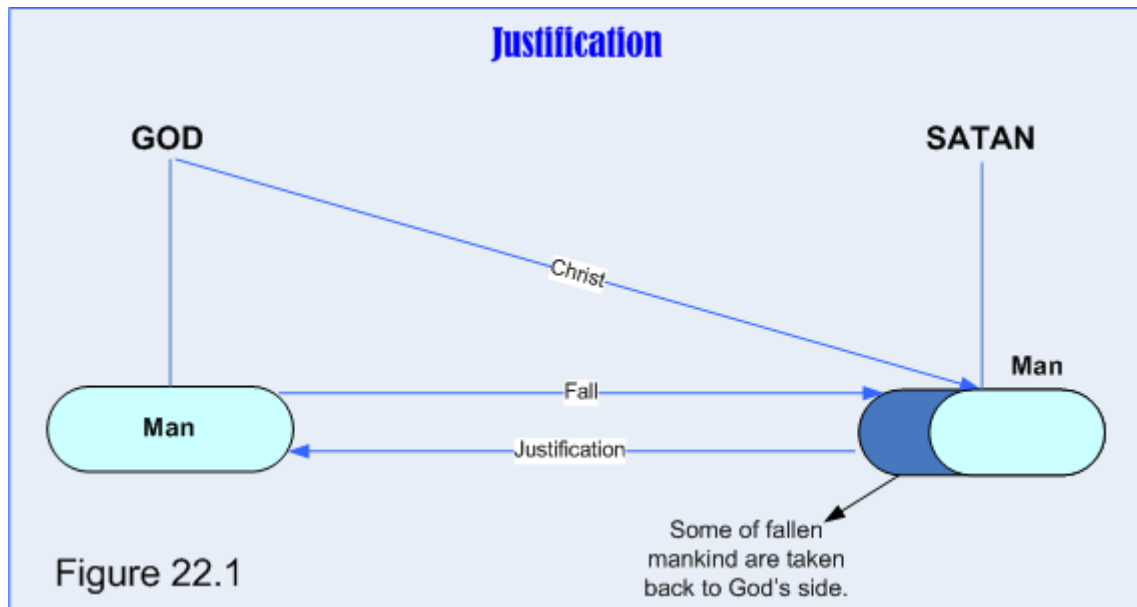
THE VISION OF ZECHARIAH

The vision Zechariah saw helps us to understand the concept of justification. *“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest (representative of the people) standing before the Angel of the LORD (the Angel is the Old Testament manifestation of the pre-incarnate Son of God, second person of the Trinity) and Satan (the word means ‘accuser’) standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this (Joshua the high priest) not a brand plucked from the fire?’ Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments (symbolic of the sins that lay on him), and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those (the angels) who stood before Him, saying, ‘Take away the filthy garments from him.’ And to him (Joshua) He said, ‘See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.’ And I (Zechariah) said, ‘Let them put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him. And the Angel of the LORD stood by” (Zechariah 3:1-5).*

The vision is of a court case. Joshua the high priest, as representative of God’s elect, appears before God the Judge. Satan is also present, accusing Joshua before God. Joshua is obviously a sinner (notice his filthy clothes), and so unfit to appear in God’s presence, let alone enter God’s heaven. However, the Lord does not follow up Satan’s accusations and send Joshua to hell. Instead, God makes a *declaration* that Joshua is innocent, just, righteous. God demands that Joshua be given a change of garments – forgiveness of sins.

How is it possible for God to make such a declaration? Was Satan making false accusations before God about Joshua’s sins? In the nature of the case, we can certainly assume that the Accuser was listing transgressions Joshua had actually committed. But the Lord God declared the sinner innocent because of the work of the Angel of the LORD, the Christ (note that reference is made three times to the fact that Joshua was standing before the Angel of the LORD). Joshua’s innocence was innocence *in Christ*. God had poured out onto Christ the wrath the sinner deserved. Since Christ was Joshua’s substitute, Joshua was set free. Instead of God’s wrath, Joshua received God’s mercy. The basis for Joshua’s justification certainly did not rest within himself, for he was dressed in filthy garments, sinful. Rather, the basis for this declaration of innocence was God’s good pleasure in Christ. God’s declaration was an undeserved, free gift – *grace*! Here is pointed up the marvel of the Gospel: God the Judge declares sinners *Not Guilty* of their sins! As a result, God Most High graciously sees me as without sin, righteous! That is *justification*.

Graphically, justification describes God’s act of mercy whereby He takes His elect from Satan’s side and brings them back to God’s side so that they may be innocent in His eyes. See Figure 22.1.



HOW GOD INVALIDATES SATAN'S ACCUSATIONS

What, though, has become of Satan's accusations? Those accusations, we said earlier, were accurate. A look at Lord's Day 23 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* helps us here. Question 60 asks, "*How are you righteous before God?*" One could ask the same question this way: how can I, a sinner, rightly be restored from Satan's side to God's side? In order to answer this question, this Lord's Day lists three accusations the Holy Spirit lays upon the conscience of the godly.

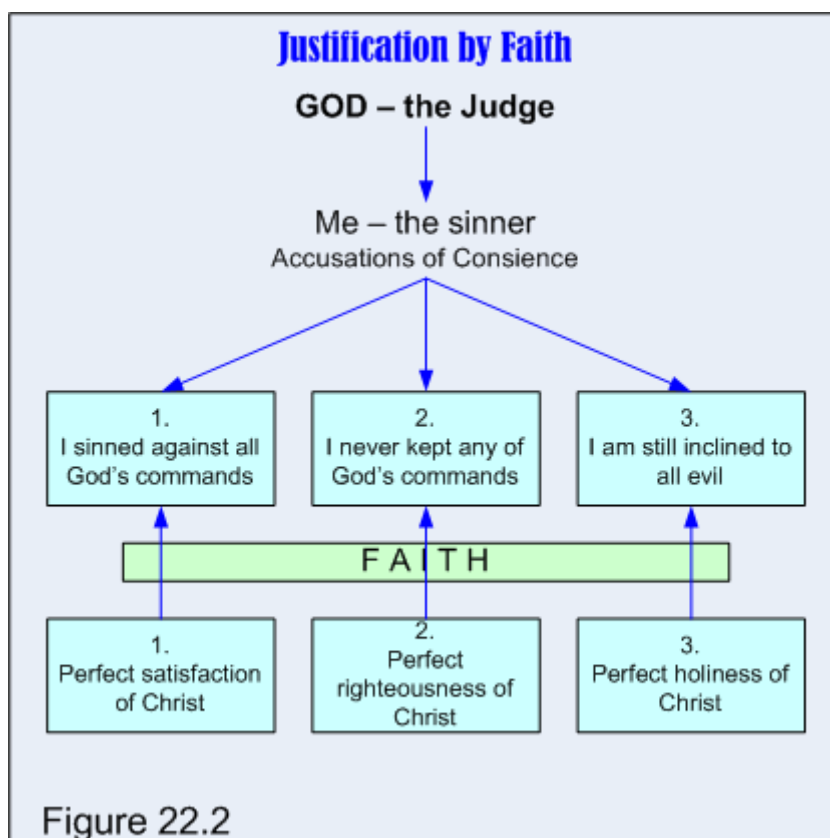
1. "*I have grievously sinned against **all** God's commandments.*" I am not a 'small-time' sinner, offending from time to time against the odd command; I'm rather a habitual sinner breaking *every* command of holy God.
2. I "*have never kept any* (of God's commandments)." My past record is no better than my current performance. There has never been a day in my life that I have lived up to God's standards and obeyed perfectly a single one of His commands.
3. I "*am still inclined to all evil.*" My tomorrows shall be as dismal as my yesterdays. I am so extremely vulnerable to sin, so prone to sinning, that I shall not improve my record, no matter how hard I try.

The picture is tragic. These accusations, though, do not mean that I stand condemned before God. Rather, in the face of these accusations, this Lord's Day goes on to describe what God does for me and to me – despite my condemnable record as His child. God knows exactly who it is that appears before Him.

- God knows that I sinned against all His commandments, yet He imputes to me the perfect satisfaction of Christ. God does not condemn me, but declares me innocent because Christ paid for my countless sins against all God's commands. As I stand before God's judgment seat, Christ is present there with me. What Christ obtained for me God imputes to me. Christ makes my account, so black with sin, white again; His payment for my sin is credited to me (Figure 22-2, point 1).
- God knows too that I never ever kept any of His commandments. Yet that did not stop God from declaring me righteous, innocent, for Christ's perfect righteousness – He never once sinned, not even in His deepest suffering– covered my

unrighteousness. Christ by His righteousness has obtained righteousness for me (Figure 22.2, point 2).

- The extent and depth of the evil within me is not hidden from God either as I stand before Him. God is pleased to cover my continuing depravity with Christ's holiness (Figure 22.2, point 3).



In a word, God grants to me Christ's perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness! Lord's Day 23 sums it up this way, "*He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me.*"

Satan's accusations, then, come to nothing! Those accusations, with which my conscience agrees, are set aside as irrelevant to this divine court case, because Christ has already covered those wrongs on my part with His perfect sacrifice on Calvary. That is why I in turn may silence my guilty conscience with reference to Christ's completed work, and bask in the warmth of God's forgiving grace!

RIGHTEOUS BY TRUE FAITH

What, now, is the bond that connects the merits of Christ to me the sinner? The bond that makes Christ's work mine is *faith*. Lord's Day 23 had asked how I was righteous before God, and gave this answer: "***Only by true faith*** in Jesus Christ.... God ... imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ ... if only I accept this gift with a ***believing heart***." Faith makes Christ's merits mine; faith is the instrument by which Christ's satisfaction, righteousness and holiness cover my debt, my unrighteousness, my unholiness. As the apostle says: "... that He might be just and the justifier of the one who ***has faith*** in Jesus.... Therefore we conclude that a man is justified ***by faith*** apart from the deeds of the law" (Romans 3:26 & 28).

DeBrès also quoted Romans 3:28 in this Article: “*Therefore we rightly say with Paul that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works of law.*” It is worth noting that in quoting this text, our confession has one additional word to what we read in our Bible, namely, “*faith alone*”. Luther in his translation of the Bible (into German) added the word ‘alone’ in order to drive home the truth that one can be justified only by faith, without needing to add works of the law to the faith. In light of the Roman Catholic insistence that one had to do good works in order to be saved (think, for example, of the sale of indulgences), we can understand this inclusion. The word ‘alone’ certainly makes clear Paul’s point in Romans 3.

FAITH: WHAT IS IT?

What, though, is faith? Faith, let it be said, is not a feeling; faith is an action. Faith is receiving, and then holding onto, anything and everything God says, despite whether I feel that what He says is true, makes sense to me, or is agreeable in my circumstances. Faith is that one accepts and clings to anything God says – despite having every rational reason to do the opposite.

Elsewhere in his confession (Article 35) DeBrès calls faith the “hand of the soul”. We know what the ‘hand of the body’ is, and we know too what the hand of the body does. If you in your kindness would present me with a gift (say, a box of chocolates), it is my hand that must reach out to receive your gift. My reaching out to receive the gift does not mean that I am earning the gift; in fact, you have already obtained the gift, decided to give it to me, and are now presenting it to me. I can do one of two things. I can stretch out my hand to receive what you freely give, or, alternatively, I can keep my hand behind my back. In the latter case, you understand well enough that I am not interested in your gift; I do not want it, I am rejecting it.

Faith is the “hand of the soul”. God presents us with the gift of justification, the gift of being declared innocent through Jesus’ blood. He presents this gift freely, without our deserving it, without our asking for it or earning it. Now it is for me to *receive* what God *has given*. How do I do that? I do that by stretching out my hand – not the hand of the body, but the hand of the soul. That action, that receiving what God gives, *that* is faith.

Yet we need to take it further. If I *receive* the chocolates you present me, it’s not good enough that I stretch out my hand to receive – and then leave it stretched out with your gift in my hand. To benefit from your gift I need to act further; receiving includes drawing my hand (with the gift) back, includes perhaps unwrapping the gift and even sinking my teeth into a specimen. In a word, *receiving* includes making the gift my own. So it is too with the gift of salvation God gives in Christ and its resulting privilege of being reconciled to God. If God has become my Father again through Christ, then *receiving* this gift involves more than daring to echo God’s claim that I’m righteous; receiving this gift involves delighting in this righteousness – and that in turn exhibits itself in entrusting oneself to the care of this God.

We read in Hebrews 11 of the faith of various Old Testament persons. Repeatedly the faith of the person mentioned is evidenced through specific action. Notice the verbs: “*by faith Abel offered...*” (vs 4); “*by faith Noah ... prepared an ark...*” (vs 7); “*by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called..., and he went out, not knowing where he was going*” (vs 8). The faith of these men consisted of more than knowledge about God, or even knowledge that God was their God. Rather, the faith of these men is presented here as knowledge-combined-with-

trust, which together translates into *actions of obedience*. James catches the point like this: “*faith without works is dead*” (2:26). Obedience to God’s commands, entrusting oneself to the good instruction of the God who graciously declared us righteous for Jesus’ sake, is integral to the essence of faith. One is saved *by faith alone*, not by works. Given what faith is, though, one must also insist that one is never saved without works.

COVENANT

This is a covenantal concept. God makes promises to me and I am to believe these promises. If I do not believe them, I cannot be saved. I must make a point of believing, that is, of receiving what He in grace gives to me. In the covenant it is my responsibility to do so, in all the ups and downs of life. Here we have the two sides inherent in the covenant: promise and obligation. God has promised me salvation and He gives me faith both to believe in and to hold on to these promises. When I believe I can only thank God that He gives the gift of faith.

Points for Discussion:

1. Who benefit from Christ’s work?
2. Explain why Joshua in the vision of Zechariah 3 could be given clean clothes. What is ‘justification’?
3. Is God’s ‘declaration of innocence’ real or a wish? Why?
4. What is the result for you of God’s declaration? See Romans 5:1; 8:1.
5. What is meant by ‘imputation’?
6. What is the function of faith in this justification? What is the significance of the phrase ‘by faith’?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 7.21; 15.37, 38, 39; 16.40, 44
Canons of Dort, II.1-4
Form for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, *Book of Praise*

Article 23: OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD

ARTICLE 23

We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists, as David and Paul teach us. They pronounce a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works (Romans 4:6; Psalm 32:1). The apostle also says that we are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

Therefore we always hold to this firm foundation. We give all the glory to God, humble ourselves before Him, and acknowledge ourselves to be what we are. We do not claim anything for ourselves or our merits, but rely and rest on the only obedience of Jesus Christ crucified; His obedience is ours when we believe in Him.

This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror, and dread, so that we do not follow the example of our first father, Adam, who trembling tried to hide and covered himself with fig leaves. For indeed, if we had to appear before God, relying - be it ever so little - on ourselves or some other creature, (woe be to us!) we would be consumed. Therefore everyone must say with David, O LORD, enter not into judgment with Thy servant, for no man living is righteous before Thee (Psalm 143:2).

RESULT OF JUSTIFICATION

Paul draws out the results of God's declaration in glorious words. He writes, "*Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 5:1). Paul had earlier declared that the law makes every person guilty before God (Romans 3:19) – Paul and his readers included. Such guilt invariably means judgment, experiencing the heavy hand of God's displeasure eternally. For God is your enemy.

But now Paul dares to say that "*we have peace with God.*" The relation we had with God in Paradise, then, is restored, and the sins that brought God's curse upon us are gone. No longer is that angel at the gate of Paradise brandishing his flaming sword to prevent any access to the presence of holy God (Genesis 3:24). No longer does the heavy hand of an offended God crush the life out of us. Instead, there is peace, harmony between holy God and me the sinner. With the peace comes His favor and His blessing. In fact, this God is now my 'Father'. What glorious, wonderful news for sinners!

It is not, we need to know, that Paul is describing the way he personally felt. Paul, like every other sinner, will have had his moments when he felt that God was very displeased with him on account of his sins, even distant. Feelings, though, can never be the measure of reality simply because our feelings have been warped through the fall into sin. No, when Paul speaks of "*peace with God*", he expresses the reality *as God declares it to be*. That is why every person who is justified through Jesus' blood may take Paul's words on his own lips, and freely state the facts as they are: I have peace with God because of God's declaration in Christ Jesus. This reality prompted DeBrès to state so boldly in Article 23, "*This (ie, the fact that Christ's obedience is imputed to us) is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror, and dread, so that we do not follow the example of our first father, Adam, who trembling tried to hide and covered himself with fig leaves.*"

Away, then, with all terror of God on account of our sins! Christ's work means they are forgiven, removed as far as east from west extends (Psalm 103:12), dumped into the irretrievable depths of the sea (Micah 7:19) – and therefore no longer an obstacle in the relation between God and His people. In truth, *“there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Romans 8:1). DeBrès echoed the revelation of God so well: *“...our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake.”*

FLEEING FROM GOD?

Knowing that DeBrès was raised as a Roman Catholic helps one to appreciate the wealth of a confession as this. According to Roman Catholic theology, those who sin need to satisfy three steps before they can be received again into God's favor:

1. One must have a broken heart on account of his wrongdoings;
2. One must confess his sins with the mouth;
3. One must make amends for his wrongs by doing good works.

It is certainly true that every sinner must be contrite of heart on account of his sins, must confess those sins to God, and flee from such sin in the future. But is it really so that one cannot be received into God's favor unless he satisfy those three requirements? Must the sinner do something himself before he can be assured of reconciliation with God? Such a theology leaves the sinner in cruel bondage! For how does one know whether his heart is sufficiently broken and contrite?! How does one know if he has confessed his sins adequately, or if he has performed enough good works to make amends? What haunted Luther so badly before his conversion from Roman Catholicism was, ‘how can I be just before God?’ No matter how hard he tried, he could not get himself that far that he was assured of God's favor to him; always, he felt, he should do a little more, try a little harder. And always the peace of God eluded him – until he came to see the gospel of justification as God gave it in Jesus Christ, the gospel of God declaring sinners Not Guilty of their sins for Jesus' sake. Then, finally, he understood that he no longer had to flee from a righteous God as Adam did!

A theology such as this brings much uncertainty in the hearts of reformed Christians still. Granted, we call this a Roman Catholic theology, but time and again those same fears produce questions and doubts in our hearts. Do we not catch ourselves asking: am I really forgiven, are my sins not too great for forgiveness, have I confessed my sins adequately, is my humility deep enough? We have our moments when we feel that God is far away, that He does not hear us, that we are not forgiven. We feel we have to *do* something. How greatly, then, does God encourage us: *“every (Old Testament) priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.”* Talk about *doing* something that ultimately does not help! *“But this Man (Christ), after He had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God.... Now where there is remission of (sins), there is no longer an offering for sin”* (Hebrews 10:11,12 & 18). With what confidence may we then repeat after God what He has revealed: we *“rely and rest on the only obedience of Jesus Christ crucified; His obedience is ours....”* I need no longer flee from God again, though I remain a sinner! Christ atoned for me; His perfect satisfaction paid for my sins, His righteousness covered my unrighteousness, and His holiness covered my unholiness.

DRAWING NEAR

A consequence follows. The apostle to the Hebrews continues from the above quote:

*“Therefore brethren, **having boldness to enter the Holy Place by the blood of Jesus**, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a high priest over the house of God, **let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith**” (Hebrews 10:19-22). Instead of running from God on account of our sins, we may enter His presence freely and tell Him all the cares of our hearts. In principle, Paradise is restored! We shall speak more about prayer in Article 26.*

Points for Discussion:

1. How do I know whether my sins are *really* forgiven??
2. Need I ever be afraid to pray?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 11.30; 15.37, 38, 39; 16.40, 44; 23.59, 60, 61;
51.126

Canons of Dort, II.1-5

Form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 24: AN'S SANCTIFICATION AND GOOD WORKS

ARTICLE 24

We believe that this true faith, worked in man by the hearing of God's Word and by the operation of the Holy Spirit, regenerates him and makes him a new man. It makes him live a new life and frees him from the slavery of sin. Therefore it is not true that this justifying faith makes man indifferent to living a good and holy life. On the contrary, without it no one would ever do anything out of love for God, but only out of self-love or fear of being condemned. It is therefore impossible for this holy faith to be inactive in man, for we do not speak of an empty faith but of what Scripture calls faith working through love (Galatians 5:6). This faith induces man to apply himself to those works which God has commanded in His Word. These works, proceeding from the good root of faith, are good and acceptable in the sight of God, since they are all sanctified by His grace. Nevertheless, they do not count toward our justification. For through faith in Christ we are justified, even before we do any good works. Otherwise they could not be good any more than the fruit of a tree can be good unless the tree itself is good.

Therefore we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do, since it is He who is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Let us keep in mind what is written: So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). Meanwhile we do not deny that God rewards good works, but it is by His grace that He crowns His gifts. Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them. We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment. Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it. We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour.

WHY GOOD WORKS?

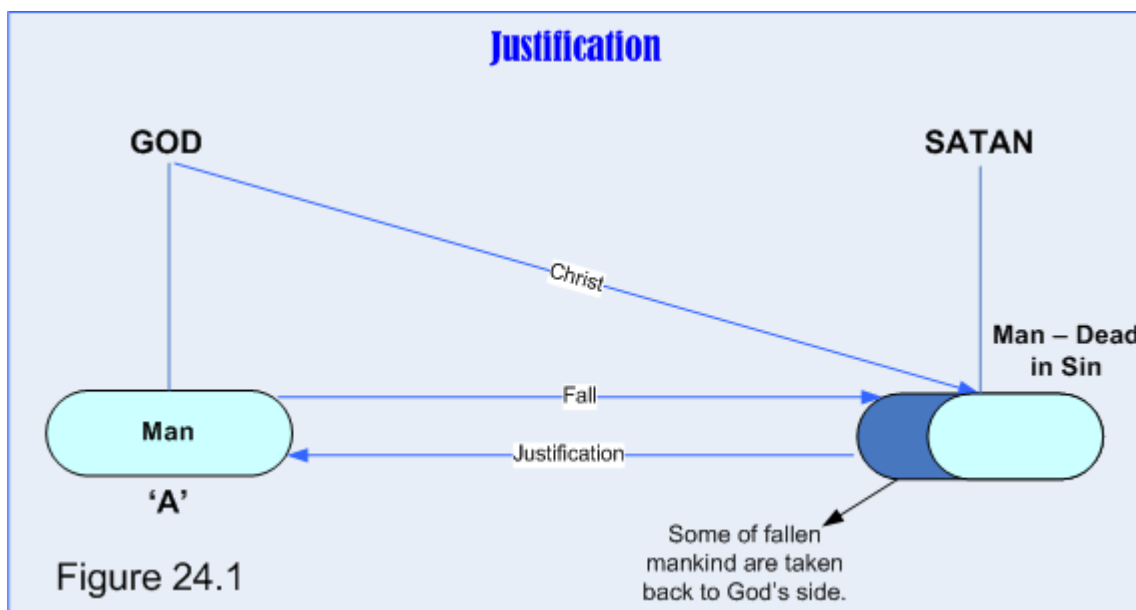
DeBrès and his congregation lived in an environment where emphasis was laid on doing good works as a means to becoming right with God. In previous articles DeBrès had made clear that one's depravity makes it impossible to earn God's favor; instead, one became right with God only through the atoning work of Jesus Christ – a work made yours through faith in Him.

This gospel of redemption by grace alone raised questions about the place and value of good works. If good works did not earn you points with God, why bother doing good works? If you were right with God on account of the finished work of Jesus Christ, why not live it up? In Article 24 DeBrès answers questions as these. He was insistent: "... we do good works, but not for merit. For what could we merit? We are indebted to God, rather than He to us, for the good works we do, since it is He 'who is at work in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' ... Furthermore, although we do good works, we do not base our salvation on them."

SANCTIFICATION

To make clear why the Christian does good works and at the same time does not earn anything through the good works he does, DeBrès explains the doctrine of sanctification. The term 'Sanctification' literally means 'to make holy' (derived from two Latin words meaning 'holy' and 'make'). Terms as 'conversion', 'regeneration', 'recreation' and 'born again' are all essentially synonyms of the term sanctification.

Back in Article 22 DeBrès had discussed the justification of fallen man. In the fall into sin all mankind had rejected God and joined the devil's side. As slaves of the devil, fallen man was dead in sin and reflected what the devil was like. In mercy the Lord God chose a certain number of fallen mankind to salvation in Christ, and so delivered them from bondage to Satan and restored them to God's side (see Figure 24.1). Though God was fully aware of their sins, God declared these sinners Not Guilty, righteous, for Christ's sake, so that these elect enjoy peace with God. This was justification.

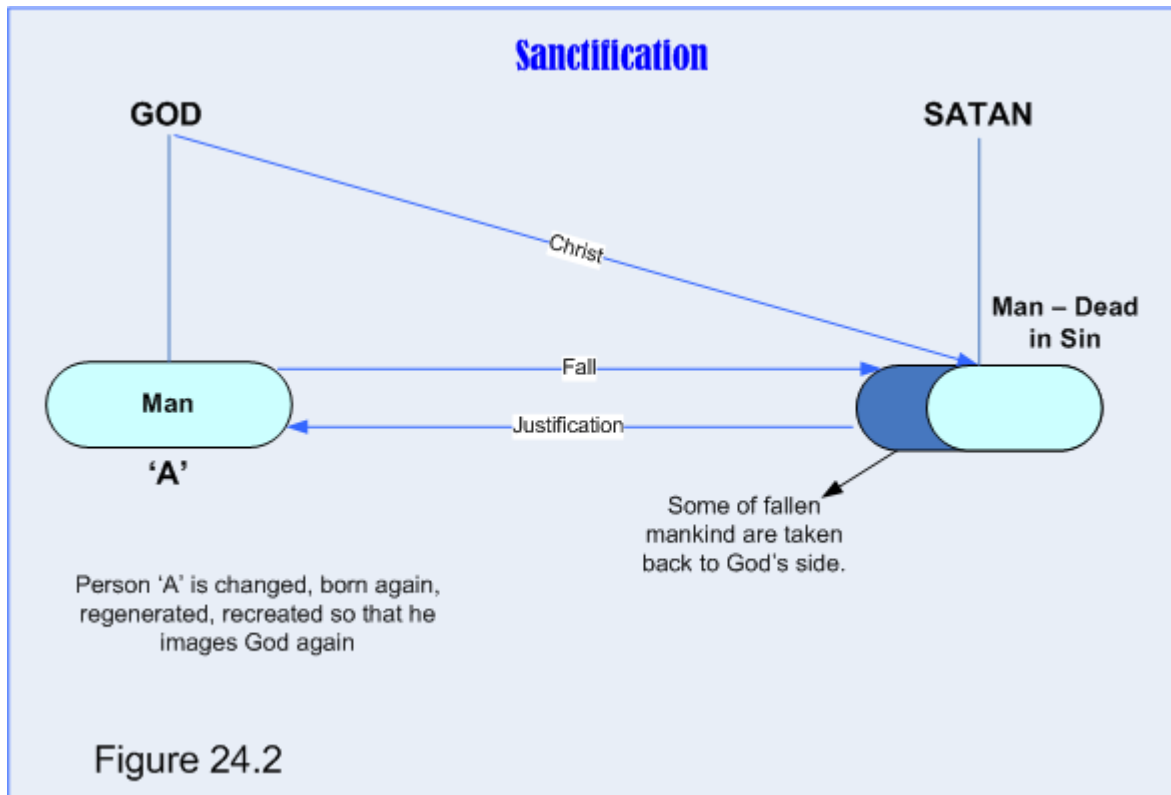


But what happens now to the sinner who has been justified, brought back to God (person 'A' in Figure 24.1)? Does he remain dead in sin? Now that he has been restored to God's side, is he still inclined to image the Devil?

No, he does not remain dead in sin. Justification does not change the nature of the sinner; justification changes his *legal* standing before God – he is now innocent, not guilty, justified. As it is, though, God does not leave the justified sinner in his deadness; God rather *changes* his nature. This change is known as **sanctification** (see Figure 24.2). Those whom God in His good pleasure justifies through the blood of Christ He also sanctifies through the Spirit of Christ. You cannot be justified by the blood of Christ, and at the same time not be sanctified by the Spirit of Christ. All who benefit from justification are also sanctified. Though justification and sanctification are two different acts of God in the life of the sinner, these two cannot be separated. God does not sanctify a person still in bondage to Satan and hence destined for hell, nor does God let a person restored to Him remain dead in sin. All those who are justified receive sanctification and all who are sanctified have also been justified. Consider the following table:

	JUSTIFICATION	SANCTIFICATION
When	• Good Friday	• Pentecost
How	• by means of the blood of Christ	• by means of the Spirit of Christ
Application	• the work of Christ FOR me	• the work of Christ IN me

Table 24.1



The cross of Calvary is most certainly the high point in the history of salvation. That Christ by His suffering and death on the cross bore God's wrath against my sins on my behalf gives me much cause for thankfulness. But I may not consider the work of Christ on the cross as the sum total of what He did for me, for His work continued after Calvary. At Pentecost Christ poured out His Holy Spirit so that I could be a new, changed person. In our thinking, then, we also need to move past Calvary (justification) and come to grips with the reality of Pentecost – sanctification. Christ's work on Pentecost is life renewing, and this work of Christ must be reflected in the way I live.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE FOR SANCTIFICATION

Although sanctification is a New Testament term, we find a description of it in both the Old and New Testaments.

- Deuteronomy 30:6: Here we read that should the Lord need to carry out His punishment of exile on a disobedient covenant people, He would let them return from exile if they showed evidence of repentance. But the Lord promised to do more than let them return to the land of their fathers. We read, "*And the LORD your God will **circumcise your heart***"

and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

The phrase ‘circumcision of the heart’ describes the concept of regeneration (= sanctification).

- Jeremiah 31:31-33: “*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: **I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their heart**; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*”

The phrase ‘put My law in their minds, and write it on their heart’ describes the concept of regeneration.

- Ezekiel 36:26: “*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **I will put My Spirit within you** and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*”

Here is an accumulation of phrases, each in turn describing something of the notion of sanctification, regeneration, conversion.

- John 3:3: In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus describes regeneration as being born again.

Said Jesus to Nicodemus, “... *Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is **born again**, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*”

- Ephesians 2:4-5: “*But God, ... even when we were dead in trespasses, **made us alive** together with Christ.*”

To be regenerated, sanctified, converted, implies that one was dead and is made alive again.

From the above, it is evident that regeneration, sanctification, is a work of God: “**The Lord your God** will circumcise your heart.” Said God, “**I will put My law in their minds; I will give you a new heart; I will put My Spirit within you.**” In his letter to the Ephesians Paul, too, emphasizes that being made alive to God is God’s work: “**But God made us alive**” (2:5). It cannot be otherwise, for I am by nature dead in sin, and the dead can do nothing. No more than Lazarus could contribute to his rising from physical death can we contribute to our rising from spiritual death. The *Canons of Dort* describe sanctification this way: “*regeneration is a supernatural, most powerful...work..., not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead*” (Chapter III/IV, Article 12). As God’s work in Genesis 1 was a miraculous display of His power, and as His work in raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11) was again a miraculous display of His power, so His working in regenerating sinners, making spiritually dead people alive, is a miraculous display of His power. Let no one say that ‘miracles’ no longer happen!

REGENERATION: IT HAS A BEGINNING AND IS ONGOING

1. The beginning of regeneration

The change known as regeneration (or sanctification) begins at a particular point in time. An unbeliever becomes a believer, and at that point his lifestyle changes on account of that powerful work of the Holy Spirit in his heart. Paul the persecutor was arrested by the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus, and became a new man so that he noticeably ceased persecuting the church. Here is a parallel to life itself; each person living on earth has a beginning when his life began.

Through borrowing words from many of the texts quoted above, the *Canons of Dort* speaks this way about the beginning of regeneration, “*By the efficacious (= effective) working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient. He moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works*” (Chapter III/IV, Article 11). At a particular point in time, then, God the Spirit makes changes in a person. It is when the Spirit penetrates the heart of a person that the person is born again, changed, begins a new life as a Christian.

2. Regeneration is ongoing

At the same time, regeneration is a continual, daily process in the life of the Christian. As a person at birth is not full grown, so a person at rebirth is not full grown in his regeneration. NOTE: the instantaneity of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus is no more a norm for all conversions than Adam’s instantaneous adulthood is a norm for us (for Adam, let us recall, was a mature adult of, say, 30 years old, when God created him). God is mighty to call into existence an adult person out of dust, and mighty too to call into existence an adult believer on his road to Damascus. But what God is mighty to do (and once has done) does not describe what God daily does. As He commonly gives adult life through a process of birth and growing up, so He commonly gives spiritual adulthood through a process of coming to faith and growth thereafter. For that reason we ought not to be disappointed when we cannot recount a ‘conversion story’; as it is no surprise that I cannot recall the moment of my birth, it is no surprise either that I cannot recall the moment of my rebirth. Yet I am fully persuaded through the things I do that I was born, and am equally persuaded through the things I do that I am reborn.

Lord’s Day 33 speaks of this ongoing regeneration. Q & A 88 mentions that “*true repentance or conversion of man is the **dying** of the old nature and the **coming to life** of the new.*” Note that the Lord’s Day does not say that conversion takes place when the old nature ‘died’ and the new ‘came’ to life. No, ‘dying’ and ‘coming to life’ are written in present progressive tense. In other words, conversion is not a once-off, never-to-be-repeated occurrence in the life of the Christian, but is rather an ongoing process. That is why Q & A 89 explains the dying of the old nature as a “*heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and **more and more** to hate it and flee from it.*” The person justified by the blood of Christ is truly and radically changed, is spiritually born again. However, this changed heart is not immediately perfected. This is a life long process by which one is made to grow in the Lord daily, ‘more and more.’

Implications

What are the implications of this for me? The Lord in His grace has declared me Not Guilty of my sins, justified through Jesus' blood. Since you cannot separate justification and sanctification (as if you can have the one and not the other), all who are justified may say with conviction that they are also sanctified, changed, converted, born again. This delightful state of affairs, however, allows for no complacency, as if I may assume that my regeneration means that 'I have arrived'. For those who are born again, sanctified, are not instantly perfected. There needs on my part to be daily growth. Daily I need to see to it that I keep putting my old nature to death and living according to the new nature. Daily I need to fight against sin and strive to do the will of God. Sanctification has a beginning, but it is also an ongoing process, and therefore growth in faith and holiness must be evident in my life. It is because there needs to be evidence of such growth that the elders in their annual home visits also inquire about whether I have grown in the last months.

TURNING TO GOD AND TURNING AWAY FROM SIN

It is imperative that we understand these two aspects of conversion and what they mean for us individually. Conversion, regeneration, means to be turned *away* from Satan and turned *towards* God. Conversion means that our focus is 'God-ward.' Before we were justified we focused on Satan, but conversion means we are made to do a 180-degree turn (as it were). As a result God now becomes the center of our attention and life. The following table helps to illustrate these two aspects of conversion.

DYING OF THE OLD NATURE	COMING TO LIFE OF THE NEW NATURE
A turning away from sin	A turning to God
Involves sorrow on account of sin	Involves joy on account of redemption
<i>"To grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin"</i>	<i>"It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ"</i>
A resolve <i>"more and more to hate (sin) and flee from it."</i>	A resolve <i>"to live according to the will of God in all good works."</i>
humility	obedience

Table 24.2

Some passages from Scripture make clear that conversion (= regeneration, rebirth, sanctification) involves both turning from sin as well as turning to God.

- Deuteronomy 30:1-3: Israel is warned that, if they should refuse to place God in the center of their attention, God will send them into exile. Yet God also tells Israel what it is that He will do should they come to repentance. *"Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among the nations where the LORD your God drives you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart and with all your soul, that the LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you."* Here God Himself makes the connection between being turned towards God and being turned away from sin (obeying Him). Israel had only two options:
 1. be turned towards God and receive God's blessing *or*

2. be turned away from God, focusing instead on sin and disobedience, and consequently being separated from God, exiled.
- 1 Samuel 7:3: God had permitted His ark to be taken from Israel because of the people's sin. After the ark had come back to the Promised Land, Samuel said to Israel, "*If you **return to the LORD with all your hearts**, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and **prepare your hearts for the LORD, and serve Him only.***" Israel was called to make that 180-degree turn away from idol-centered worship to God-centered worship. Here are the two aspects of true conversion: turn *from* sin and turn *to* the Lord.

REPENTANCE: A BROKEN HEART ON ACCOUNT OF SIN

That this change also involves sorrow for sin is evident from Israel's response to the call for repentance. We read in 1 Samuel 7:6, "*So they gathered together at Mizpah, drew water, and poured it out before the LORD. And they **fasted** that day, and said there, 'We have sinned against the LORD.'*" From Leviticus we know that water played the symbolic role of the washing away of sin. Fasting designated a broken spirit, a sense of humility. In their repentance, then, Israel sorrowed on account of sin, was broken hearted, as they turned away from sin in order to seek the Lord. Such grief and sorrow is characteristic of repentance from sin.

- Psalm 38:17-18: In anguish over his sins, David prays, "*There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones **because of my sin.** For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me (Psalm 38:3-4). ... I am **troubled**, I am **bowled down greatly**; I go **mourning** all the day long (Psalm 38:6).... For I am ready to fall, and my **sorrow** is continually before me. **For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin**".*
- Psalm 51:7-8: This whole Psalm of David exudes a spirit of brokenness on account of his sin with Bathsheba. In full awareness of Whom he sinned against, David prays in all humility, "*For **I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin** is always before me. **Against You, You only** have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight (Psalm 51:3-4). ... Purge me ... wash me ... make me hear joy and gladness, that the **bones you have broken** may rejoice*".
- Jeremiah 3:21-25: God calls Israel to repentance, "*Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings.*" Israel replied, "*Indeed we do come to You, for You are the LORD our God.... Truly, in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.... **We lie down in our shame, and our reproach covers us.** For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers....*" Notice Israel's shame and humility.
- Ezekiel 36:26, 31: Said God to Israel, "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.... Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good; and you will **loathe yourselves in your own sight, for your iniquities and your abominations.***" Repentance involves despising oneself on account of one's sin, turning away from sin and evil and directing oneself to God, striving to obey Him and to do His will.

We conclude: the Spirit's work of sanctification is a change in the self, whereby one turns in humility from sin to God with a heartfelt desire to deny self in favor of doing God's will. It

means that one's whole focus in life is directed *God-ward*, with as result that one adopts a new lifestyle and a new attitude.

NEW LIFESTYLE OF THE CHRISTIAN: WALKING IN THE SPIRIT

What does this new lifestyle actually look like? How much different is it from the old style of living? Paul describes the practices that used to characterize the Corinthians before the gospel of Jesus Christ came to Corinth. Says Paul: “*Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such **were** some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God*” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Paul’s emphatic “*such were some of you*” leaves no doubt what sort of histories the saints of Corinth had. Paul’s statement equally leaves no doubt that these saints have been radically changed so that they were fornicators and idolaters and homosexuals and thieves no longer. So effective is the powerful working of the Holy Spirit that these sinners are dramatically *changed*. The Spirit gives a new heart that in turn produces a new conduct. This change cannot remain hidden, but manifests itself in behavior one and all can see. It produces a new lifestyle, radically different from the previous manner of living.

Paul encouraged the believers at Rome to live in a fashion consistent with their sanctification. The Holy Spirit does indeed work in us, but –in true covenantal fashion– we are also to busy ourselves with that work. In Romans 5 Paul had described justification, and in chapter 6 he goes on to say, “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?*” (vs 1). The argument is this: since we are justified by grace alone, should we not leave room for sin so that we might receive more evidence of God’s grace – for He freely forgives our sins? Paul is adamant in his answer to this question. “*Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?*” He explains why we cannot live in sin: “*For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death (through baptism), certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.... For he who has died has been freed from sin.... For the death that (Christ) died He died to sin once and for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 6:2-11). To have died to sin and to have been raised with Christ in His resurrection means regeneration, sanctification. Paul knows: his readers have been made alive to God.

But since his readers have been made alive, sanctified, they need to *be consistent* and to live according to this reality. Says Paul in Romans 6:12,13, “*Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.*” The reality of sanctification prompts the command to live as sanctified persons. So the “saints” of Rome (1:7) are told: “*do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but **present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.***” The sanctified sinner, born again as he is through the Holy Spirit, is not inevitably bound to give in to every sin that tempts him. Says Paul in verse 14, “***For sin shall not have dominion over you.***” I don’t have to give myself to the sin that is dangled so enticingly before me. I can never say that ‘I couldn’t help it’ that I fell for temptation. “*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it*” (1 Corinthians 10:13). I am always one hundred percent responsible for my failure to resist temptation to sin, for I am born again, raised to a new life, enabled to resist sin. I am instructed by God to say No to sin, to hate it and flee

from it. I believe my Savior has sanctified me through His Spirit, and so I am not to let sin have dominion over me.

Instead of reflecting what Satan is like, my sanctification means that I can again reflect what the Lord God is like. So the fruit of the Spirit characterizes the Christian's life: "*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*" (Galatians 5:22,23).

NOT PERFECTED

True, it certainly happens that I fail to resist sin; though changed I am not at all made perfect already. Paul himself, God's chosen instrument to the Gentiles, confessed that "*I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do*" (Romans 7:14,15). That's why the church says in Lord's Day 44 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*: "*in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning*" of the obedience God requires. Sanctification does not mean perfection. As the saints of Scripture grieved over their sins, so I too must be bothered by my sin, repent, turn away from sin and turn back to God. But the fact that I cannot live the perfect Christian life does not mean I may be content with a mediocre Christian life!

Christ has done much for me (justification) and in me (sanctification). It is my duty to respond to Christ's work by producing evidence in my life. If those who observe me cannot see Christ's renewing work in me, if I am as adulterous and idolatrous and deceptive and thieving as those around me, then I have not been born again. Similarly, if those around me do not see in me such fruit of the Spirit as love and joy and peace and kindness and gentleness, then I have not been raised to new life through the mighty work of the Holy Spirit. If I am not born again, I am not justified either. Then I am still on Satan's side, and need to turn to God in repentance and faith. A tree is known by its fruits. Conversely, where those fruits of the Spirit abound in my life (though far from perfect!) I may be assured of both my sanctification and my justification – and hence of God's mighty grace upon me.

SALVATION BY GRACE, NOT BY WORKS

DeBrès wrote Article 24 at a time when the church of his day taught that in order to be saved one had to do good works. DeBrès' response was No! My good works are so covered by sin that they are offensive to God (cf Isaiah 64:6). "*We cannot do a single work that is not defiled by our flesh and does not deserve punishment. Even if we could show one good work, the remembrance of one sin is enough to make God reject it. We would then always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be constantly tormented, if they did not rely on the merit of the death and passion of our Saviour*" (Article 24).

One does not become righteous before God through doing good works. Yet good works characterize the life of the Christian. How come? The Christian does good works not *in order to* be saved, but rather *because he is saved*. Those washed in the blood of Christ (justification) are also renewed through the Spirit of Christ (sanctification). The renewed invariably look renewed. A person made spiritually alive is radically different from a person dead in sin, just as Lazarus after his resurrection was radically different from those remaining in the cemetery.

I cannot gain anything from doing good works, for in Christ I already am heir to the world.

Rather, performing good works, obeying the law of God, is the inevitable consequence of regeneration. As Lord's Day 24 expresses it: it is impossible for those who belong to Christ to fail to bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

That I see such fruits in myself, then, becomes very much a reason to praise God. For "*God is at work in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:13). Such fruit of faith in my life prompts to greater praise and gratitude. Christ's work of salvation is complete, involves both justification *and* sanctification, Good Friday *and* Pentecost. How wonderful this God is!

Points for Discussion:

1. Do good works play a role in *obtaining* God's approval? Do good works play a role in *maintaining* God's approval? What, then, is the benefit of good works?
2. Explain what sanctification is. Give some words that mean essentially the same thing.
3. Are all justified persons also sanctified? Why?
4. Sanctification has a beginning and a continuation. Explain.
5. There are two aspects to sanctification. What are they?
6. How does the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God's people become obvious?
7. Does this renewing work on the part of the Spirit involve a struggle on our part? If so, how? And why?
8. Is it inevitable that you give in to a particular temptation? Explain.
9. Is the Christian made perfect in this life? Conversely, can a Christian be content with a 'mediocre sanctification'?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 11.30; 15.37, 38, 39; 16.40, 44; 23.59, 60, 61; 51.126

Canons of Dort, II.1-5

Form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 25: CHRIST, THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

ARTICLE 25

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled.

In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God's will and to His glory.

CONTEXT

Articles 22 and 23 confessed Christ's work of justification and Article 24 Christ's work of sanctification. DeBrès continues his confession concerning Christ in Article 26 by mentioning His intercessory work at God's right hand. Yet DeBrès saw a need to insert within this sequence of articles dealing with the work of Christ an article concerning the Old Testament laws and ceremonies. One wonders why. Why would DeBrès wish to interrupt his confession concerning Christ's work with an article devoted to the law of the Old Testament? DeBrès saw a need to state clearly that the work of Christ on the cross was so complete that the sacrifices and ceremonies of the Old Testament law had been fulfilled.

ROMAN CATHOLICS: CONTINUE TO SACRIFICE CHRIST DAILY

The *Belgic Confession* was completed in 1561, not long after the Great Reformation had passed through Roman Catholic Europe. In DeBrès' day the Roman Catholic Church taught that though the ritual cleansings as prescribed in the Old Testament were no longer required, we still need to keep the Old Testament ceremonial laws. The daily forgiveness of sins, they said, can only be obtained through the daily sacrificing of Christ. Hence the Roman Catholic Church maintained the sacrament of the Eucharist, in which the priest offered Christ daily to God (cf Lord's Day 30.80). DeBrès and his congregation had been brought up from childhood with this teaching. The Reformers, though, had opened the Scriptures and learned that daily sacrifices for sin were no longer required because Christ had already fully paid for sin – as DeBrès gratefully confessed in Articles 22 and 23. But if Christ has indeed fully paid for sin and reconciled the sinner to God, there was simply no need for the sinner still to keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. This is the conviction DeBrès expressed in Article 25.

CHRIST: THE FULFILMENT OF THE LAW

DeBrès writes in this article that the Old Testament laws have been "*fulfilled*". This sentiment echoed Christ's instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill*" (Matthew 5:17). In Article 5 we saw how the Old and New Testaments complemented each other. The Old Testament looked forward to the Cross of Calvary, while the New Testament reflects back on that cross. Well now, Jesus did not destroy the Law and the Prophets that foreshadowed His coming, but rather accomplished perfectly what the Law foretold concerning Him.

Should New Testament believers now keep the Old Testament ceremonies? No, says DeBrès, "*We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians.*" This means that if we should become aware of any sin against

the law on our part, we no longer have to take an animal to the priest and make a sacrifice to atone for that sin (see Leviticus 4). As the apostle to the Hebrews wrote, “*Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood (Christ) entered the Most Holy Place **once for all**, having obtained eternal redemption*” (Hebrews 9:12). Christ has fulfilled the law’s requirement for blood so that we no longer need to sacrifice blood to atone for our sins.

The Old Testament laws, ceremonies, and feasts were “*a shadow of things to come, **but the substance is of Christ***” (Colossians 2:17). “*The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ*” (Galatians 3:24), writes Paul, and we learn from that that the ceremonies of the tabernacle foreshadowed Christ’s work and directed Israel’s attention to the work He would do. So “*Christ is the end,*” the purpose and goal “*of the law*” (Romans 10:4). Now that His work on the cross is complete, Christ has fulfilled the ceremonies of the law so that the New Testament church needs no longer perform those ceremonies as the people of Israel did.

ANABAPTISTS: A FULFILLED LAW IS AN OBSOLETE LAW

While the Roman Catholics in DeBrès’ day maintained that the ceremonies of the law should still be performed in New Testament worship, the Anabaptists on the other hand (they were the Protestants who swung too far to the other extreme) claimed that in having fulfilled the ceremonies of the law, Christ made them obsolete and hence they have no role at all any more in the New Testament dispensation. In turn, the law (and with it much more of the Old Testament) could safely be ignored. This thought is still alive today, and explains why much preaching (in the Western world) is drawn solely from the New Testament. This thinking is also behind the printing of New Testament Bibles, without the Old Testament.

DeBrès could not agree with this sentiment of the Anabaptists, and saw distinct value in the Old Testament law for the New Testament church. Back in Article 5 DeBrès repeated after God what He had revealed in His Word about the authority of Holy Scripture. He (and we with him) said, “*we receive **all** these books, (including books as Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers, focused as they are on the ceremonies and symbols of the law), ... as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.*” We find these words echoed in Article 25, “*In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both **to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God’s will and to His glory.***”

The point is that the Old Testament explains what the Lord teaches us in the New Testament. It is not only the New Testament that reveals the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, but the law and the prophets do this too. Those ceremonies of the Old Testament law are vivid pictures of how it is that the Lord has obtained salvation for us in Jesus Christ. One need but recall the action of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, when he had to lay his hand on the goat, confess over it the sins of the people, and then send the goat away into the wilderness to perish. Here is a clear picture of how our sins were transferred onto Jesus Christ so that He perished in our place. When the priests and Levites of the Old Testament dispensation explained the ceremonies of the tabernacle (see Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 33:10), they were in fact preaching the gospel of redemption in Jesus’ blood.

Furthermore, the Ten Commandments teach us to “*order our life in all honour according to God’s will and to His glory.*” The New Testament certainly promotes and reinforces a lifestyle in obedience to God’s Ten Commandments as recorded for us in the Old Testament. But it is to the Old Testament that we ought to turn to learn how saints as Abraham and Joseph, Moses and David, lived a life of trust in God and obedience to His commands. It is

not for us to cast aside as obsolete the Old Testament revelation God preserved for us; our obligation instead is to read these Scriptures, to familiarize ourselves with them and to treasure them.

Christ has finished the work the Father gave Him to do. The Father's mandate for the Son was written in detail in the ceremonies and symbols of the Old Testament law. So the church does not offer sacrifices for sin today. Yet the Lord has preserved for us in His Word what He required in these ceremonies so that we might the more fully understand and appreciate the righteousness Christ attained for us and thereby be confirmed in our faith. So the Old Testament remains a source of rich instruction as New Testament saints delight in the completed work of Jesus Christ.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why did DeBrès include at this point in his confession an article about the Old Testament ceremonial law?
2. Why does the Christian no longer need to keep the Old Testament ceremonial law?
3. Why does Christ no longer need to be sacrificed for us?
4. What does it mean that Christ “fulfilled” the law?
5. What role do the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament play today? What value does the rest of the Old Testament have? Is it necessary for Christians today to read the book of Leviticus? Why?
6. What function does the Moral Law have today?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 6.19; 33.91

ARTICLE 26: CHRIST'S INTERCESSION

ARTICLE 26

We believe that we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this purpose He became man, uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty. This Mediator, however, whom the Father has ordained between Himself and us, should not frighten us by His greatness, so that we look for another according to our fancy. There is no creature in heaven or on earth who loves us more than Jesus Christ. Though He was in the form of God, He emptied Himself, taking the form of man and of a servant for us (Philippians 2:6-7), and was made like His brethren in every respect (Hebrews 2:17). If, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than He who laid down His life for us, even while we were His enemies (Romans 5:8,10)? If we had to look for one who has authority and power, who has more than He who is seated at the right hand of the Father and who has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18)? Moreover, who will be heard more readily than God's own well-beloved Son?

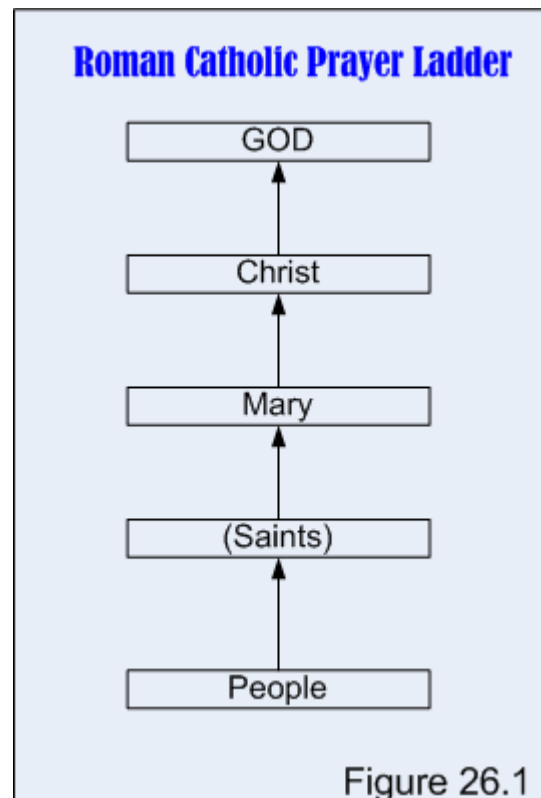
Therefore it was pure lack of trust which introduced the custom of dishonouring the saints rather than honouring them, doing what they themselves never did nor required. On the contrary, they constantly rejected such honour according to their duty, as appears from their writings. Here one ought not to bring in our unworthiness, for it is not a question of offering our prayers on the basis of our own worthiness, but only on the basis of the excellence and worthiness of Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is ours by faith.

Therefore with good reason, to take away from us this foolish fear or rather distrust, the author of Hebrews says to us that Jesus Christ was made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted (Hebrews 2:17,18). Further, to encourage us more to go to Him, he says: Since then we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16). The same letter says: Therefore brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus . . . let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, etc. (Hebrews 10:19,22). Also, Christ holds His priesthood permanently, because He continues forever. Consequently He is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:24,25). What more is needed? Christ Himself says: I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by Me (John 14:6). Why should we look for another advocate? It has pleased God to give us His Son as our Advocate. Let us then not leave Him for another, or even look for another, without ever finding one. For when God gave Him to us, He knew very well that we were sinners.

In conclusion, according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our only Mediator, as we are taught in the Lord's prayer. We rest assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in His Name (John 16:23).

PRAYER LADDER

Through the training they had received from the Roman Catholic Church in their childhood, DeBrès and his countrymen had been taught to view the ascended Christ as a fearsome person. Sinners dare not approach God in prayer through Him. Between themselves and Christ, sinners needed another intercessor, one more understanding of human needs and weaknesses, and at the same time able to exert an influence upon Jesus Christ. This person was His mother Mary. Mary was seen as the 'Mediatrix' (the word is the feminine form of the word Mediator) to whom one ought to pray, requesting her to intercede with her Son and urge Him to go to the Father on the sinner's behalf. Mary in turn could be approached via the saints (see Figure 26.1). From this 'prayer ladder' it is evident that, according to Roman Catholic theology, a great distance remains between God and the justified, sanctified sinner.



Over against this teaching dominant in his day, DeBrès sought to instruct his congregation on what Scripture said about sinners approaching God.

CHRIST RESTORED MAN'S RELATION WITH GOD

When God created the human race in the beginning, He established a close and warm relationship between mankind and Himself. In Genesis 3:8 we read how close the relation was: "*And (Adam and Eve) heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.*" How was it possible for Adam and Eve to conclude from the sound they heard that God was approaching them? It was with them as it is with us; we recognize a particular hum as evidence of an approaching car because we've heard it so often. Familiarity produces recognition. Adam and Eve recognized the sound of God's approach because they had heard it frequently. The relation between God and man in Paradise was one of open and frequent contact.

But this close relationship did not last. With the Fall into sin, man broke his communion with God. God in turn sent man out of His presence, out of the garden, and into a world of thorns and thistles, into a world of communion with Satan (Genesis 3:23; see Figure 14.2). Such was the distance between God and man that Scripture can describe fallen man as dead in sin and alienated from God (Ephesians 2:1; 4:18). Yet it pleased the Lord God to send Christ to earth in order to pay for sin. Christ bore for me the judgment I deserved. Through His gracious work all God's elect were taken from Satan's side and brought back to God's side: *justification* through the blood of Christ. God declared innocent and righteous those whom

He had chosen to eternal life, so that they could once again live in His presence (see Figure 22.1). The justified sinner, once returned to God's side, was made alive, changed, renewed, recreated: *sanctified* through the Spirit of Christ (see Figure 24.2).

What now is the relation like between the restored sinner and holy God? Now that the sinner is returned to God's side and declared righteous before Him, now that he is made alive again so that he can image God once more, can he speak with God as He did in Paradise? Or is he still banished from the presence of God as Adam was after the fall? In Article 26, DeBrès insists that the redeemed sinner has free access again into the presence of holy God. DeBrès confidently repeats after God what God has revealed in Scripture: Jesus Christ has so fully restored the relation between the justified sinner and the Creator that I can once again have communion with God. Christ's work on Calvary means that Paradise is essentially restored!

When we think of Christ we tend to associate Him with the cross of Calvary and no more. And indeed, Calvary is the climax of salvation history (justification, forgiveness of sins). However, we must take care not to stop at Calvary. Jesus Christ, after He had finished His work on the cross, went on to do more work. After He completed His work on Calvary to pay for sin, He ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50-51) in order to mediate between holy God and the people He redeemed.

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE OF CHRIST'S INTERCESSION

That Jesus bridges the gap between holy God and His sinful people is clear from several passages of Scripture.

- Romans 8:34: "*It is Christ who died (Good Friday), and furthermore is also risen (Easter Sunday), who is even at the right hand of God (Ascension), who also makes intercession for us.*"

After His death, resurrection and ascension, Christ has not gone into retirement, but He continued His work, pleading with God for us in heaven. Note the use of the present tense: He "*makes intercession for us.*" His work in heaven for our benefit is ongoing.

- Hebrews 7:25: The apostle describes the work Christ is doing in heaven today. Christ, "*because He continues for ever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them.*" Note that here again the present tense is used with reference to Christ's work: *He ever lives to make intercession.*

Christ's resurrection, or the pouring out of His Spirit, did not mark an end to His work. *Today* the ascended Christ is busy in heaven, interceding before the Father on my behalf.

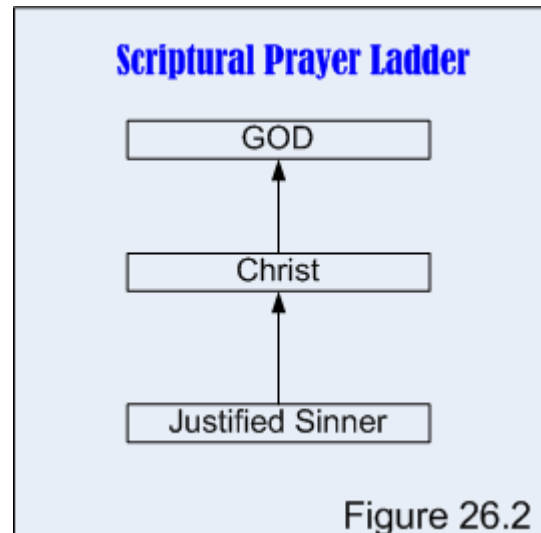
- 1 John 2:1: "*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an **advocate** with the Father, **Jesus Christ, the righteous.***"

'We have,' Scripture says here; it is a continuing reality. *Today* my Savior is in heaven acting as an advocate, a lawyer, presenting my case to the Father.

CHRIST IS MY ADVOCATE

Such Scripture passages prompted DeBrès to confess, "*We believe that we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this*

purpose He became man, uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty.” Our barring from God’s presence on account of our fall into sin in Paradise is undone! No, we do not come directly to God as we did in Paradise before the fall; our depravity requires the work of the Mediator. Even so, sinners may approach the same God with whom Adam and Eve communed before the fall, and this God hears for Jesus’ sake. See Figure 26.2. It makes for an exciting and encouraging thought: my Savior is today still active for my sake, and the result is that I can speak openly with holy God! How marvelous is His grace!



Here is the encouragement of the apostle to the Hebrews: *“Therefore, brethren,”* he says, *“having **boldness** to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, **let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith**”* (10:19-22). Here the ‘Holiest’ is a reference to the Holy of Holies of the Old Testament, the place where God dwelt among His people. The Hebrew readers of this letter understood the term to refer to the dwelling of God in heaven. The force of the apostle’s words, then, is clear: the Hebrew Christians are encouraged to enter boldly into the presence of holy God Himself! There is for their benefit an eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ who sacrificed Himself on the cross for sinners, who pleads with God on sinners’ behalf. Small wonder the apostle can tell his readers to *“draw near”* to God with *“boldness”*! In truth, *“who will be heard more readily than God’s own well-beloved Son?”*

CHRIST’S INTERCESSION HAS RESULTS

Scripture is emphatic that God always listens to the pleas of the Son. Indeed, it could not be different, given that the Father and the Son are one!

- Luke 22:31-32: Because He knew that Satan would attack Peter, Jesus made a point of interceding the Father on Peter’s behalf. *“Simon, Simon,”* Jesus said to Peter. *“Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But, **I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail.**”*

In the grip of Satan, Peter certainly went through a deep valley, to the point of denying the Lord three times (Luke 22:54-60). Yet God, in answer to Peter’s prayer, did not give Peter over completely to the devil. Christ had prayed for Peter, interceded for him that his faith would not fail, and the result is that when Peter heard the rooster crow and saw Jesus looking at him, he recognized his sin, broke down, and wept. *“Then Peter went out and wept bitterly”* (Luke 22:62).

- John 17:11-12: Just before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus prayed to the Father: *“Holy Father,”* He said, *“keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name.*

Those whom You gave Me I have kept, and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”

These words form Jesus’ intercession to the Father on behalf of His disciples, requesting God’s preserving grace over those disciples.

The prayer was so necessary. Jesus knew that at His arrest the disciples would scatter (Matthew 26:56) and one would even publicly deny Him (Matthew 26:69-74). Yet on Easter Sunday, all the disciples (except for Thomas who would join them a week later) were together again (John 20:19,24). That is because the Father, in response to Jesus’ prayer, kept the disciples in Jesus’ name. The Father answered this petition from the Son!

- John 17:20-21: In the same prayer Jesus prayed a little later, *“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You...”*

In this part of His prayer, Jesus prayed for the unity of those who would come to faith through the preaching of the disciples. Did the Lord God answer?

After the outpouring of Christ’s Spirit on Pentecost we read: *“Then those who gladly received (Peter’s) word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... Now all who believed were **together**, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need”* (Acts 2:42-45). Similarly, in Acts 4:4 we read of a further five thousand who believed in the Word preached by the apostles, and in verse 32 we read, *“Now the multitude of those who believed were of **one heart** and **one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”* Here is another example that Jesus’ prayer of intercession on behalf of the saints was effective; God answers the petitions of His Son.

PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE

If, now, the Father heard Jesus’ petitions on behalf of His people before He went to the cross, how much more shall the Father hear Jesus’ petitions on our behalf after His Son has been exalted to God’s right hand!? More, if the Son laid down His life for me on the cross, will He now in heaven turn a deaf ear to my cries, and not implore the Father on my behalf? Surely, neither my Father nor my Savior is like that!

Rather, the Intercessor I have in heaven hears my pleas and speaks to the Father on my behalf. Paul is emphatic: *“It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us”* (Romans 8:34). Similarly, Jesus’ promise is sure: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you”* (John 16:23). Therefore I have every reason to pray boldly. I have been reconciled to God; hence I am allowed to speak to God freely. More, because I’m allowed to speak freely to God, I also (in gratitude) *must* speak freely and boldly to God. Christ intercedes in heaven on my behalf, and so I’m permitted to tell the Lord what is on my mind. Even my sins may not hinder me from speaking openly to God, for (as DeBrès put it) *“when God gave Him to us, He knew very well that we were sinners.”*

More, I may be assured that the Intercessor I have in heaven understands exactly what is going on in my life. He is not far removed, distant, or remote from this life. He has been on

earth Himself! *“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was **in all points tempted as we are**, yet without sin. **Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace**, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (Hebrews 4:14-16). Have I been tempted in any way? Then I may tell it to my Father, for Christ Himself was tempted in the same way. Have I fallen? Then I may tell my Father that too, for Christ knows and understands my weaknesses in the face of the barbs of Satan’s temptations. In the presence of the Father to whom I pray, Christ tells the Father of the weakness of the human flesh, reminds the Father of His saving work on the cross and His renewing work by the Spirit. And the Father always hears the Son (cf John 14:13,14; 15:16; 16:23).

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: WALKING AND TALKING WITH GOD

Such wealth results in an obvious consequence. Given that the way is open again to speak freely with God, it follows that the life of the Christian can only be a life *with God* at all times, in all places. As I walk or work, I may talk to my God through prayer, and God talks to me through His Word.

This means that prayer should characterize each of my days. God does not place a limit on the number of times I may speak to Him in one day. It will not do to limit prayer to the start and close of a day, and at the beginning and conclusion of every meal; such restrictions inhibit communication with God. Rather, I may speak to Him in any moment, even when I cannot accompany prayer with folded hands, closed eyes, bent knees, or a bowed head (though there is much to be said for such posture if the situation allows it). With my hands on the steering wheel or in the suds, with my eyes on the computer screen or on the shelves of the grocery store, I may ask the Lord for strength to do the task He gives, may ask for wisdom to meet a challenge I don’t know how to face, may explain my frustration with the children and ask for patience. I may pour out my heart whether I’m at home, in the office, on the work site, in the garden or on the road. I may express my thankfulness to God at any time of the day, be it for a beautiful rainbow, for sunshine, for a good time with the children, for having received strength, wisdom, or endurance as was required. I may tell God of the loneliness I feel or the rejection I experience, no matter what time of day or night. There is nothing in the life of His child that does not interest the Father. All things are in His control, including the red traffic light when I’m running late or the empty fuel tank when there’s no gas station in sight, and I may lay these concrete needs before Him in plain language. Nothing in my life is too trivial for Him, for I live every moment in His presence and all things come from His hands. My prayers don’t need to be composed of fancy words and phrases. I am allowed to be open to the Lord with words of daily life, for that is what it means to truly walk and talk with God.

How rich the Gospel of grace in the grind of my life today! DeBrès put it well: *“In conclusion, according to the command of Christ, we call upon the heavenly Father through Christ our only Mediator, as we are taught in the Lord’s prayer. We rest assured that we shall obtain all we ask of the Father in His Name.”*

THE LORD’S PRAYER

Just what, though, are we taught in the Lord’s prayer? We read in Luke 11:1 that the twelve disciples were once listening in on Jesus’ conversations with His Father in heaven. When He finished His prayer, one of the twelve asked Jesus the question on the minds of them all: *“Lord, teach us to pray, as John [the Baptist] also taught his disciples.”*

Jesus obliged the disciples and taught them to pray. The first aspect of His instruction related to God's identity. The disciples were to call God 'Father' – because God is not a heavy-fisted tyrant, nor a disinterested stranger. Realizing that the one you speak to is a *Father* (instead of a tyrant) makes speaking to Him so much easier! That's the more so given what the Scripture says about the meaning of the term 'Father' (see, for example, Deuteronomy 32:4-14, especially verse 6; Hosea 11:1-11).

As to what the disciples should pray, Jesus reminded them that all of life is to be God-centered, and so the disciples' prayers were to be God-centered too; they should pray first of all that *God's name be hallowed*. With this petition they were to ask that God give them grace to live each moment of each day to the glory of God Most High.

The disciples, Jesus continued, should pray from their daily context, from the setting of war and the antithesis that characterizes this life (see Genesis 3:15); they should pray that *God's kingdom be made to come* since in this fallen world there are many who live in rebellion against God's kingship and refuse to submit to His authority. This is a request that the disciples (and all who pray) should acknowledge God's kingship in Christ over all of life. This request follows the first petition, for God's name receives the glory that is His due specifically through people acknowledging God's kingship in daily life.

Yet how is God's kingship in daily life acknowledged? One highlights Christ's kingship by *obeying God's will*. So the third petition follows from the second; the disciples should ask for the gift of obedience, should ask for grace to deny their own will in order to do God's will, and so make that kingdom come – so that in turn God's name be hallowed. Those first three petitions, then, are all of one piece. It is through people doing God's will that His kingdom is made to come, and so God's name receives the glory.

Jesus taught His disciples to follow these first three God-centered petitions with three more petitions. Contrary to what we might expect, though, the second cluster of three petitions does not revolve around people. Rather, Jesus taught the disciples to pray for *daily bread* with God's glory in mind. That is: it is through our obeying God's commands (third petition) that God's kingdom is made to come (second petition) and His name hallowed (first petition). But if a sinner is to obey God's commands he needs strength from God, needs food, needs sleep, needs faithfulness, love, humility, clothes, work, contentment, etc. In the fourth petition Jesus would have the disciples pray for "daily bread" in order that they might be able to obey God's commands, so that in turn God's kingdom come and He be glorified. This fourth petition is as God-centered as the first three.

The fifth petition about forgiveness of sins dovetails again with the fourth and the ones before. For we daily misuse the bodily needs God gives in answer to the fourth petition. Though God gives us adequate in terms of food and money, clothes and work, freedom and time to study His Word (so that in turn we might be equipped to do His will, make His kingdom come, glorify His name), we for our part repeatedly misuse His many good gifts. Through that misuse we chalk up a debt with God, a debt that blocks us from receiving more of the gifts we need to do His will, make His kingdom come, glorify His name. So Jesus taught His people to pray that the Lord God please *forgive the debt* we daily accumulate through our sins. God in mercy for Jesus' sake does forgive our debt with Him, so that in turn the way is open again for Him to provide us with the needs required to do His will and make His kingdom come – to the greater glory of God's most wonderful Name.

The sixth petition, too, dovetails with the previous five. Where there is forgiveness, the Lord God again supplies daily bread – for the greater glory of God's most wonderful Name. That's a reality Satan loathes. So He sets before us temptations geared to make us misuse again God's gifts, so that in turn we accumulate a debt with God..., and God does not receive

the glory that is His due. So Jesus instructs His disciples to ask God to please prevent that they come into a situation of temptation, and to *deliver them from the evil one*. Just how God-centered prayer (and all of life) is to be is pointed up again in the doxology Jesus adds to the prayer He taught His disciples. “*For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory;*” life is all about God.

After His instruction concerning what to pray, Jesus added this promise: “*Ask, and it will be given to you*” (Luke 11:9). Jesus’ point was not that the disciples should ask for anything they desired, and then expect to receive it; Jesus’ point was that the disciples should ask for anything *in agreement with the thrust of the Lord’s Prayer* and they will receive it. James underlines the Lord’s instruction on the point when he writes, “*Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. **You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures***” (James 4:1-3). A chapter later James states emphatically, “*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much*” (James 5:16). He mentions an example from the Old Testament. “*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit*” (James 5:17,18). Elijah’s prayer for drought was pitched to God’s glory; God should withhold daily bread from a sinful nation (according to His promise in Deuteronomy 28:23), so that Israel might learn to do God’s will, and so acknowledge His kingship and give glory to Him. According to promise, the Lord heard and answered.

Driven by a desire to see God glorified, we may pray with equal fervor for the things God has promised to give. Christ will bring our petitions before the Father, and He will certainly hear.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why did the Roman Catholics place Mary between Christ and man? Why is this wrong?
2. How is it possible for a Christian to speak to God?
3. Christ is our Advocate. What does this mean? Why is an Advocate still necessary?
4. What is the result of Christ’s work as Advocate?
5. What advantage follows from the fact that this Advocate is true man?
6. “Every moment of my life I live in the presence of my God.” Is this thought scary to you? Should it be?
7. What sorts of things should we speak about in our prayers? From what perspective should these things receive a mention in our prayers? Should that perspective differ in prayer from the perspective we have for life as such?
8. Explain the structure of the Lord’s Prayer.
9. Read through the first three of the Form Prayers in the *Book of Praise*. What attitude prevails in them? Are you comfortable with this attitude? Is it fitting for us today??

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 18.47, 48, 49; 19.50; 45-52
 Prayers in the *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 27: THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH

ARTICLE 27

We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world, although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man. Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal.

Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

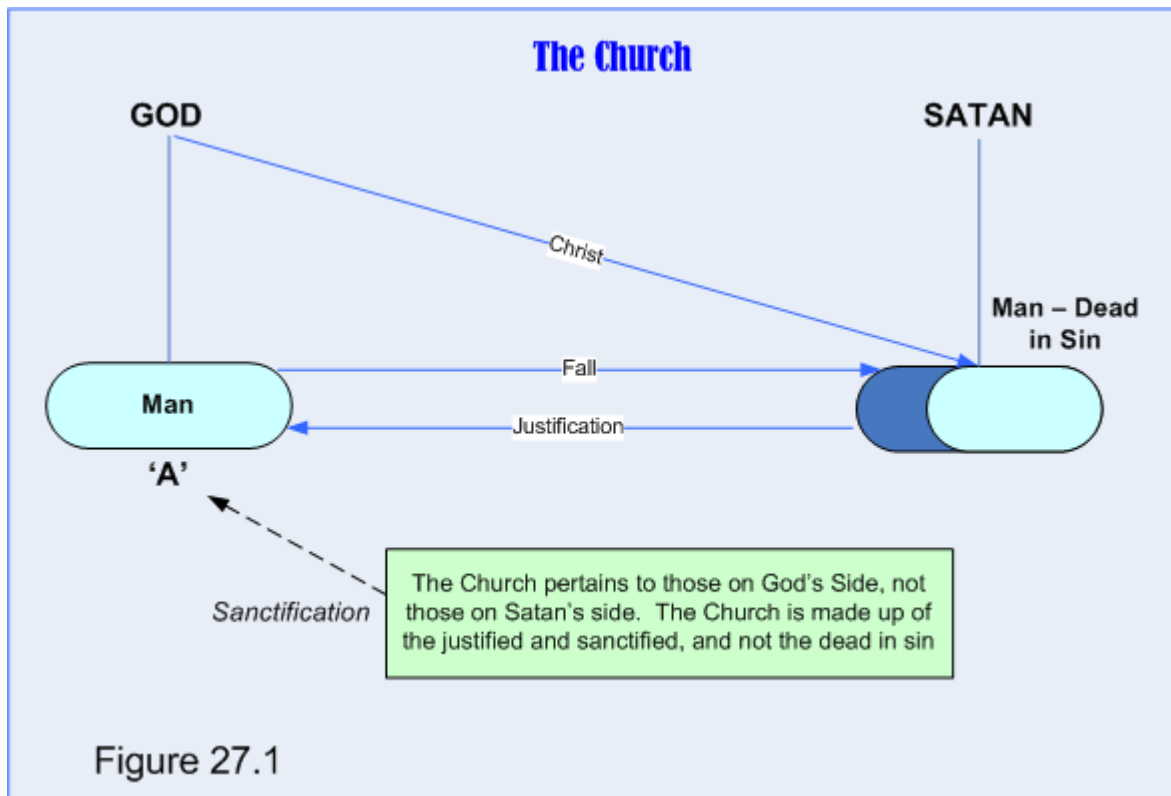
BY FAITH AND NOT BY SIGHT

The article concerning the Church is as much an article of faith as any other article of the *Belgic Confession*. The fact that we can see churches around us tempts us to define the church on the basis of what we *see* instead of on the basis of God's revelation. Each Sunday anew, though, we confess that we *believe* a holy catholic Church, and so whatever we say about the Church needs to be based on Scripture alone – even if the Lord's revelation about the Church flies in the face of what we see around us.

SEQUENCE

Directly on the heels of his confession concerning how God restored the relationship between Himself and His elect after the Fall into sin, DeBrès made his confession concerning the church. God had given His only Son (Article 17) so that through His sacrifice on the cross (Article 21) persons enslaved to sin and Satan might be justified before God (Articles 22 & 23). The persons transferred through Christ's work from Satan's side to God's side were not only justified through Christ's blood but were also sanctified by Christ's Spirit – sanctification (Article 24). The bond with God, once broken by the fall into sin, was restored so that, through the intercessory work of Christ, redeemed sinners may come again into the presence of holy God in prayer (Article 26). DeBrès summarizes all this material in one sentence at the beginning of Article 27, when he speaks of "*the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.*"

It is, DeBrès insists, these redeemed persons, washed by the blood of Christ and sanctified by His Spirit, who form the objects of the Church (see Figure 27.1). The Church does not pertain to those persons still on Satan's side (the reprobate). Rather, the Church pertains to those persons who have been brought from Satan's side back to God's side (the elect). (This, of course, is not to say that there are no reprobate persons in the Church; see Article 29). You cannot separate the doctrine of the Church from the doctrine of God's electing grace, and hence His justifying and sanctifying work. At the same time, as will be explained below, one cannot equate the Church with the elect.



THE CHURCH IS THE WORK OF TRIUNE GOD

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are each involved with the Church.

- *God the Father elected* to life certain persons from the whole of fallen mankind. These elect God gave to His Son (John 6:37,39; John 17:2,6).
- *God the Son* laid down His life to pay for the sins of those whom the Father gave to Him (John 17:2,24). Yet after Jesus Christ atoned for sin on the cross and ascended into heaven, He did not wash His hands of the redeemed. Rather, from His place at God's right hand He labors on earth still. He does two things:
 - He sends preachers of the gospel to those parts of the world where there are elect persons whom the Father had given to Him. Christ, for example, arrested Paul on his road to Damascus and commissioned him "*to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel*" (Acts 9:15). When Paul wanted to go to Bithynia to preach, the Lord forbade him, and directed him instead to Macedonia because in Macedonia were persons whom the Father had given to the Son (see Acts 16:6-10). So the Lord caused Paul's path to cross the paths of Lydia and the Philippian jailer, so that they heard the Word of life (Acts 16:11-34).
 - God the Son also gathers together the persons who have come to faith. See below.
- *God the Holy Spirit changes the hearts of the elect*, regenerating them so that among the elect there is ongoing renewal, growth, and an increase in holiness so that in the Church there may be the holiness there ought to be. It was the Spirit of Jesus Christ who caused Lydia and the jailer to respond to Paul's preaching with faith.

Lord's Day 21.54 echoes this work of Triune God in relation to the church. The question is this: "*What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church of Christ?*" The answer we have learned from the Bible is this: "*I believe that the **Son of God**, out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends and preserves for Himself,*

*by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church **chosen** (that is the work of God the Father) to everlasting life.”* Article 27 also speaks of the work of Triune God with respect to the Church. *“We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a **holy** congregation and assembly of the true **Christian believers** (ie, chosen, set apart by the Father), who expect their entire salvation in **Jesus Christ**, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the **Holy Spirit**.”*

In the town of Philippi, then, were persons elected by the Father, justified by the Son, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit – Lydia, the jailer, and (according to Paul’s letter to the Philippians) others like Epaphroditus, Euodia and Syntyche (2:25; 4:2). That these elect persons were transferred from Satan’s side to God’s side, were justified through Jesus’ blood and sanctified by the Spirit, is all part of Christ’s church gathering work. But: does the fact that there were now two – or perhaps ten – believers in Philippi mean that there was a church in Philippi? The answer to that question depends on one’s understanding of what the church is. If – as is common today – one defines the church as the elect (in a given town), one must conclude that the presence of faith in the hearts of two (or perhaps ten) Philippians implies that there was a church in Philippi. However, if one defines the church as Article 27 does, the presence of faith in the hearts of these persons does *not* yet mean there is a church in that city. What, then, is the church actually?

‘CHURCH’ IN SCRIPTURE

The English word ‘Church’ (and the Scottish ‘kirk’ and Dutch ‘kerk’) is derived from the Greek word ‘kuriake,’ meaning ‘belonging to the Lord’. This word gives expression to the fact that the Church was bought by the blood of the Lord, and so is His possession.

However, the word ‘kuriake’ does not appear in the Bible as a word for church. Instead, the Bible uses the word ‘ecclesia.’ This word was well known to the Greeks of the early New Testament era to describe an assembly. We come across the word in Acts 19, in the context of the riot instigated by Demetrius the silversmith in Ephesus. In verse 32 we read, *“Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the **assembly** was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”* The city clerk challenged the crowd that *“if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful **assembly**”* (vs 39). Having said that, he *“dismissed the **assembly**”* (vs 41). In each of these cases the Greek uses here the word ‘ecclesia’. This was the common Greek word for a meeting, a get-together, an assembly, and was commonly used to describe a gathering of (some of) the citizens of town. Inherent in the word ‘ecclesia’ is the notion of *gathering*.

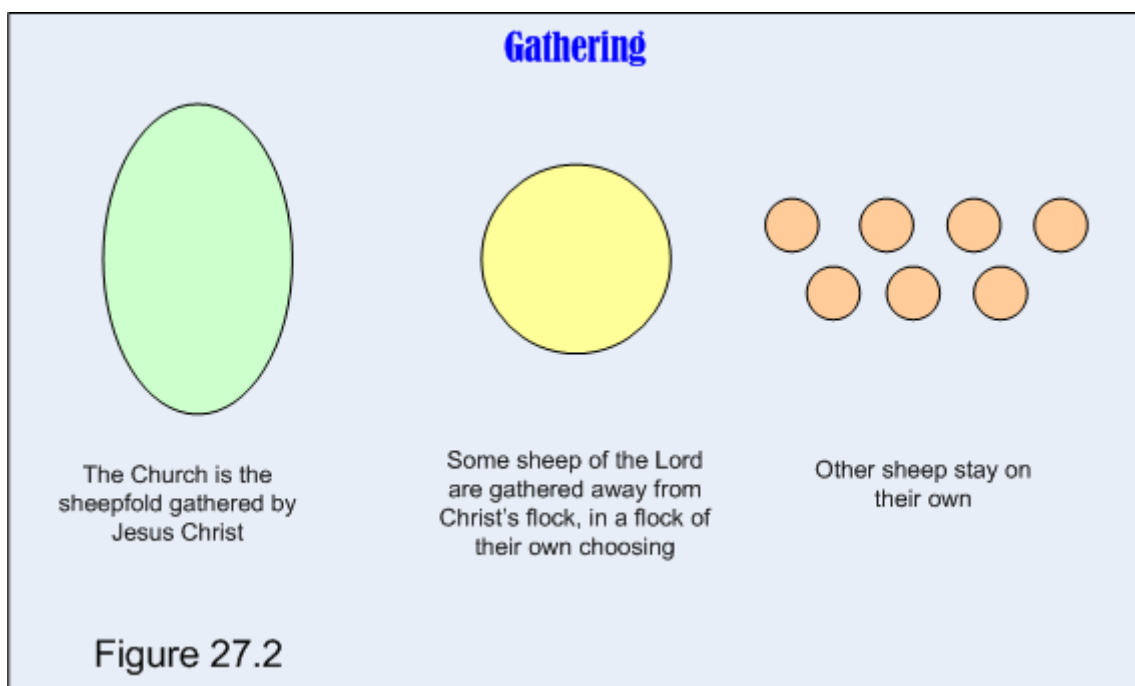
Further, God’s New Testament revelation is based on His Old Testament revelation. As it turns out, the word ‘ecclesia’ appeared frequently in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as translation of the Hebrew word ‘qahal’, which again means ‘gathering’, ‘assembly’. This term occurs, for example, in Deuteronomy 5:22, where Moses recalls the time when God made His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai and gave His Ten Commandments. That meeting at the foot of Mt Sinai is circumscribed like this: *“These words the LORD spoke to all your **assembly**.”* Since both the Old Testament and the Greek speaking world of Paul’s day used the word ‘ecclesia’ to describe an assembly of people, it is not correct for us to read the word ‘ecclesia’ in the New Testament as if it describes all the elect.

When Jesus in Matthew 16:18, then, used the word ‘ecclesia’, His hearers on the road to Caesarea Philippi knew what Jesus was speaking about. He told Peter that *“I will build **My church**,”* and His hearers understood Jesus to speak not of an invisible, global entity

comprising all the elect throughout the ages; they understood Jesus to mean an assembly, a gathering – for that’s what the word ‘ecclesia’ meant. Moreover, this gathering of Christ’s would be distinguished from other gatherings, for Jesus spoke of *My Church, My assembly*.

Similarly, Paul addressed a letter “to **the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). The mailman who had to deliver this letter to Thessalonica did not think in terms of an invisible entity of the elect of Thessalonica that could not be located. Rather, the common use of the word ‘ecclesia’ prompted the person charged with delivering this letter to think of a gathering of Thessalonians, something real, something identifiable, something visible. As to which assembly of Thessalonians was to receive the letter, the mailman could discover that by the addition of the words “*in God the Father.*” That is: this letter was not addressed to an assembly of, say, all the citizens of the city of Thessalonica, or those citizens who came together to play soccer; this letter was addressed to a gathering of persons united “*in God the Father*”. Nor was this letter addressed to the assembly in the Jewish synagogue (to whom the words “*in God the Father*” could apply); this letter was addressed to “**the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**” The mailman had to deliver the letter to the gathering of *Christians*, the Christian church. Yet Paul knew that this particular gathering did not include all the Christians of town, for he added at the end of his letter the instruction that “*this epistle be read to all the holy brethren*” (5:27).

In His teaching to His disciples, the Lord Jesus Christ also made this distinction between the people of God (the elect) and the *gathering* of the people of God. He spoke of the Church as a sheepfold: “**And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd**” (John 10:16). See Figure 27.2.



Jesus’ point is that there are elect persons outside the Church, persons who –for whatever reason– are separate from the assembly of true believers. Jesus’ church gathering work is *incomplete*, and so He continues to labor to complete the church. In the meantime (as in a construction site; see 1 Peter 2:5a), there are elements in this building called ‘church’ that are

not yet assembled to their proper place. If you will, the bricks are still on pallets in the yard, the light fixtures are still with the supplier, and the kitchen cupboards still have to be made. This is the force of the present progressive tense in 1 Peter 2:5: “*you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house.*” This is also the force of the future tense in John 10:16: “*there will be one flock*”. When the Lord returns on the Last Day the church will be complete, and that’s to say that all the elect will be gathered into one. This is what John was shown in the vision he saw on Patmos: “*I looked, and behold, a Lamb (Christ) standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty four thousand, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads*”(Revelation 14:1). The 144,000 is not to be taken as the literal number of the elect, but, as with much of the book of Revelation, is to be understood symbolically as a number of fullness. It’s 12 times 12, times 10³. This number is symbolic of *all* the elect, the totality of Christ’s Church (see Revelation 14:4). This group, all the elect, is standing *together* at the end of history, as one assembly on Mt Zion. This is when Christ’s church-gathering work is complete, and this is when the “gathering of the people of God” will constitute the same group as “the people of God.” Today, though, the construction of Christ’s church is still ongoing. That is why we should not be surprised to find sheep of the Lord in town who do not gather with us, be it that they meet together in a place of their own choosing or that they wander as individuals on their own.

Meanwhile, there are places in Scripture where the term ‘church’ is already used to denote simply the people of God, without asking us to imagine in our minds a *gathering* of God’s people (cf Colossians 1:18,24; Ephesians 1:22; 3:10,21; 5:23ff). Yet the church as people of God without reference to gathering is secondary, and this loading of the term ‘church’ is possible only because the apostle reaches forward to the day when the body of the elect overlaps exactly the persons who are gathered together. It does injustice to the Biblical meaning and usage of the word *ecclesia* to maintain that the term describes first of all the totality of God’s elect – be it universally or in a given town. The church is primarily a gathering, and secondarily all the elect by virtue of their eventual gathering together in one place on the day of Christ’s return.

Was there, then, a church in Philippi once Lydia, the jailer, and perhaps others had come to faith? No, there was no church yet in Philippi, in the normal and primary sense of the word. Jesus Christ had further work to do before there was a church in town; He had to gather together into one those in whom the Spirit had worked faith.

‘CHURCH’ IN CONFESSION

The fathers in the time of the Great Reformation 450 years ago understood well the Biblical instruction concerning the church-as-gathering. The earliest confessions of the Reformation all place stress on the Church as *communion* or *community*, or *fellowship* of believers. The First Confession of Basel of 1534, for example, states in Art 10: “*We believe one holy, Christian Church, the fellowship of the saints, the spiritual assembly of believers which is holy and the one bride of Christ....*” Similarly, the Geneva Confession of 1536 states this: “*While there is one only Church of Jesus Christ, we always acknowledge that necessity requires companies of the faithful to be distributed in different places. Of these assemblies each one is called Church*” (Art 18). The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 answers the question about what the Church is with these words: “*the Church is an assembly of the faithful called or gathered out of the world; a communion, I say, of all the saints....*” Confessions that developed under the stress of persecution also spoke of the church in terms of gathering. In the French Confession of 1559 (upon which John Calvin exercised great influence), the true church is “*the company of the faithful who agree to follow God’s Word*

and the pure religion which it teaches” (Article 27). The Scottish Confession of 1560 states: “As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk, that is to say, one **company** and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace Him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the Kirk, even as it is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus” (Article 16). So there is nothing new or surprising in DeBrès’ characterization of the church in his Belgic Confession of 1561: “We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy **congregation** and **assembly** of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit” (Article 27). The fathers of the Great Reformation repeated after God what they heard the Lord teach in His Word: God’s church is the *gathering* of the people of God, and remains an ongoing work of the Lord.

After the above mentioned Confessions had come into print in the 1560’s, no reformed confessions of great note were written with the exception of the Canons of Dort (1618/19) and the Westminster Standards (1648). The Canons of Dort gives no description of the Church, though passing reference to the Church does appear (cf II.9 & V.9). The Westminster Confession, on the other hand, does present a characterization of the church. It reads as follows: “*The catholick or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one....*” And further: “*The visible church, which is also catholick or universal under the gospel ... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*” (Article 25.1,2). It is remarkable that this description of the church lacks the centrality of the concept of gathering. Article 25.1 instead defines the church in terms of election, be it that the elect are gathered at some time or another. This change of understanding of what the church is has colored North America’s popular understanding of what the church is. Given, though, what the Scripture teaches on the point, we do well to treasure the emphasis of the Great Reformation: the church is the ongoing work of the Son of God, wherein He visibly and locally gathers together the people of God.

FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

The Church revealed by God in Scripture has various characteristics. In the course of church history, four have commonly been confessed. The *Nicene Creed*, for example, mentions the following attributes: “*I believe **one, holy, catholic and apostolic** Church.*” This is a confession based not on what man sees of the church, but on what the Lord has revealed about the church in His Word. These attributes characterize the church today (whether we see them or not), and will characterize the church forever. These attributes are God’s *gifts* to the Church and at the same time form a *mandate* to the Church. On the one hand the Church *is* one, holy, catholic and apostolic; on the other hand God calls the Church to *be* one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

1. The Church is One

GIFT: that the Church is one is certainly not a confession made as a result of what man sees of the Church, for one sees so much division. The fact, then, that Scripture speaks of the one-ness of the Church has led many to believe that the Church is a large, invisible entity comprised of all the elect. This one big invisible body would then be the real Church. That makes each local church, each local gathering or assembly, a manifestation of the big thing, the real thing. (Abraham Kuyper was one proponent of this view.) This, however, is not what the Lord means when He reveals the Church as one.

Scripture teaches that there is but one way to be saved. The angel announced that the coming baby was to be called “*JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21). The disciples insisted that “*there is no other name under heaven [than Jesus Christ] given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). As Jesus said, “*I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through Me*” (John 14:6). Yet this same Jesus spoke not of gathering numerous churches, but just one church. “*My Church*,” one reads in Matthew 16:18, not ‘*My churches*.’ Since there is but one Savior who works faith in the same way for all the saved, there is only *one* Church. As Paul puts it, “*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all*” (Ephesians 4:4,5).

Jesus prayed to the Father concerning the Church: “*I do not pray for these alone, (ie, the disciples) but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that **they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be **one** in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be **one** just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in **one***” (John 17: 20-23). God’s answer to Jesus’ prayer is recorded in Acts 2:44, “*Now all who believed were together, and had all things **in common**,*” and also in Acts 4:32, “*Now the multitude of those who believed were of **one heart and one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things **in common**.*” There was no division in the early Christian Church; rather, the church was characterized by unity, because there was one Savior and therefore one Gospel.

Revelation 14 speaks of the perfect unity the Church shall enjoy at its completion. “*And they sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth*” (Revelation 14:3). In unison they sing *and confess*, and together enjoy the Lamb’s supper. “*And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, ‘Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! ... Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. ... Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’*” (Revelation 19:6,7,9).

We experience the reality of this gift of oneness in the fact that we assemble together in Church on Sundays, singing together, praying together, listening together to the Word, eating together from one bread and drinking from one cup at the Lord’s Supper. The communion of saints as we experience it day by day in the course of the week also gives local expression to the unity of the church. On a broader level, one may think of the bond of churches, as well as sister relations with churches far away. In the closing words of Article 27, “*it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.*”

MANDATE: In the brokenness that characterizes life since the fall into sin, the church experiences fractures in this oneness. Not that long after Pentecost, the oneness of the church came under stress through the failure of the saints to look after the needs of the Hellenist widows (Acts 6:1). The church in Corinth was self-destructing because the members insisted on their own way (1 Corinthians 1-4). Yet brokenness and division harms the cause of Jesus Christ in this world. Christ prayed for unity amongst His own “*that the world may believe that You sent Me*” (John 17:21). This prayer provides catalyst for the church to *be* the one body God has made the Church to be. The unity we experience in our assembling together on

Sundays, be it by listening together to the one word of life, by praying and singing together, by giving our gifts for a common cause inside or outside the congregation, or by eating from one bread and drinking from one cup at the Lord's Supper, needs constant growth and encouragement. The gift of the communion of saints needs cultivation so that more and more we become an active, living communion, where the one reaches out to the other so that together all members become increasingly unified. See there the mandate of the deacons (cf Acts 6:1-7)! On a broader level, the unity of the Church is to be expressed amongst sister churches nationally (synods) and internationally. This is not to be limited to those assemblies that we already know, for the Son of God is continuously at work gathering His Church. For that reason we are to keep examining whether there are other churches which we are to recognize as true, faithful churches of Jesus Christ, and with whom we should unite.

2. The Church is holy

GIFT: the closing paragraph of Article 27 speaks of "*this holy Church*". This designation comes from passages of Scripture as 1 Peter 2:9 where we read, "*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*" To be holy means to be set apart, claimed by God, treasured and special to Him. Since the church is special to God, its members are also regenerated by the Holy Spirit to be different from the world in which they live. This gathering of holy people cannot identify with the people on Satan's side. Paul speaks of the Church's holiness in his letter to the Ephesians, to whom he writes, "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might **sanctify and cleanse her** with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish*" (Ephesians 5: 25-27).

MANDATE: As it is, in this broken world one sees so much sin within the Church. The egotistical attitude of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) did not reflect the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. The church in Corinth tolerated in their midst a man who had his father's wife (1 Corinthians 5:1). Such behavior made the church look worldly – and so the Lord of the church looks weak and worldly too. Precisely because the Lord of the church has made the church holy, it is the mandate of the church to *be* holy – and that involves an ongoing struggle. The gathering of the believers is to make a point of *being* separate from sin, being holy through the mighty working of the Holy Spirit within us. "*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are*" (1 Corinthians 3:16,17). In the strength of the Lord the church shall increase in holiness. Ephesians 5:27 speaks of the goal of pursuing holiness, namely, that Christ "*might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she **should be holy and without blemish.***" The reference here is to the Last Day. Though by God's work in Jesus Christ the Church is today characterized by holiness, we today are at the same time to work towards that holiness.

3. The Church is catholic

GIFT: the term 'catholic' in this context does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, the term 'catholic' actually means universal, worldwide. In Article 27 we read, "... *this Church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but **is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.***" That is one aspect of the church's catholicity. Article 27 mentions a second aspect of the church's catholicity when it states that the "*Church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end.*" The

catholicity of the church, then, refers to both *time* and *place*.

This characteristic of the church is inherent in the promise God gave to Abraham, “*In your seed **all the nations of the earth** shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice*” (Genesis 22:18). The Church is not exclusively for Abraham’s physical offspring, but for *all* nations anywhere under the sun (see Psalm 87). The gathering of those washed in Jesus’ blood and renewed through His Spirit is not limited to Abraham’s day, for God says through Isaiah many centuries later, “*It shall be that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and see My glory*” (Isaiah 66:18). The New Testament, too, speaks of the Church made up of people from any race, language, gender, age, or social status. In the Revelation to John we read repeatedly of “*a great multitude which no one could number, **of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues***” (Revelation 7:9; see 5:9; 15:4) – and therefore of all ages and places. Hence there is no room for discrimination in the Church on the basis of race or language or social status. “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body –whether **Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free**– and have all been made to drink into one Spirit*” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

This catholic character of the church tends to generate confusion in our minds. What is catholic or worldwide cannot be seen – and so our thoughts drift toward the scholastic notion of an invisible church. Then it is easy for our thoughts to slip again into the rut of equating the church with all the elect – as if the church is characterized by the election of its members.

Perhaps an analogy with the ocean can help us understand the catholicity of the church better. Off the coast of Vancouver Island one sees the ocean. One sees the ocean too at Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, as well as at South Head in Sydney. In all three places one sees ‘the ocean’, yet one never sees ‘the ocean’ in its entirety. The ocean is too worldwide for the human eye to see at one time. That fact, however, does not make the ocean invisible; it rather makes the ocean un-oversee-able. The same is true in relation to the church. One sees the church in Kelmscott, Australia. One sees the church also in Yarrow, Canada, and in Pretoria, South Africa. These are not different churches, no more than the ocean off the coast of Vancouver Island is a different ocean than in Sydney. The one church of Jesus Christ, spread as it is over the entire world, is not invisible but un-oversee-able.

Again, as one considers the catholicity of the church, one notices differences between the churches of Africa and the churches of Australia and the churches of Canada. Do the differences not take away from the catholicity of the church (or its unity, for that matter)? The ocean off the coast of Vancouver Island is the same ocean as around Hawaii or off the coast of Australia, but the wave patterns, currents and water temperatures differ in those three places. Yet all the while, the water remains wet and salty and supportive of life. So it is, too, with the catholicity of the church. In no place on this earth is the church Christ gathers a carbon copy of His work in another place. In the one, catholic church of the Lord many different historical, ethnic, cultural and linguistic contexts abound. Yet all the while, the same Word of redemption is proclaimed and embraced, and people dead in sin are raised to new life. Unity does not mean uniformity, and catholicity does not mean sameness.

MANDATE: The catholic character of the church implies the mandate to be involved in mission work. If it is a gift of Christ that He has died for people of any tribe, religion, language or place, then the Gospel of Christ must also go out to every tribe, religion, language or place. Jesus emphatically linked His sovereignty over the whole world with the command to do mission work: “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*”

Go *therefore* and make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:18,19).

Similarly, in a local community no church may be content to remain an ethnically homogenous group, comfortable in one’s ethnically determined religious culture. Since the church is catholic, God’s people in any age or community must be open to the elect of God of any race or language in that community, and draw them in. So, too, on a personal level I need to live my life in such a way that all around me whom God has chosen to life may be attracted to the church of the Lord. Abraham was called out to be a blessing for *all* nations.

4. The Church is apostolic

GIFT: In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote, “*Now therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone*” (Ephesians 2:19,20). Likewise, concerning the New Jerusalem, we read in Revelation 21:14, “*Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve **apostles** of the Lamb.*” The twelve disciples had seen and heard what Jesus had done and said during His ministry on earth (Acts 1:22; 2:32), and were equipped by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word of God (John 16:13). They were inspired to do so, while others were not. That is why the Church is built on the foundation of these apostles. That is: it is characteristic of the Church to embrace whatever the apostles taught, and so to receive the teaching that God has given. (See also Article 29: the Church “*governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it.*”)

MANDATE: If the Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles, the Church must also believe what the apostles said, and not teach anything at variance with their teachings. Because embracing the doctrine of the apostles is characteristic of the Church, Paul tells Timothy to “*hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me*” (II Timothy 1:13). Timothy must “*commit*” this truth “*to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*” (II Timothy 2:2). Jude tells his readers to “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (vs 3). Were the Church to add to or to subtract from the Gospel as preached by the apostles, it would no longer be the Church. The gift of apostolicity implies the mandate to remain apostolic, fully faithful to God’s whole revelation. So the Church must be ever busy with Scripture, always ensuring that she is faithful, reforming.

CONCLUSION

The ecclesiastical scene of today can discourage the child of God greatly – as it also did in the days of DeBrès. We see so much disunity, unholiness, parochialism, and even heresy in those who call themselves Christians and claim they are a ‘church’. But the child of God walks not by sight but by faith. Despite what the eye sees, we *believe* that the Son of God is busy in today’s world, gathering together those whom the Father has given to Him. He is busy sanctifying God’s chosen ones for the Day of His return. In the midst of the brokenness we see today, we’re encouraged by the promise that when Jesus returns the brokenness that mars the church of God so terribly today will be no more. The gates of hell cannot prevail!

In that confidence the people of God strive to *be* the church God wishes us to be: one, holy, catholic, apostolic – to the greater glory of the God of all.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why may I not describe the church in terms of what I can see around me today?
2. What is the connection between the doctrine of election and the doctrine of the church? Is the church all the elect?
3. How could the mailman in Thessalonica know where to deliver Paul's letter to the church of the Thessalonians?
4. Are there persons outside the church who will go to heaven? Support your answer with proof from the Bible.
5. When will the church be complete? How is the Builder currently bringing the church closer to completion?
6. What gift is implied in the confession that the church is *one*? What mandate?
7. What gift is implied in the confession that the church is *holy*? What mandate?
8. What gift is implied in the confession that the church is *catholic*? What mandate?
9. What gift is implied in the confession that the church is *apostolic*? What mandate?
10. Will the church necessarily always remain in your town? Will the church of Jesus Christ necessarily always remain the (federation of) church(es) of which you are currently a member?
11. Is it necessary to belong to a specific federation of churches in order to go to heaven?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 21.54, 55, 56
Canons of Dort, II.1-9; V.9

ARTICLE 28: EVERYONE'S DUTY TO JOIN THE CHURCH

ARTICLE 28

We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.

To observe this more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.

All therefore who draw away from the church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

CONTINUITY

In Article 27 we repeated after God what He taught us in Scripture about the Church and her characteristics. The Church, we confessed, is not the sum total of God's elect, but rather the *gathering* of the people of God, the *assembly* of all those saved through Jesus Christ. The gathering of all the elect in one place will occur on the Last Day, when the church will be complete. We also confessed four attributes of the church: her unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity.

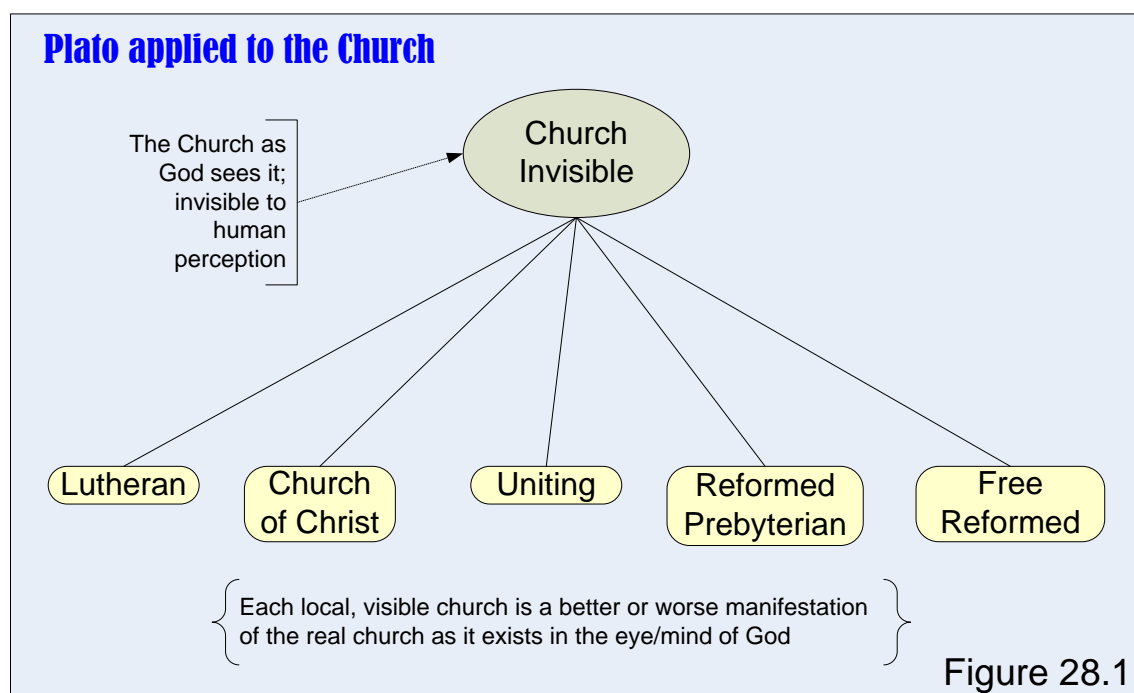
Article 28 continues with the confession begun in Article 27: "*We believe, since **this** holy assembly and congregation ...*" Which holy assembly and congregation does DeBrès refer to here? Could DeBrès possibly be referring to a Church different from that confessed in Article 27? Is it possible that the church spoken of in Article 27 is a reference to the Church as God sees it, a church invisible to man, and that Article 28 is a reference to the Church as man sees it, a visible church? This distinction between a visible and an invisible church has become widely accepted in our day (see below). However, DeBrès did not intend such a contrast, as is clear from his use of the pronoun '*this*' in his opening sentence. "***This** holy assembly and congregation*" spoken of in Article 28 is not a new or different Church, but the very *same* assembly spoken of in Article 27, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church the Lord gathers locally throughout history.

VISIBLE VERSUS INVISIBLE

The popular notion of a visible church versus an invisible church comes not from Scripture but from the teaching of the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato (he lived some four centuries before Christ) tried to come to grips with the concept of what is real. He reasoned that a real, true impression of things exists only in the mind of God, and that on earth God has placed many representations of the real thing in His mind. For example, God alone has in mind an accurate impression of the horse, but on earth there exist many different representations of the real horse, such as the Shetland pony, the Clydesdale, the Arabian race horse, the Quarter horse, the Palomino, etc. Each variety of horse, Plato taught, shows to greater or lesser degree something of the real horse-as-God-alone-knows-it. Hence, the real horse is not the same as the horse one sees in the field. The real horse only exists in God's mind and is

invisible to man. Each different kind of horse is merely a better or worse representation of what is in God's mind. We might, for example, judge the sleek Arabian racehorse to be a more pure horse than the stout, heavy Clydesdale.

Theologians have adopted Plato's distinction between the visible and the invisible in their efforts to understand what the Church was (see Figure 28.1). The real Church, it was said, was something God alone saw. To man the real Church was and remains invisible; man can only see manifestations of the Church on earth. These manifestations include for example the Lutheran Church, the Church of Christ, the Anglican Church, the Baptist Church, the Presbyterian Church, etc. Each church is a better or worse representation of the real Church as God alone knows it. Each church is a *true* church (as each horse is true), but the one church is a closer or more pure representation of the real-church-as-God-sees-it than the other.



This perception of the church goes today by the name of 'pluriformity'. Abraham Kuyper was a proponent of this view, going so far as to extol the great variety among the churches as manifold expression of God's wisdom. As the more varieties of horses show up something of the wisdom of God (in making the same thing in so many different ways), so the sheer multitude of churches give reason to praise God the more.

DENOMINATIONALISM

Today each of these different visible manifestations of the Church-as-God-knows-it are called "denominations". The term 'denominations' does not come from God's revelation in holy Scripture, but comes from the world of banking. Before coins replaced dollar notes, one could find a \$1 note, \$2 note, \$5 note, \$10 note, \$20 note, etc – all denominations of one set. Each banknote is legal tender, all are valid denominations – though the higher currency notes may be more valuable and desirable than the lower currency notes.

When the term 'denomination' is now applied to the church, the thought is that every church is equally real and equally valid – be it that one church is more desirable than the other. The

one church may be more pure (in one's opinion) than the next church, or more attractive and desirable to personal taste. But all are equally valid churches, as different notes are equally valid money. Denominationalism is the modern child of Plato's philosophy applied to the doctrine of the church. The theory fits hand-in-glove in the Postmodern philosophy of our times, for no church is right or wrong – as no horse, or no denomination of money, is 'right' or 'wrong'; the one is just more pure or more desirable, depending on personal taste.

Obviously, consequences follow. If all the churches of town are equally valid churches (be it with different degrees of purity according to personal taste or cultural influences), it does not principally matter which church one joins – as long as you join a church. You can no longer speak of true churches verses false churches, no more than you can speak of true horses verses false horses – for all horses are by definition true horses. This leads to church shopping, and settling in the church where you feel comfortable. Again, since all churches are true (though the one more pure than the other), you cannot ultimately condemn interdenominational services or communion. Admission to the pulpit or to the Lord's table is no longer regulated by *which* church one belongs to, but instead by *whether* one belongs to a church (and is, of course, a believer).

NOT CONFESSIONAL

This distinction between the church-as-God-sees-it and the church-as-man-sees-it (with the numerous visible churches of town being better or lesser manifestations of the church-as-God-sees-it) is simply not found in DeBrès' writing. I drew attention earlier to the force of the pronoun '*this*' in the opening line of Article 28; the church one must join on earth is the same church confessed in Article 27. On top of that, the very term 'church' itself describes an assembly, by definition something local and tangible. It is true that the church is not over-see-able (like the ocean), but that doesn't make it invisible or something nebulous and hard-to-define. The Platonic distinction between church as visible and invisible is a philosophical import made popular in the last two centuries, and then read into the *Belgic Confession*. It is not a Scriptural distinction, and should –together with its consequences– be rejected.

If we can agree, then, to reject this error, we can read DeBrès' words for what they say, and join him in repeating after God what the Lord has revealed in Scripture about the duty to join the church.

THE OBLIGATION TO JOIN

To emphasize the obligation of one and all to join the church, DeBrès uses powerful logic.

Since: 1. the Church "*is the assembly of the redeemed,*" and
 2. "*there is no salvation outside of it,*"

Therefore: 1. "*no one ought to withdraw from it,*" and
 2. "*all and everyone are obliged to join it.*"

We note: DeBrès lists two realities, and on the basis of these two realities comes to two conclusions – or, rather, one conclusion which, like all coins, has two sides. DeBrès repeats the conclusion in the closing sentence of this article: "*All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.*" That's strong language. On what Scriptural grounds was DeBrès able to make such a statement in his day? Was he actually 'repeating after God' here, or was he recording nothing more than a personal conviction? The question is important: are we able to defend such a perspective and such

strong language in our confession today?

A. THE TWO REALITIES

1) THE CHURCH IS THE ASSEMBLY OF THE REDEEMED

The following Scriptural arguments may be mentioned in support of the Confession's claim that the Church is the assembly of the redeemed.

(I). The Church Belongs to God

Article 28 had begun with describing the Church as "*this holy assembly*". This description of the Church is an echo of passages of Scripture as Exodus 19:6 ("*a holy nation*") and 1 Peter 2:9 (again "*a holy nation*"). Notice how the apostle applies to the Church of the New Testament the identical title Israel received from God in the Old Testament. This holy nation, washed by the blood of Christ, belongs to God; these are the people whom God in Christ has delivered from the power of the devil. That is why the apostle Paul regularly speaks of the congregation as "the church of God." Paul's letters to the Corinthians are addressed to "*the church of God which is at Corinth*" (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1). This is the normal congregation, with many weaknesses and sins, strongly admonished by the apostle to repent. Yet, because of Christ's work for them, she is addressed as "*church of God*".

Paul writes to Timothy about how things ought to be done in Church (regarding, for example, the offices in the Church). Timothy is a minister of the Church at Ephesus, minister of a real, local Church, God's house. Writes Paul, "*These things I write to you ... so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth*" (1 Timothy 3:14,15). This Church in Ephesus, with all its sins and weaknesses, is God's house, God's dwelling place, God's Church. To belong to God means then, too, that one ought to belong to God's church. The church's identity as church of God requires that all the redeemed join her.

In fact, since the church belongs to God, God Himself made a point of joining new believers to His church. Peter's preaching after Pentecost was blessed with many converts. The Lord, however, did not let these converts float wherever they would. Scripture tells us rather that "*the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved*" (Acts 2:47). The church to which God joined these new believers was not an invisible Church, but a real, visible entity where the believers "*continued ... in the breaking of bread*" (vs 42). To belong to God, to be one of the redeemed, implies that one also must be joined to His Church.

(II) The Brethren desire Togetherness

Psalms 1:5 makes mention of "... *the congregation of the righteous*." The righteous persons of the Psalm are not portrayed as so many scattered individuals. They are a body, a group together, 'the congregation of the righteous'. They are together because they take seriously the command of a passage as Leviticus 23:3. God decreed that "*the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation*." The term 'convocation' translates the notion of being called together in one place. Yet Israel was not to congregate at the soccer oval, but it was to be a "*holy*" convocation, and that's to say that the people were to gather together at the tabernacle – where the gospel of redemption in Jesus' blood was proclaimed through the sacrifices. At that tabernacle was "*the congregation of the righteous*," and this is where the redeemed longed to be. The sons of Korah think back with nostalgia for the time when "*I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and*

praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast” (Psalm 42:4). David was “*glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD’*” (Psalm 122:1). The godly have no desire to be alone, but wish instead to be together in the presence of the Lord.

(III) In the Assembly of the Redeemed God meets His people

Ruth the Moabitess came to faith, and as a result insisted on accompanying Naomi to the land of Israel. She did so because, she said, “*your people shall be my people, and your God, my God*” (Ruth 1:16). She understood: you cannot separate God from His people. More, she would not meet God in the land of Moab, but had to go to the place where God was pleased to meet with His people.

Zechariah 8:23 tells us of the eagerness of the Gentiles to join the Jew. “*Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying “Let us go **with you**, for we have heard that **God is with you**.”*” These Gentiles do not simply embrace the faith of Israel and then stay in their heathen land; rather, they realize that those who treasure salvation shall also seek to join the assembly of the redeemed, for that is where God is.

Here is again the message of the passage quoted earlier from Leviticus 23:3: “*the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation.*” The gathering was to be at the tabernacle because the Lord God dwelt with Israel in the Holy of Holies in the back of the tabernacle. The people had to assemble at the tabernacle because that is where God would meet with them, to set before them the gospel of redemption through the blood of Another and to lay upon them His divine blessing.

Why, then, must I join the Church? To put the question differently: why must I join the assembly of the redeemed? Why is any alternative improper? If God is my God, then I want to be with the others God has redeemed – and that’s the Church of God. In the unforgettable words of John Calvin: “to those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother” (*Institutes*, IV, I, I).

2. OUTSIDE THE CHURCH THERE IS NO SALVATION

The second reason mentioned in Article 28 for the prohibition against withdrawal from the Church and the demand to join the Church is the phrase “*there is no salvation outside of it.*” This phrase has been variously interpreted over the years. There have been those who understood the pronoun ‘it’ in this phrase to refer to the invisible church, the church as God sees it, all the elect. Then the point of the phrase is that there is no salvation outside the body of the elect; that is: outside the body of the elect none will be saved. So the punch of the phrase becomes that one must make sure that he is elect, is a believer, must come to faith. Yet, since the Confession does not speak of some invisible church (= all the elect), this cannot be the meaning of the phrase.

There have also been those who have understood the phrase to mean that no one will be saved outside the Church (= the gathering of the people of God), for believers are only to be found inside the Church. This understanding assumes that all the elect are in the local, visible church, and so this local church equals all the elect of a given community. However, with Article 27 we have confessed Scripture to teach that the Church is not all the elect but is rather the *assembly* of the elect. With our discussion of Article 27 we also learned that, according to Scripture, there can be, and indeed are, believers, elect persons, outside the church. One cannot maintain that only the members of a particular federation of churches

will enter heaven.

The point of the phrase *‘there is no salvation outside of it’* is that salvation is not available outside the church. God has ordained that salvation is made available for mankind not in the bush or on the beach, nor in the flock of a hireling (John 10:12); salvation is available there where Christ is, where His voice is heard. That is so because one needs faith to be saved (cf John 3:16), and *“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”* (Romans 10:17; see also Lord’s Day 25). The Word one hears in the preaching is the Word of Christ, is the Voice of the Good Shepherd. *“My sheep **hear My voice**, and I know them, and **they follow Me**,”* Jesus said (John 10:27). So the church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit; through the preaching in the assembly of the redeemed the Spirit of Jesus Christ works faith in the hearts of those whom the Father has given to the Son.

To clarify: if one wished to buy a bike, the place to go is the local bike shop. Certainly you do not go to the local bakery to buy a bike. So too: if one wants salvation, there is a place where one is guaranteed to find it, namely, the Church. One can find salvation here because this is where Christ labors. In His Church His voice is heard (in the preaching), and so in His Church the Holy Spirit works faith. If one wants faith, there is a place to go to obtain it.

Again, this is not to say that outside the Church no one will ever be saved. It is quite possible that one will one day find a bike for sale in a bakery. Yet that possibility does not mean that you shop at all the bakeries to find a bike. As almighty God, the Holy Spirit is able to work faith wherever and however He pleases. He has, though, been pleased to bind Himself to a particular means to work the faith needed for salvation, and that is through the preaching of the Word. It is for us to abide by the means the Lord has revealed to us. If we wish to be saved, we need to adhere to the *norms* of Scripture. That means: we join the Church of Jesus Christ, every Sunday anew. We do so because we believe that this is where the Holy Spirit works the faith needed to be saved. So it will not do for me to stay away from Church, or to go to the church of the hireling (much as the hireling may sound like Christ, see John 10:12); rather, I am to respect the means God Himself is pleased to use to bring His chosen children to faith.

These two realities lead to two conclusions. Since:

1. the church is *“the assembly of the redeemed”*, and
2. *“there is no salvation outside of it”*,

two conclusions follow:

1. *“no one ought to withdraw from it”*, and
2. *“all and everyone are obliged to join it”*.

B. THE TWO CONCLUSIONS

1. WITHDRAWAL IS ALWAYS ILLEGITIMATE

Article 28 concludes as follows, *“All therefore who draw away from the Church or fail to join it **act contrary to the ordinance of God.**”* It does not say here that a person who withdraws himself from the Church will be lost and go to hell. DeBrès expresses himself in modest terms concerning the eternal destiny of those who withdraw from the Church. This is in keeping with the apostle’s command in 1 Corinthians 5:12,13: *“For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges.”* Even so, the act of withdrawing from the church is contrary to God’s ordinance, is sin. And sin invariably has consequences. To explain how withdrawing is always sin, and what consequences follow, we need to consider God’s second

commandment.

The second commandment reads as follows: “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image – any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them*” (Exodus 20:4,5). One can make a molten image of God to set up in one’s house as an aid to worship Him; one can also develop a mental image of God in one’s mind – and one will then worship God in accordance with the mental image of God one has developed in one’s mind. That’s why the church summarizes God’s instruction in the second commandment like this: “*We are not to make an image of God in any way, **nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word***” (Lord’s Day 35, Q & A 96).

Why would one withdraw from the church? One leaves the assembly of the redeemed only because one is convinced that the Lord permits it. The thought goes like this: though the church belongs to God, He will not mind my staying away from the church of God – as if God will overlook my transgression. Or: though He says the church is one, He will not mind if I go elsewhere where my own back is stroked. Or: though He says He works faith through the preaching, He’ll make an exception for me. Withdrawing from the church of God is the product of having in one’s mind a perception about God that differs from His revelation about Himself in His holy Word!

We need to know that the Lord does not tolerate that one worship Him in a self-chosen manner. The second commandment continues: “*For I, the LORD your God, am a **jealous** God, visiting **the iniquity** of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me...*” (Deuteronomy 5:9). Who hate the Lord? The reference here is not to the heathen or the harlots, but to those who decline to embrace the Lord as He actually is, who replace His revelation about Himself with a modified mental image of God – and so serve ‘God’ in a manner or in a place different from what God has commanded. Such action provokes God’s jealousy, so that the Lord pours out His judgment on the coming generations.

No, withdrawing from the Church does not automatically make one an unbeliever or earn one a place in hell. Yet it remains true that the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching. To absent oneself from the preaching means one’s faith is no longer fed, and so it will eventually suffer from malnutrition. More, my actions today not only affect me, but have implications for my children also. If I no longer go to church to hear God’s Word and be instructed in His way, I invariably set a bad example for my children and grandchildren; their perception of Who God is will be more relaxed still, and it will come out in their behavior – also in relation to the church. More still, since I close myself off from being fed through God’s Word, I shall not be able to teach the coming generations the way of the Lord to the degree I should. One must bear in mind, then, that withdrawing from the Church is not a decision for the self only, but has obvious implications for future generations. One need but look around to see what has become of the descendants into the third and fourth generation of those who have withdrawn years ago from the church. On the other hand, God blesses obedience; He shows “*mercy to thousands of those who love Me and **keep My commandments***” (Deuteronomy 5:10) – including His command to be faithful in joining the church Sunday after Sunday.

DeBrès lived in a time when it was exceedingly dangerous to join the church of Jesus Christ, due to intense persecution. Yet DeBrès was categorical as he sought to echo in his confession what the Lord had revealed in His Word. “*It is the duty of all believers,*” DeBrès confessed, “*to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly*

wherever God has established it. They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow." He rules out, then, all exceptions. Neither hard feelings nor strained relationships, neither death threats nor opportunities to make an extra dollar, neither enjoying activities nor another preacher justify leaving the church of Jesus Christ. Sunday by Sunday, as often as the Lord gives health and opportunity, I am to be present with the saints in the workshop of the Holy Spirit.

Why is joining the Church even worth the cost of one's life or physical punishment? It is because, ultimately, one's own (and one's children's) eternal salvation is at stake. The price of withdrawing from the Church is always too high to pay. *"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?"* (Mark 8:36).

2. THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The consequence flowing from the double reality of 1) the church being *"the assembly of the redeemed,"* and 2) *"there is no salvation outside of it,"* includes more than that *"no one ought to withdraw from it"*. There is also the obligation that *"all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it."*

Joining the Church involves more than getting your name on a membership list and so placing oneself under the oversight of the office bearers. That's only a small part of it. Joining oneself to the Church is something one does Sunday by Sunday, by being in Church when the Word is preached. This was the command of God to Old Testament Israel: *"the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation"* (Leviticus 23:3). The need to be gathered together is repeated in the New Testament, for the apostle exhorts the Hebrews not to forsake *"the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching"* (Hebrews 10:25). Soon Christ shall return, time is running out, and it is for me to be there where salvation through Him alone is preached. It's all part of Jesus' command to *"watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming"* (Matthew 24:42).

Again, there is more to Church membership than filling my spot in the pew each Sunday. Church membership also implies an active involvement on the part of each member of the body. Says DeBrès: The members *"must submit themselves to (the Church's) instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body."* Scripture compares the Church, the body of believers, to a physical body where all members of the body are dependent upon each other. One reads of this in 1 Corinthians 12:12, *"For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many are one body, so also is Christ."* Each member needs the other, and the other members all need him.

The communion of saints is part and parcel of being Church. Said Paul to the Corinthians, *"Now you (the saints of Corinth, the Corinthian Church), are a body of Christ, and members individually"* (1 Corinthians 12:27. (Note: the Greek text does not have the definite article 'the' here). That is: the church of Corinth is a complete body, with each member needing every other member. So each believer in Corinth was to make a point of being actively involved in the body, for mutual benefit and personal advantage. Likewise, the Church of Kelmscott today is a complete body of Christ, and so is the church in Yarrow. That is why the church in Kelmscott, as well as the church in Yarrow, is also to be a body, to be a communion of saints together, where each member is there for the other and where each member is dependent upon the other. It will not do for me therefore to distance myself from

the congregation. After all, is David's delight in the communion of saints, his delight in the togetherness of the saints, not also my delight? (Psalm 16, Psalm 122). Hence I delight in congregating with the saints Sunday by Sunday, and I give myself in service to the saints all the time.

Much confusion prevails concerning the doctrine of the Church. God's revelation on this point of doctrine, though, is not so confusing. Instead, His revelation is clear – and has consequences for us that run counter to our fallen desires. May the Lord give grace that we humbly repeat after God, in word and in deed, what He teaches us about His Church.

Points for Discussion:

1. Article 28 underlines the need to join the church. According to this article, which church must one join?
2. Explain what, in popular, philosophical terms, the invisible church is.
3. What is the theory of denominationalism? Evaluate it in light of God's revelation.
4. If one belongs to God, ought one also to belong to God's church? Why or why not?
5. The confession says that "*outside of it there is no salvation.*" What does this expression mean? Explain its comfort and its obligation.
6. What is wrong with withdrawing from the church? What consequences follow? Do those who withdraw from the church invariably go to hell? Why or why not?
7. Why is the communion of saints an essential element of the church? Is there true communion of saints across church borders?
8. Should shouldering the cost of reformed education be primarily the responsibility of the parents of school age children or should the communion of saints as a whole bear the weight of the cost together? Why?
9. Should shouldering the cost of caring for the aged of the congregation be primarily the responsibility of the family or should the communion of saints as a whole bear the weight of the cost together? Why?
10. Discuss the same question in relation to the care of the handicapped in the congregation.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 21.55
Form for Ordination of Deacons, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 29: HE MARKS OF THE TRUE AND THE FALSE CHURCH

ARTICLE 29

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church. We are not speaking here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it. We are speaking of the body and the communion of the true church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church.

The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practises the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.

Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.

The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.

These two churches are easily recognized and distinguished from each other.

THE NEED FOR DISCERNING WHAT THE TRUE CHURCH IS

As with so many other articles of the *Belgic Confession*, Article 29 begins with the words “we believe.” With these two words DeBrès acknowledges that the material confessed in Article 29 reflects not what the eye sees in this broken world, but echoes instead what the Lord has revealed in Holy Scripture. The article is a statement of faith.

The church in faith echoes God’s revelation that “*we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true Church.*” Back in Article 28 DeBrès (and we with him) had confessed that “*all and everyone are obliged to join [the church] and unite with it.*” We supported that obligation with two reasons drawn from the Scripture:

- “*this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed,*” and
- “*there is no salvation outside of it.*”

In the brokenness of this sinful life, however, there are many people who do not join the church. In fact, in this world there are numerous gatherings that call themselves churches while in fact they have no right to the term – and they call Christians to join *them*. We see it in our local community. One finds, for example, the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican

Church, The Church of Christ, the Free Reformed Church, the Baptist Church, the Lutheran Church, and more. Which of these churches am I to join? Will any church of town do? If not, why not? If the Lord God determines which church I'm to join, has He given me criteria to follow? The point of Article 29 is that Yes, God Himself specifies what criteria must be satisfied before I may join a given church.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

We could, of course, say that we are members of a church already. So many of us were born into the churches of which we are currently members, were baptized in this church as infants, received our Christian education in the circle of the Church, and so eventually made profession of faith in this church. We've become very comfortable with this church; it's 'our' church.

Yet Article 29 obviously does not think that such a reason for church membership is valid. According to this article, Scripture insists that "*we ought to discern **very diligently and very carefully from the Word of God** what is the true Church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church*" – and 'my' church could be among those who hold that claim! So I have homework to do; I must be convinced that the marks God says identify His church are present in the church to which I belong.

Another concern arises. May I not claim that God Himself has joined me, through circumstance of birth, baptism and upbringing, to 'my' church? If God has done so, must I not for that reason alone remain a member? In answer to this question, we need to acknowledge that indeed the Lord God Himself placed me in 'my' church – for nothing happens by chance (Lord's Day 10). But the same point needs to be said, then, of the neighbor born and raised in the local Baptist Church or Roman Catholic Church; God's providence is true for his life too. Yet God's hand in the neighbor's life does not relieve him of responsibility and justify his membership in 'his' church. As we confessed in Article 28, "*it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it.*" Inasmuch as this point is true for the neighbor is it also true for me: I have a responsibility before God to see to it that I, in the circumstance God in wisdom has led my life, make a point of obeying His command – also on the point of joining His church in my town.

So we are driven back to our original question. In the face of a smorgasbord of churches in town, each of which claims for itself the name 'church, every Christian believer has the responsibility before God to "*discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God*" which church God wants him to join. What does His Word say? What criteria does He give for deciding which church He wishes His people to join?

'TRUE' AND 'FALSE'

The church of town we are to join is, in the words of Article 29, the "*true church*". In seeking to understand that phrase, it is helpful to observe that when DeBrès originally wrote his confession he used two adjectives to describe the church. He spoke of "*the right and true church*". The word 'right' carried in it the concept of *genuine*. Though the term 'right' was dropped in later editions of the *Belgic Confession*, it does provide us with the flavor DeBrès intended with the word 'true' and the word 'false'. We need to think in terms of *genuine* versus *counterfeit*, and *legal* versus *illegal*. The one is the real thing, while the other is Satan's imitation effort (see 2 Corinthians 11:14,15). Like counterfeit, illegal money, the imitation church may look much like the real thing, but it is and remains fake, illegal-before-

God, counterfeit; it does not have the right of existence.

In normal conversation, we do not commonly talk about ‘real’ money as opposed to ‘counterfeit money’, or ‘true’ money versus ‘false’. Instead, we simply talk about ‘money’, and take the genuineness of the money in our wallets for granted. We all understand that the word ‘real’ does not add anything to the word ‘money’ – unless we’re confronted with counterfeit money. Only then, in distinction from the counterfeit money circulating in our community, will we speak of our money as ‘real money’, ‘true money’.

The same is true in relation to the church. Setting the word ‘true’ beside the word ‘church’ does not add anything to the word ‘church’. Instead, the word ‘true’ has a place only when there’s a counterfeit church around, and we want to distinguish the real thing from the fake. That observation helps us to understand that the true church spoken of in Article 29 is not a different church from the one confessed in Articles 27 and 28. It is the same church, be it that it is now contrasted with an imitation church. The (true) church of Article 29, then, is the *“one catholic or universal Church”* of Article 27, *“which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.”* This is the church from which no one may withdraw, *“but all and everyone are obliged to join it,”* as Article 28 puts it.

EXAMPLES IN SCRIPTURE

Are there examples in Scripture of a counterfeit church, a false church that had no right of existence? A couple of examples spring to mind.

Israel in the desert was the people of God, which assembled around the tabernacle under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Numbers 16, however, tells us of a second assembly, under the self-appointed leadership of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. *“And Korah gathered all the congregation against [Moses and Aaron] at the door of the tabernacle of meeting”* (vs 19). This second assembly stood over against the first; it was a second *qahal* (as the Hebrew has it; see Article 27), a second gathering, a second ‘church’. That this second gathering of (some of) the people of God was illegitimate in God’s eyes became so very evident from the words the Lord told Moses to say to Israel, *“Get away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram”* (vs 23). The extent of God’s displeasure with this counter assembly is evident from God’s punishment; the ground opened to swallow them up (16:31f).

A second passage to consider is 1 Kings 12:25-33. After the death of Solomon and the unwise words of his son Rehoboam, the ten northern tribes anointed Jeroboam as their king. God’s instruction to all Israel –all twelve tribes– was that they were to worship Him in the place where God had chosen *“to put His name for His dwelling place”* (Deuteronomy 12:3), and in the days of 1 Kings 12 that was Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 6:6). There stood His ark of the covenant, in the Holy of Holies in the back of the temple (1 Kings 8:6). Jeroboam, however, considered it political suicide to permit his subjects to cross the border into Judah to serve the Lord, and so established sanctuaries of worship in Dan and Bethel. He made two golden calves and said to the people, *“It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt”* (1 Kings 12:28). Or, as can equally be translated (for the word ‘god’ is always in plural form in the Hebrew language): *“Here is your God, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt.”* In fact, the reference to being brought up from the land of Egypt indicates that Jeroboam was very much thinking of the LORD God of Israel. Jeroboam did not want to serve other gods

(which would be sin against the first commandment), but encouraged Israel to continue to serve the LORD – be it through the use of idols (which is sin against the second commandment).

The result of Jeroboam's action was that the people of Israel assembled in more places than one; there was an assembly in Jerusalem, another in Bethel, and a third in Dan. All three assemblies were gatherings of the people of God, persons God claimed for Himself in the blood of the coming Christ. But only the assembly of God's people in Jerusalem was legitimate in God's eyes; the assemblies of Dan and Bethel were counterfeit assemblies, illegitimate before God, false. God Himself pointed up the illegitimacy of the Bethel sanctuary and hence the illegitimacy of His people congregating there, for He sent a prophet from Judah to Bethel to admonish the king and destroy Bethel's altar (1 Kings 13:1-5).

EXAMPLES IN HISTORY

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, those who believed in Jesus Christ assembled together; there was no division (Acts 2:40-47; 4:32-35). But in the course of years savage wolves entered the sheepfold of Jesus Christ, and did not spare the flock (to use Paul's words in Acts 20:29). These savage wolves "*drew away the disciples after themselves*" (Acts 20:30). We find partial fulfillment of this word in John's first letter, when he writes about those who "*went out from us*" (1 John 2:19). Here were people who used to gather with the people of God, who used to belong to the church of Jesus Christ, but they departed. Did they throw away every vestige of the Christian faith, and return to their heathendom? From the rest of what John writes it appears that they forcefully continued to embrace and to preach Jesus Christ, but it was a mutated 'gospel' that was gospel no longer, insisting that Jesus was not the Messiah sent from God (1 John 2:22; 4:3). They surely considered themselves Christians still, but their meeting-together-away-from-the-Christians-they-deserted was illegitimate in the eyes of God, their church false.

In the course of centuries there have been so many who formed their own church. In DeBrès' day there were in his corner of Europe at least three churches, if not four. The Roman Catholics of Doornik (where DeBrès labored while he wrote the *Belgic Confession*) formed one assembly that met in the cathedral on Main Street (one may assume), while those who embraced the gospel of Scripture met in small groups in secret due to persecution. Given how DeBrès writes against the Anabaptists in his confession, we are safe to assume that Anabaptists existed in town as well. And Lutherans too were known to be about. Were all these churches legitimate in God's eyes? Were they all real, true and genuine? To DeBrès and the people of town this question was so very important because –as DeBrès had laid out in Article 28– the Lord obliges all and everyone in town to join the church of God for the sake of their very salvation. How, then, could the believer of DeBrès' day know which assembly to join? For that matter, how could the people of Israel in the days of Moses and Jeroboam know which assembly to join?

THE THREE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

From Holy Scripture DeBrès learned to examine three criteria in determining which assembly of Christians in town the people of God ought to join. In DeBrès' words: "*The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks:*

- *It practices the pure preaching of the gospel;*
- *It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them;*
- *It exercises Church discipline for correcting and punishing sins."*

1. The pure preaching of the gospel

The first mark characterizing a legitimate assembly of God's people is the preaching of the gospel. Given that the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching (Romans 10:17; see Article 28), it is self-evident that this mark receives priority of place in any list characterizing the Lord's church.

Strictly speaking, the adjective 'pure' ought not to be necessary with the word 'preaching'. But in this sin-filled world, so much of what passes as preaching of the gospel is in fact not preaching of the *gospel*. As preaching so obviously characterizes the church of God, Satan's imitation church will also, invariably, have preaching. But Satan will certainly not have the gospel of redemption purely proclaimed in a counterfeit church – for he hates God's gospel of grace with a hellish passion. So the preaching in an illegitimate assembly will be twisted and warped, and hence not 'pure'. Jeroboam built a sanctuary in Dan and in Bethel, including an altar where sacrifices for sin were made – and so the gospel of Jesus Christ portrayed. Yet the message was perverted, for the God Jeroboam's priests taught Israel about was not the God who had revealed Himself in Scripture – one too glorious and holy to be portrayed by calves. The Lord Jesus Christ too spoke about “*a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep*” (John 10:12). A hireling speaks, calls the sheep to follow him, but does not give the sheep the leadership and protection they require. The hireling “*sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them*” (John 10:12).

In the church of God, though, the preaching will be 'pure'. No, the term does not mean that the preaching will be perfect. As long as the Lord God is pleased to use sinful men to preach the gospel of redemption, there will be impurities in the preaching. Rather, with the term 'pure' DeBrès seeks to catch what the Good Shepherd calls “*My voice*” (John 10:27). Those who hear Biblically faithful preaching will recognize in the words of the preacher (sinful man though he is) the Voice of the Good Shepherd. Such preaching will not twist the Word of God, and will not take from or add to what is written in the Bible. If Christ speaks, one hears *what is found in the Bible*.

When, therefore, the people of DeBrès' town went to look for the church they were to join, they were to consider first the *preaching*. In the message I hear from the pulpit, do I recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd? This is the vital question that saints of every generation must ask anew. And, implied in recognizing the voice of the Shepherd is the need to *know* that voice. That's what makes Bible knowledge, and living close to the Lord, so imperative. Here is the responsibility of God's people: see to it that you are able to discern the Voice of the Shepherd (“*pure preaching*”) from the sounds a hireling makes! Your own growth in the Lord and the salvation of your family is at stake! Then make a point of joining that assembly of believers Sunday after Sunday where the Voice of the Shepherd is faithfully heard. For the Shepherd is where His voice is heard!

2. The pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them

The sacraments are the visible preaching of the Word of God. More will be said of the sacraments in Articles 33 to 35. For now it is sufficient to say that sacraments function to the preaching as illustrations in a book do to the written text. As the illustration in a good book will not contradict the message of the written text, so the administration of the sacraments cannot contradict the message of the preaching. The Voice of the Shepherd will always speak about “*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*” (1 Corinthians 2:2), and therefore the sacraments must always be about “*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*” (see also Lord's Day

25.66). Where the sacraments have a different message, something is amiss – and the child of God does not belong in that church.

3. Church discipline is exercised for correcting and punishing sins

The church is “*a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who ... are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit,*” Article 27 had said. That being so, it follows that no church can truly be ‘church’ if it welcomes or tolerates amongst its members those who live lives obviously not renewed by the Holy Spirit. Such persons must be disciplined (a point to which the confession returns in Article 32). As one considers which church to join, one must recall what the church is, and see evidence of its holy identity in the way the congregation deals with sin in her midst. This is the more necessary when we recall that each of us remains inclined to evil, and therefore we do well to surround ourselves with brothers and sisters who will actually dare to correct us and/or help us in the ongoing fight against our weaknesses.

IN SUM

Altogether, then, the three marks speak of Christ’s pastoral care for His people. Article 29 summarizes these three marks of the true Church as follows, “*In short, [the true Church] governs itself according to the Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head.*” Though the Lord God had stipulated Jerusalem as the place His people were to assemble, Jeroboam changed the place to Bethel – where God did not live. Though the Lord had stipulated that only descendents of Aaron could serve as priests (Exodus 29:9), Jeroboam “*made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi*” (1 Kings 12:31). Though the Lord had decreed that “*the fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the LORD*” (Leviticus 23:33), “*Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah*” (1 Kings 12:32). You see, the Word of God did not govern Jeroboam’s assembly, and Jesus Christ –though sacrifices were made in His name– was not acknowledged as the only Head. So Jeroboam’s assembly of God’s covenant people was not God’s assembly, was not Christ’s church. Conversely, the presence of these three marks in a church testifies to the fact that Christ is the acknowledged Head of that Church and so His whole Word is the final authority in every question.

This conclusion leaves no room for using *people* as the criterion for determining which church to join. Though it is tempting to join a church where one feels socially comfortable, people’s friendliness may never, in the final analysis, be the reason why one joins a church. In fact, the better one comes to know the members of a given church, the more sin and weaknesses one will find – and that can be distinctly off-putting.

There is no such thing as a perfect church on this earth. Churches are invariably made up of sinners – and that is why the gospel of redemption through Christ’s blood must continue to be preached also to church members. It is the presence of the gospel of redemption –the Voice of the Shepherd– that points up which church is legitimate in God’s eyes, and hence which church I must join.

THE CHRISTIAN

Back in Article 27 DeBrès had echoed what he heard the Lord say in Scripture about what the church is. The church, he’d confessed, “*is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.*” In Article 29 DeBrès returns to this

point. “*Those who are of the Church,*” he says, “*may be recognized by the marks of Christians.*” Persons “*washed by [Jesus’] blood and ...sanctified by the Holy Spirit*” display particular characteristics.

‘Of’ and ‘In’

DeBrès speaks about “*those who are of the Church*”. There is a difference between those who are ‘of’ and those who are ‘in’ the church. John writes about persons who “*went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us*” (1 John 2:19). John’s reference is to people who once were ‘in’ but they were not ‘of’ – and that’s why they left. One may think of a tumor in a body; it is ‘in’ the body but not ‘of’ the body, and in the long run may very well kill the body. In relation to the church, these are the hypocrites of whom DeBrès had already spoken in the first paragraph of Article 29: hypocrites “*are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it.*”

But the distinction between ‘in’ and ‘of’ cuts the other way too. Not only can people be ‘in’ the church who are not ‘of’ the church (hypocrites), there can also be persons ‘of’ the church who are not ‘in’. These are people who *belong* in the church, but who have not yet joined the church. These are the people DeBrès spoke of in Article 28, when he wrote, “*it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the Church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it.*” Believers outside the church belong to the church (they are ‘of’) and therefore must join.

Marks

What, now, do the people ‘of’ the church look like? Are they persons whom the community knows as thieves and adulterers, drunkards and liars? Or are they perhaps people who have put sin so far behind them that the community knows them as perfect?

According to Scripture, neither extreme is true. In his description of the Christian, DeBrès uses very categorical terminology. He says:

- “*They believe in Jesus Christ the only Savior.*” The point is first of all that every Christian admits, with Peter, that “*there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we may be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Yet this is not just verbiage, but a conviction of the heart that reaches into every facet of life. Persons who boast of Christ even while they insist that their own works or the works of another are necessary for salvation and well-being-before-God in this life and the next are actually not Christians (see Lord’s Day 11.30). To the Christian Jesus Christ is “*the only Savior*” for this life and the life to come.
- Christians “*flee from sin.*” The Christ in whom Christians believe has delivered His people from bondage to sin. In gratitude for this redemption, Christians do not dabble a little with sin, nor do they take a laidback approach to sin, but they flee from it. The Christian has come to see something of the holiness of God, of His radical hatred for sin, and is *taken* by how much God has done to deliver His people from sin; He even sent His only, well-beloved Son into the world to pay for my iniquity! So a Christian is not blasé about sin in his life or home, he does not consider a bit of sin acceptable, but strenuously and categorically *flees* from sin – as if there were a mad dog behind him.
- Christians “*pursue righteousness.*” The Christian does not reach for an upright lifestyle in a half-hearted fashion. Pursuit speaks of exertion. With strong and even forceful determination the Christian strives to reach the goal of righteousness, a manner of living that cannot be faulted in the community.

- Christians also “*love God and their neighbor without turning to the right or left.*” The formulation of this characteristic of a Christian comes from God’s instruction to Israel after He gave them His commandments, “*you shall be careful to do as the LORD your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left*” (Deuteronomy 5:32). Keeping God’s commandments, Jesus taught, was evidence that one actually loved Him (John 14:15; cf 15:10; 1 John 5:3). Love for the God who gave His most precious Son for our redemption cannot be sporadic or half-hearted. The Christian is particular in his service to God and neighbor, exerting himself to act just as his God and Savior has commanded. God’s holy identity leaves no place for mediocre Christianity.
- Christians “*crucify their flesh and its works.*” Crucifixion is not a small measure of self-denial. Whoever is hung on a cross suffers greatly and most certainly dies. Christians have been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20) and now need to make a point of *being* crucified – cutting off one’s hand and plucking out one’s eye if that is what it takes to cut sin out of one’s life (Matthew 5:29,30).
- Christians acknowledge that “*great weakness remains in them*”, as Paul wrote: “*what I will to do, that I do not practice*” and “*the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice*” (Romans 7:15,19). At the same time the Christian is deeply frustrated by his continuing weaknesses, and he cries out with Paul, “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” (Romans 7:24). His hatred of sin and his frustration with his evil inclinations makes the Christian “*fight against it by the Spirit all the days of [his] life.*” And ‘fight’, we understand, speaks again of determination and exertion.
- Yet Christians do not get despondent about the brokenness that continues to hound their best efforts. Paul in his brokenness delighted in the redemption there was in Jesus Christ (Romans 7:25), and every Christian does the same. “*They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of sins through faith in Him.*” The focus of the Christian is not on his failures and his sins; his focus in the midst of sin is on Christ and the redemption He accomplished.

Such persons show evidence that they “*are washed by [Jesus’] blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit*” (Article 27). These people are “*of the church*”. Those outside who demonstrate these marks of the Christian need to be encouraged to join “*the assembly of the redeemed*” (Article 28). Those inside who do not demonstrate these marks of the Christian need to be urged to repent, lest they lose the salvation they think is theirs.

Double Emphasis

It is not that hard to speak about the church. It happens repeatedly over a cup of coffee or in our Bible study societies, and so often with a sense of smugness: we are the true church. The flip side of the coin gets talked up and down as well; *they* are illegitimate, a false church.... There is certainly place to speak about the church and its marks, and to dare to acknowledge, too, which is the true church and which is not (but without smugness; see below) – for one needs to obey God’s command to join. But when one fails to display the marks of the Christian, one surely loses all moral right to speak with smugness of belonging to the true church and condemning those who belong elsewhere. Not for nothing did DeBrès list the marks of the Christian in the paragraph immediately following the one about the marks of the church. Let those who would speak about the church –and we must!– see to it that he first display the marks of the Christian. Nothing is as offensive to an outsider as the arrogance that’s displayed when one pontificates about church but fails to show the marks of the Christian. And that’s so understandable: if ‘my’ church is legitimate in God’s eyes, if the Voice of the Shepherd is indeed heard and honored in ‘my’ church, then the fruits of His

shepherding *must* be evident in the devout lifestyle and the Godly talk of the Lord's sheep. Jesus' flock is certainly not spiritually malnourished and lethargic but well fed, thriving and active in doing good works.

THE FALSE CHURCH

What, now, characterizes a church not legitimate in God's eyes? What does a counterfeit assembly of Christians look like? DeBrès puts it like this: "*The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them or subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.*" What, we wonder, is the Biblical evidence for this confession?

We paused earlier at Jeroboam's illegitimate assemblies in Dan and in Bethel, as we found it in 1 Kings 12:25-33. The next chapter tells us that the Lord God sent a prophet from Judah to reprimand Jeroboam's apostasy at his self-styled center of worship, and announce the destruction of Jeroboam's altar. The king's response was instant: "*Arrest him!*" (1 Kings 13:4). This leader of this counterfeit assembly did "*not want to submit [him]self to the yoke of Christ.*" Instead, he very blatantly persecuted those "*who rebuke[d] the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.*"

But it is not always so blatant. An old prophet living in Bethel heard about the words of the prophet from Judah. He knew also that this Judean prophet had declined the king's invitation to stay for dinner on grounds that God had commanded he return forthwith to his own country (1 Kings 13:7-10). Yet this old prophet pursued the man of God from Judah, and said to him, "*I too am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the LORD, saying, 'Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water'*" (vs 18). The Holy Spirit adds, "*He was lying to him*" – as the man of God from Judah should have perceived, for God cannot contradict Himself. The prophet from Judah fell for the deceit of the old prophet, and it cost him his life (vs 24). Here is an example where (leaders in) an illegitimate assembly refused to bow before the Word of God, and assigned more authority to itself than to the Word. By enticing the Judean prophet through false appeal to God's revelation, this old prophet of Bethel in fact persecuted the faithful – be it that he did so very subtly.

The book of Acts also lays out the characteristics of the false church. A great number of the people of God in Jerusalem continued to follow the chief priests who had earlier demanded Jesus' crucifixion. "*The priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon*" Peter and John as they proclaimed Christ crucified, and "*put them in custody*" (Acts 4:1-3). They laid a ban of silence upon Jesus' preachers (vs 18) before they let them go. Shortly thereafter the high priests and those with them arrested the apostles once more. This time they beat them with the traditional forty-stripes-minus-one before releasing them with the command no longer to speak in Jesus' name (Acts 5:40).

Scriptural testimony as this led DeBrès to summarize the teaching of the Lord on the characteristics of the false church in the manner he did. The dominant feature of the false church is the opening line of DeBrès' characterization: it does not want to listen but goes its own way.

In two of His seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, Jesus Christ makes mention of “*the synagogue of Satan*” (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The reference is to a gathering of persons in the name of God that is obviously so degenerate as to be unmistakably the work of Satan. Not every false church is equally corrupt (as also not every true church is equally ‘pure’). However, it is not the amount of perversion in a church that determines whether it is false. A church is false, illegitimate before God, when it does not want to bow before the Word of God. This refusal to bow may range anywhere from subtle to blatant, even becoming diabolic in its treatment of those who act in a godly fashion and admonish its evils. In its extreme form such a church may very unmistakably be a synagogue of Satan.

TRUE AND FALSE CHURCHES: EASILY DISTINGUISHABLE

The true church verses the false, the genuine verses the counterfeit, the legitimate versus the illegitimate are, concludes DeBrès, “*easily recognized and distinguished from each other.*” As with everything else DeBrès has written about the church, this conclusion is not the consequence of observation; it is instead a statement of *faith*. Was it clear to the people of Israel whether they should remain with the assembly of Moses and Aaron or join that of Korah, Dathan and Abiram? Was it clear in the days of Jeroboam that the assemblies to which he summoned the people in Dan and in Bethel were illegitimate in God’s eyes? Is it so clear to us whether we should join this church or the one up the road? Due to our depravity and its resulting near-sightedness, we –like Israel of old– may well have difficulty in seeing clearly which gathering of Christians God wants us to join. Personal histories, emotional longings, family ties and so many other factors cloud the issue for us, as it surely did for Israel of old. Yet from the vantage point of God’s Word and commands, *His* evaluation of Moses’ assembly verses Korah’s assembly was very evident, and so was *His* evaluation of the Jerusalem gathering verses the Bethel gathering. Looking at those respective gatherings without the fog of personal emotion or preference, and only through the glasses of God’s Word, makes it easy to recognize and distinguish which was true and which was false.

I refer here once more to Jesus’ word in John 10 about Himself being the Good Shepherd. Jesus mentions that the “*sheep hear [the shepherd’s] voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ...The sheep follow him, for they know his voice*” (vs 3 & 4). Surely the people of God today are able to recognize whether the sound they hear from their pulpit is the Voice of the Good Shepherd or the voice of a stranger.

THE CHALLENGE POSED BY ARTICLE 29

Article 29 challenges me to ask myself where I might find the true Church in my local community. In which of the several churches of town do I belong? That is: where does God want me to be? Am I convinced that in the Church where I am currently a member the Word of God is the final authority? If I am not convinced, I have a task ahead of myself. That is: I need to call the brethren to repentance. If they refuse to submit to the Word of God, it is for me to leave, to find and join myself to the true church.

However, if I am convinced that I am joined to the Church to which God calls me, if by the grace of God His Word is indeed the final authority in ‘my’ church (be it with so many imperfections remaining), then I must ensure that it remains that way. I cannot assume that what is a legitimate gathering of God’s people today will automatically be a legitimate assembly of God’s people tomorrow. There are dynamics in Christ’s church gathering work, and man’s responsibility to be faithful to Him is part of that dynamic. So I need to keep asking myself whether the sound I hear from ‘my’ pulpit is in fact the Voice of the Good Shepherd. I need to keep evaluating whether the church I’ve joined continues to “*govern*

itself according to the pure Word of God.” That takes Bible knowledge, study, and involvement. Of course, while I do so I need to ensure that I personally continue to display, unambiguously, the marks of the Christian.

ARROGANT?

If the church to which I belong is the true Church, then all other Christians of town are also to join themselves to this Church (see Article 28). Such a sentence has the ring of arrogance to it, and comes across to other people as judgmental.

What really is arrogance, haughtiness? Is arrogance not that one speaks against God, acts contrary to Scripture, fails to submit to it – is that not arrogance over against *God*? If the Lord in His wisdom and mercy gathers in town an assembly of those chosen to life, and if He in kindness sees to it that in this church His Voice is clearly heard, and if He in compassion joins me (of all people, O wonder of wonders!) to this congregation of believers – shall I then refuse to admit that I belong to the true church? Is refusing to recognize Christ’s work for what it is not arrogance, and an affront to God?? Should I not in profound thankfulness delight in what God is doing in my town and in my life, draw the attention of others to God’s wonderful work in our midst, and encourage them to see it, too, and accept the consequences?

To people it may sound arrogant to suggest that ‘my’ church is the true church, the legitimate assembly of God’s people in town. It sounds arrogant because we are used to thinking in human terms. As we speak of ‘church’, though, we are to think in terms of *the Lord’s* work. We need to dare to see His work as He does it in our midst, and challenge our neighbor to see it too. The focus must not be primarily on people’s activity, but on Christ’s activity amongst people. When the eye is on the Shepherd, one can only follow in thankfulness, and obey in humility.

Points for Discussion:

1. What significance is attached to the fact that Art 29 begins with the words “we believe”?
2. Why is it necessary to discern “diligently and very carefully” what the true Church is? Give two reasons.
3. Is the fact that you were born into the church of which you are a member sufficient reason to justify being a member of this church today? Why or why not?
4. Why is the pure preaching of the gospel a mark of the true church? Why is hearing the pure preaching so important?
5. Why is the pure administration of the sacraments a mark of the true church? Why is receiving the sacraments purely so important?
6. Why is the correct administration of church discipline a mark of the true church? Why is participating in and succumbing to pure administration of church discipline so important?
7. Why am one not to look at the *people* when one tries to find a church to join?
8. What are the five marks of the Christian? What characterizes these five marks?
9. Where are Christians found? Why?
10. What is meant by a ‘false’ church? Give another word that means the same as ‘false’.
11. Are there Christians in a false church? What obligation do they have? What consequence follows if they do not submit to the obligation?
12. Discuss in what way one is to speak of Christians in other churches. See *Canons of Dort* III/IV.15 for guidance.
13. Is a true church easily distinguished from a false church? Why or why not?

14. Is it arrogance to consider one's own church the true church in town? Why or why not?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 21.55

Form for Ordination of Deacons, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 30: THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH

ARTICLE 30

We believe that this true church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

FAITH

DeBrès has written three articles confessing what the church is. Three more articles now follow about how things are to be done in the church. In the three ‘practical’ articles DeBrès continues to listen to Scripture and repeat after God what the Lord has revealed. He knows: the practical side of church life is as much a matter of faith as the question of what the church is. “We *believe* that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word.”

THE CHURCH IS A CHRISTOCRACY

The ascended Christ from heaven on high is active in this world gathering, defending and preserving His church. The product of His work is the church of which confession is made in Articles 27 to 29, the assembly of the people of God to which all believers must join themselves, and in which all things must be done in submission to Jesus Christ the only Head. Though the church is made up of people, these people –irrespective of wealth or influence or birth– do not make up the rules for fitting conduct or leadership in the church. The Church belongs to Christ, and so Christ determines what ought to happen in church, and how.

Christ has revealed His will in His holy Word. Holy Scripture does not give any place for the power of the sword in the church of God, nor do you find any place for the influence of bullies. Christ governs His church through a “*spiritual order*”, a manner of government empowered by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ uses men of the Spirit to lead and govern His church. These men speak from God, and their authority lies only in their use of the Word of God. It is to that Word, therefore, that office bearers must constantly appeal when they seek to carry out their office in Christ’s church. They cannot ask the congregation to listen to *them*; they are instead repeatedly to set before the congregation the will of God found in Scripture as it pertains to their specific circumstances. They are to speak the Word of God in such a way that a rejection of their instruction or admonition is never a rejection of particular brothers (or their opinion), but a rejection of the Word of the Master (see 1 Samuel 8:7).

OFFICE BEARERS: CHRIST’S GIFTS TO THE CHURCH

On the cross Christ purchased the Church for Himself with His own blood. He thereafter ascended into Heaven to receive a throne at God’s right hand. His physical absence from earth, however, does not mean that Christ has deserted His Church. Rather, when Christ

“ascended on high, He ... gave gifts to men” (Ephesians 4:7,8). These gifts included *“some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers”* (4:11). Christ’s purpose in giving these particular gifts to His Church was *“for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”* (4:12). In His good pleasure the Lord is pleased to rule over and care for His bride by means of office bearers. These men, though sinful and needing forgiveness in the blood of Christ as much as any other, are *“God’s fellow workers”* (1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1).

Ephesians 4 mentions the following offices:

- **Apostles:** this was a temporary office in the New Testament Church, filled by Paul and the twelve disciples. Characteristic of the office of apostle was that these apostles were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ (cf Acts 1:22). Their function was to pass on to others what they had heard and learned from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. In the course of the years, these apostles did so, teaching others through word of mouth as well as through their writings. They were not replaced after they died.
- **Prophets:** this office both continued as well as lapsed. Shortly after the Lord God established His covenant of grace with Israel at Mt Sinai, Moses expressed the wish *“that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them”* (Numbers 11:29). In fulfillment of this wish, Joel foreshadowed that, *“And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”* (Joel 2:28). With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the entire congregation –irrespective of age, talent, gender or gifts– spoke *“the wonderful works of God”* (Acts 2:11; see 2:17). So, when persecution beset the church of Jerusalem, *“those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word”* (Acts 8:4; 11:19,20). This is the gift Paul exhorts the Corinthian saints to strive for; *“therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy”* (1 Corinthians 14:39). In the Heidelberg Catechism, the church confesses that a Christian shares in Christ’s anointing *“so that I may as prophet confess His Name...”* (Lord’s Day 12.32).

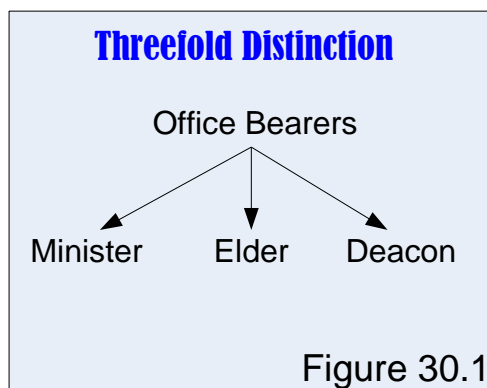
On the other hand, there appear to have been in the early church particular persons who, like the prophets of the Old Testament, *“spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit”* (2 Peter 1:21). So we read in Acts 21:10 of *“... a certain prophet named Agabus”* who indicated that Paul would be imprisoned in Jerusalem. Once God’s revelation had been completed in the Bible, the Lord no longer gave new revelation. So the office of prophet in the technical sense of the word disappeared.

- **Evangelists:** examples of evangelists in the New Testament are Philip (Acts 21:8) and Timothy (1 Timothy 4:5). The exact nature of this office is difficult to define, but it appears it should be understood in the context of the missionary expansion of the early church. The word ‘evangelist’ simply describes one who passes on the good news. Though Christians everywhere must and do pass on the gospel, we do not read anywhere about specific persons being appointed to the office of evangelist, and so we conclude that this office –as an official office– also expired.
- **Pastors and Teachers:** this is the only office that Scripture describes as continuing since its institution in Paul’s days. In Acts 20 we read of Paul calling together the elders of the Church at Ephesus and giving them this charge, *“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”* The word used here for ‘shepherd’ is the same word translated in Ephesians 4 as ‘pastor’. The pastors the ascended Lord has given to His church, then, are elders. The apostles appointed new elders in the congregations as the Lord Jesus Christ gathered them. Paul and Barnabas, for example, *“returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the*

disciples....” More, “*they ... appointed elders in every church...*” (Acts 14:21-23). Similarly, Paul instructed Titus to “*appoint elders in every city*” (Titus 1:5). Peter tells “*the elders*” to “*shepherd the flock of God which is among you*” (1 Peter 5:1,2). Here, then, is an office that remains throughout the New Testament dispensation.

PASTORS AND TEACHERS

DeBrès in Article 30 confessed that “*there should be **ministers** or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be **elders** and **deacons** who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church*” (See Figure 30.1). How does the single gift of “*pastors and teachers*” in Ephesians 4 become three offices?



The first part of the answer lies in the apostle’s words in 1 Timothy 5:17: “*Let the **elders who rule** well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.*” All elders (= pastors) rule and teach, but for some their primary task is to teach, while the primary task for others is to rule. We are accustomed to calling the teaching elder a minister, and the ruling elder an elder. See Figure 30.2.

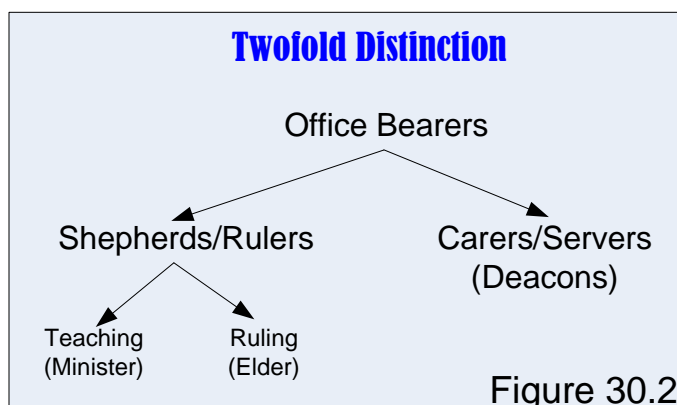
1. ELDERS = Ministers + Elders

MINISTERS: The “Form for the Ordination of Ministers of the Word” (*Book of Praise*, p. 620, 621) lists four tasks for ministers, in which the accent lies on the preaching. These four tasks are:

- Proclamation of the Word: “... **he must declare the whole counsel of God to his congregation, proclaiming the Word according to the command of the apostle Paul ... in public and from house to house. He shall expose all errors and heresies as unfruitful works of darkness, ... shall teach the Word of God to the youth, ... visit the members of the congregation and ... comfort the sick and the sorrowing.**” The main purpose of all these duties is to bring the Word.
- Administration of the Sacraments: as the sacraments are the visible preaching of the Word (see Article 35) only those called to administer the word audibly are entitled to administer the Word visibly.
- Lead in Prayer in public worship.
- Exercise Christian discipline. This last aspect of his work is done very much in conjunction with the ruling elders.

Notice that the minister of the Word is first of all a preacher and teacher. He is not an administrator, nor is he a counselor (in the clinical sense of the word). He is preacher of the Word, and both consistory and congregation need to insist (and make possible) that the minister focus his energies and skills on sermon preparation and delivery. This is vitally important for the spiritual health of the congregation since (growth in) “*faith comes by hearing,*” and one does not “*hear without a preacher*” (Romans 10:14,17).

ELDERS: The “Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons”, (*Book of Praise*, p. 630)

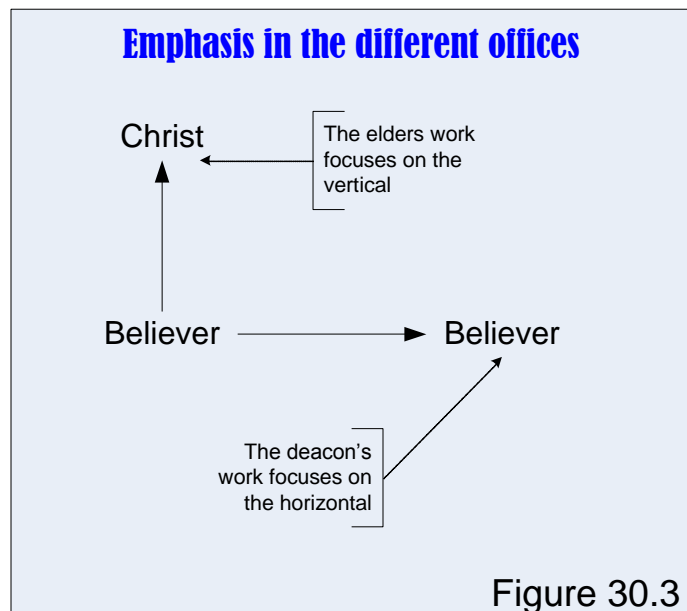


lists three tasks for elders, in which the accent lies on ruling and governing the Church. These three tasks are:

- To have supervision over the congregation. The purpose of the elders' supervision is *"that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life, according to the gospel."* In the New Testament, elders are also referred to as 'bishops', ie, one who is an overseer, one who supervises. This role of supervision includes the activities of comforting, instructing and admonishing the members of the congregation, much of which is done by visiting the members.
- To govern the Church (together with the teaching elder = minister).
- To assist the ministers with good counsel in relation to the preaching.

Notice that here the focus lies not on teaching but on supervision, ruling over the congregation. Where administration or counseling needs to be done through elders, let the ruling elders take the bulk of the work.

For both ministers and elders, the emphasis in their work lies on the vertical dimension: the relation between God and His people (see Figure 30.3). The emphasis in the minister's work is that he brings God's Word to the members of the Church, and the emphasis in the elders' work is that they see to it that the members serve God in obedience to that Word.



2. DEACONS

The church after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit experienced a very dynamic communion of saints. The 3000 souls of the Pentecost church *"were together, and had all things in common"* (Acts 2:41-44). The 5000 men (plus women and children) that Christ gathered to His church in the following months (Acts 4:4) also *"were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common"* (Acts 4:32). Here was harmony, and warm caring for each other. The sheer size of the congregation, though, presented its own problems. *"Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution."* Since it would not be advisable for the apostles to *"leave the word of God and serve tables"*, they set about appointing deacons (Acts 6:1-7). The task of these deacons was to *"serve tables"*, and, given the context, that means that they had to see to it that the Hellenist widows were not neglected in the daily distribution – be it in receiving according to their needs or in giving according to their means, (depending on which side of the table they were standing). The task of the deacons, therefore, focuses on the relations between the members of the congregation, seeing to it that one believer is looking well after his fellow believer – as

members of one body.

Here, then, is another gift the ascended Christ later gave His church. Under their supervision, *“no one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness, and poverty”* (Book of Praise, p. 631). It is not that deacons need to do the actual comforting themselves; rather, it is for them to see to it that the communion of saints functions so well that no one in the body of Christ is neglected. *“For the sake of this (above-mentioned) service of love (by members of the congregation amongst each other), Christ has given deacons to His church.”* Deacons are *“to see to the good progress of this service of charity in the church”* (Book of Praise, p. 631). So, while the focus of the Elders’ work lies on the vertical plane, the focus of the Deacons’ work lies on the horizontal plane (see Figure 3).

In order to fulfill their task, it is beneficial for the deacons to visit all the members of the congregation. Through visits they come to know what needs individual members may have, as well as learn what gifts members have for the benefit of another. On the basis of their knowledge of both needs and gifts, the deacons are to encourage members to give of their abilities for the benefit of the other such that no one is uncomforted in his needs. The healthier a communion of saints is, the less there is for deacons to do.

NOTE: it is to be understood that the scheme of Figure 30.3 is not to be understood in absolute terms. A problem between believers (on the horizontal plane) surely has a spiritual dimension (involving the elders). And a warped relation between a congregation member and God (vertical dimension) will affect that member’s attitude and conduct toward his fellow member (horizontal dimension). Nevertheless, this scheme does make clear where the *accents* of the tasks of the respective offices lie.

OFFICE BEARERS: SERVANTS OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Christ’s gifts to His church are to care for His church in a particular way. As gifts of Christ they are not permitted to rule the Church for personal aggrandizement. As the Head of the Church laid down His life in order to serve the Church, so too must the office bearers give of themselves in order to serve the Church. The Church is not there for the sake of the office bearers, but the office bearers are there for the sake of the Church. 1 Peter 5:1-4: *“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, **serving** as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; **nor as being lords** over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”*

This instruction on Peter’s part comes from Jesus’ instruction to His disciples after *“the mother of Zebedee’s sons”* requested Jesus to *“grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom.”* Jesus used the occasion to teach the twelve: *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:20-28). The operative word here is *service*. On the basis of instruction as this, Peter tells the elders to empty themselves, willingly and eagerly, for the benefit of the flock of Jesus Christ.

WOMEN IN CHURCH GOVERNMENT?

The Lord God created the human race male and female. Approximately half the world's population, and about half the church's membership too, is female. Yet, historically, women have not become office bearers in the church. Especially in our day of egalitarianism, this phenomenon needs explanation. Does the Lord open the offices of the church to His daughters?

The Bible is emphatic that the woman is in no way inferior to the man. God created both male and female in His image (Genesis 1:27). Both fell into sin and stand guilty before God (Genesis 3:16-19). God has sent His Son to redeem man and woman alike (John 3:16). Those who embrace the gospel of redemption in Christ are equally justified before God and sanctified through His Spirit; in Christ "*there is neither male nor female*" (Galatians 3:28), for both are equally saved by grace alone.

Emphatic as the Bible is about the equality of man and woman before God, the Bible is equally categorical about the different tasks the Lord has assigned to the man and to the woman. In His good pleasure the Lord first created the man by himself, and instructed him to "*tend and keep*" the garden in which God placed him (Genesis 2:7,8,15). Thereafter the Lord determined that "*it is not good that man should be alone,*" and set out to "*make him a helper comparable to him*" (Genesis 2:18). The woman God created from the man was not to be simply a companion-and-no-more, just a female copy of the man with identical rights and privileges; rather, the Lord created her to be a "*helper*" to the man-who-was-tender-and-keeper of the garden. God gave the man, then, a function as head and leader, and gave the woman the function of being helper. None less than God Himself, in Paradise already, established a hierarchy in the genders.

The fall into sin did not alter God's ordinance about a hierarchy, nor did it change the mandates God gave to man and woman as leader and helper respectively. In keeping with His creation ordinance God called Abram away from his country and his family, with as result that Sarai followed (Genesis 12:1-5); the Lord did not call Sarai so that Abram followed her. When God set about to deliver His people from Egypt, He described Himself as "*the LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob*" (Exodus 3:16), and not as "*the LORD God of your mothers, the God of Sarah, of Rebekah....*" Similarly, God commanded that the male offspring (not the female) receive the sign and seal of His covenant (circumcision) – not because the sign of the covenant had to be circumcision, but rather because of the hierarchy God established in the genders.

Again, when the Lord appointed leaders and priests in Israel at Mt Sinai, He did not appoint female elders or priests, but appointed men only. The Lord Jesus Christ chose twelve apostles, and all of them were men. In neither instance is this simply an echo of the culture of the day. The Lord God is not bound by cultural suppositions and norms (see John 4:27), and is also mighty to change culture to suit His standards. Rather, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament the Lord appointed only men to the position of leaders amongst His people because this is the standard of Genesis 2.

It is for the same reason that the Old Testament repeatedly uses the masculine pronoun 'he' to describe the person who brings a sacrifice (see, for example, Leviticus 1-4). It is not so that the woman does not have to bring sacrifices for sin or for thanksgiving, but God includes His instruction to *her* in the instruction He gives to *him*. The modern habit to use the designation 'he/she' does not do justice to the norm of the Bible.

In a culture that did not respect the differing positions and roles God intended for man and woman, Paul makes a point of reminding Christians of God's revealed will. When the brothers of the Corinthian congregation permitted the sisters to give leadership in church through their speaking, the apostle corrected them. *"Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says"* (1 Corinthians 14:34). Paul repeated the point to Timothy, *"I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence"* (1 Timothy 2:12). He makes a point of insisting that this is an ordinance of God for all times and places. *"For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression"* (vss 13, 14).

Because of this principle as found in God's Word, the churches have historically not ordained sisters of the congregation to offices in the church. For the same reason a culture stamped with Christianity has historically encouraged men, not women, to take up roles of leadership in public life (be it political, educational, business, etc). It has nothing to do with chauvinism or even with gifts, but has everything to do with humble submission to the revealed will of God. DeBrès captured this instruction of Scripture when he wrote in Article 30 about *"faithful men"* being chosen to the offices of the church.

ACTIVE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN

Does this mean that the sisters of the congregation may give no leadership at all amongst God's people? No, that's not so. After the crossing of the Red Sea, *"Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances"* (Exodus 15:20). The Holy Spirit gives no criticism of Miriam's initiative; on the contrary, her initiative receives echoes in Paul's later instruction to women (Titus 2:3-5, see below). Deborah fulfilled a function as prophetess in Israel, and even as military leader (Judges 4,5). Yet Deborah does not serve as a role model approving female leadership, for she used her influence to urge the man Barak to take up the leadership to which God called him (Judges 4:6). She understood that she could function as leader only because of the negligence of men, and so did what she could to encourage men to give the leadership Israel required. Her leadership was an embarrassment to the men, and a summons to them to be the leaders God created them to be.

When we turn to the New Testament, we read of *"Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea"* (Romans 16:1). The term 'servant' translates here a Greek word used elsewhere for 'deacon' (Philippians 1:1), and so some exegetes conclude that Phoebe was an official deaconess. Yet it should be borne in mind that the identical word appears frequently simply to describe a servant (eg, Matthew 22:13; John 2:5,9; Romans 13:4). To argue for official women deacons on the basis of this one alleged precedent is, then, hardly convincing – especially in light of the principle of Genesis 2.

Still, the apostles were very conscious of the fact that the sisters of the congregation could and must play a vital role in the well being of the congregation of Jesus Christ. Paul instructs Timothy not to *"let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, [is] well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work"* (1 Timothy 5:9-10). The phrase *"taken into the number"* in all likelihood refers to a designated group of sisters in the congregation whose task it was to labor in some way in the congregation.

Notice that the qualifications a widow must fulfill has many similarities with the list that potential elders and deacons must fulfill according to 1 Timothy 3. We receive an indication as to what these sisters had to do from Paul's words to Titus. Titus must ensure that *"the older women ... be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things – that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed"* (Titus 2:3-5). As *"teachers of good things"* these older women were to visit in the homes of the younger women of the congregation, discern the situation in the home, and admonish, instruct, and encourage as the case might require. We need to note: in those days, too, the temptation and the trend was for mothers to be out and about, to focus on things other than loving husband and children (and 'love' means self-emptying; see 1 John 4:9,10), and to be negligent in making the home an attractive place for the family to be. Yet inasmuch as the Lord God gathers His church primarily through families (for He entrusts His children by covenant to the care of believing parents), good family atmosphere is an extremely fundamental component of kingdom life. So important is healthy family life that older sisters in the congregation have, by the ordinance of God, the responsibility to guide the younger sisters. In our age of individualism and mind-your-own-business, this is a principle we do well to relearn. It means concretely: let the older sisters of the congregation, as health and means allow, take up contact with the younger sisters in the congregation (their own children in the generations first of all, of course), in order to encourage and instruct in good family life. Flip side: let the younger sisters in the congregation receive the older readily and humbly, and perhaps even seek out their instruction and guidance. As with anything else, obedience to God's instruction is a matter of faith.

The Lord, then, has entrusted the leadership in the church to men. In a time when society demands equal treatment for men and women, the people of God may not seek to be wiser than God. Parents must train their boys to be leaders, and their girls to be helpmeets. At the same time, women as helpmeets have a specific task in building up the congregation. As we come to grips in our modern time with the respective role God has given to man and woman, we ultimately need to bow before God's revelation and humbly accept what He in wisdom has ordained.

Points for Discussion:

1. Who is the Head of the church? What difference does this make in practice?
2. What means does Christ use to rule His church today? For what purpose?
3. Describe the task of the
 - minister
 - elder
 - deacon.
4. One detects somewhat of a habit in the churches to have brothers appointed first to the office of deacon and thereafter, if they have functioned well, 'graduate' them to the office of elder. Consider the merits and demerits of such a habit. Which task is harder: the work of the elder or the work of the deacon? Explain your answer.
5. What is the purpose of home visits? How can elders best achieve this purpose? Do you feel that the elders are in fact achieving this purpose in the visits you have received? If not, consider whether it would be beneficial to pass on your thoughts to your elders.

6. Do the sisters of the congregation have a Scripturally agreeable role in your congregation? Explain.
7. Read the instruction of the Holy Spirit in Titus 2:3-5. Are the older sisters in your congregation carrying out this mandate? Do the younger sisters welcome and make use of the resources the Lord has given in the older generation? Why or why not? What can be done to make your congregational life conform more completely to the Spirit's instruction in this passage?

Cross References:

Form for Ordination of Ministers, *Book of Praise*

Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons, *Book of Praise*

Church Order of Dort, Articles 16-17, 29-51

ARTICLE 31: THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH

ARTICLE 31

We believe that ministers of God's Word, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the church, with prayer and in good order, as stipulated by the Word of God. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord. Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

CHRIST GIVES OFFICE BEARERS

In Article 30 DeBrès had confessed God's revelation about Christ's headship over the church, and the fact that Christ rules through the means of office bearers. Just how, though, does one become an office bearer? May one demand that the congregation receive you as an office bearer on grounds that Jesus has personally called you through a vision to yourself – as the Anabaptists of DeBrès' day insisted? May a group of powerbrokers foist an office bearer upon a congregation – as the Roman Catholics of DeBrès' day maintained? Scripture said No.

The Corinthians questioned whether Paul was truly an apostle of the Lord. In his reply, Paul wrote: "*For the love of Christ compels us*" (2 Corinthians 5:14). The word 'compels' speaks of force. Yet it was not Paul's love for Christ that forced the office onto him, for Paul hated Christ, in fact, he actively persecuted the church of Christ (Acts 9:1-3). Rather, it was Christ's love for His people that compelled Christ to lay the office onto Paul's shoulders. This man, with his particular gifts and education, was Christ's chosen instrument to "*bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel*" (Acts 9:15).

Though the *manner* of Jesus' thrusting Paul into the office was unique, it is a principle of Scripture that Christ lays the office on men of His choosing. Note the way Paul addresses the elders of Ephesus: "*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood*" (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ acted upon these brothers so that the office was laid on their shoulders.

This is the Scriptural truth DeBrès echoes in Article 31. "*Everyone shall take care not to intrude [into an ecclesiastical office] by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord.*" The question now is: how does the Lord call to office?

CHRIST CALLS THROUGH THE CONGREGATION

After Judas Iscariot committed suicide, the congregation got together under the disciples' leadership to find another office bearer. We read in Acts 1 that the brethren "*prayed ... and they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven*

apostles” (Acts 1:24-26). With the calling of the first deacons, the apostles instructed the congregation to select seven men from their midst. This “*saying pleased the whole multitude. And **they chose** Stephen..., Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, ... whom **they** set before the apostles; and when **they had prayed**, they laid hands on them*” (Acts 6:3-7). When Paul and Barnabas revisited the churches, “*they ... appointed elders in every church*” (Acts 14:23). The word translated here as “appointed” describes literally the action of stretching out the hand. The word is used in 2 Corinthians 8:19 to indicate how the congregation indicated who was to bring the collected gifts to the Judean saints. It’s unclear how the raising of hands functioned in the appointment of the elders of Acts 14, but at a minimum some brothers were indicated.

Notice how the congregation was involved (certainly in Acts 1 and Acts 6) in settling the question of who was to become an office bearer. Notice too that the congregation’s involvement goes beyond casting lots or choosing (or showing hands) to include prayer. In fact, it is the prayer that forms the central part of the congregation’s activity in the process of calling a brother to office. The members of the congregation together, irrespective of age or gender or status, are to implore God publicly (and privately) that *He* make clear which brother He desires in the offices of His church. Then, trusting that the Lord will give the necessary guidance, the church undergoes a pre-established procedure (whether lot or election) through which the Lord indicates who should serve.

Reformed churches have historically opted for a procedure involving a ballot. This procedure arises out of the conviction that the Lord has poured out His Holy Spirit upon His people, and so His people are equipped to think and consider Scripturally who can best serve in the offices of Christ’s church. A brother who does not satisfy the criteria mentioned in passages of Scripture as 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is not to serve, and so the members of the congregation are not permitted to vote for him. DeBrès caught the Biblical teaching on the point: “*We believe that ministers, elders, and deacons ought to be **chosen** to their offices **by lawful election of the Church**.*” There is, consequently, no room for claiming an office on the basis of private feelings. There is no room either for influential persons to impose a man on a congregation.

CHRIST EQUIPS

When the Lord, then, calls a brother to an office in His church, both the brother concerned and the congregation wherein he becomes an office bearer may believe that the Lord will supply the wisdom and strength needed to fulfill the office. It is no shame that a brother feels inadequate to the demands of the office; in fact, which sinner is capable of looking well after the sheep of the Lord – given Satan’s cunning attacks and sinners’ inclination to evil – to say nothing of the candidate’s own evil heart? The task is simply too much even for the wisest, most energetic and skillful brother. Yet a brother whom the Lord has called may tackle his task with confidence, assured that the Lord who called will give the strength and the blessing. Meanwhile, let the office bearer carry out his task in humility, with a strong sense of dependence on his God.

THE CONGREGATION RECEIVES

Not every congregation member may be pleased to see a particular brother elected to an office in the church, and ordained. Yet the congregation is to receive the brother concerned as a man whom God in His wisdom has put into the office. The Hebrew Christians were told to “*remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you*” and to “*obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as*

those who must give account" (Hebrews 13:7,17). Timothy must ensure that *"the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor"* (1 Timothy 5:17). DeBrès ties it all together like this, *"We declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing."*

A consequence follows. When an office bearer makes a visit to a home, it is not simply a man who appears at the door. Rather it is *Christ* who comes in the person of the elder. If my Savior sends an elder (of His choosing) to my home, I must receive that elder readily. More, I'm to be open with him for the Christ who visits in the office bearer knows my thoughts and circumstances already. He knows, and now seeks to encourage (or admonish or instruct, as the case might be) by means of this man. Whether or not I like a particular elder, or get on with my elders, is then not the criteria by which I decide how I shall receive a brother (or even whether I shall receive him). In faith I receive the man or men Christ sends.

Again, since office bearers are gifts of Christ, I can never consider them as my *representatives* when they approach another person or make decisions in the council of the church. Unlike a democracy in which the people elect for themselves a representative to Parliament (and expect that that person will speak on their behalf), office bearers do not represent segments of a congregation. Rather, office bearers are representatives of Christ and must therefore speak *Christ's Word* at all times, be it in my home, my neighbor's home, or at meetings of the Church council.

Since it is Christ who sends the elders, they are not to carry out their office or make their visits in order to satisfy personal egos or as a means to finding out as much gossip as they can concerning the members of the Church. Office bearers are to visit and listen and ask questions very much in the awareness that Christ has sent them. That reality also means that office bearers may not divulge to third parties what congregation members have confided to them!

IN SPECIAL ESTEEM

It bears mentioning that the brothers the Lord calls to office are invariably sinful men. In fact, the Holy Spirit stresses the responsibility office bearers have when Scripture says, *"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many things"* (James 3:1,2). In truth, office bearers need the atoning blood of Jesus Christ every bit as much as any other member of the congregation!

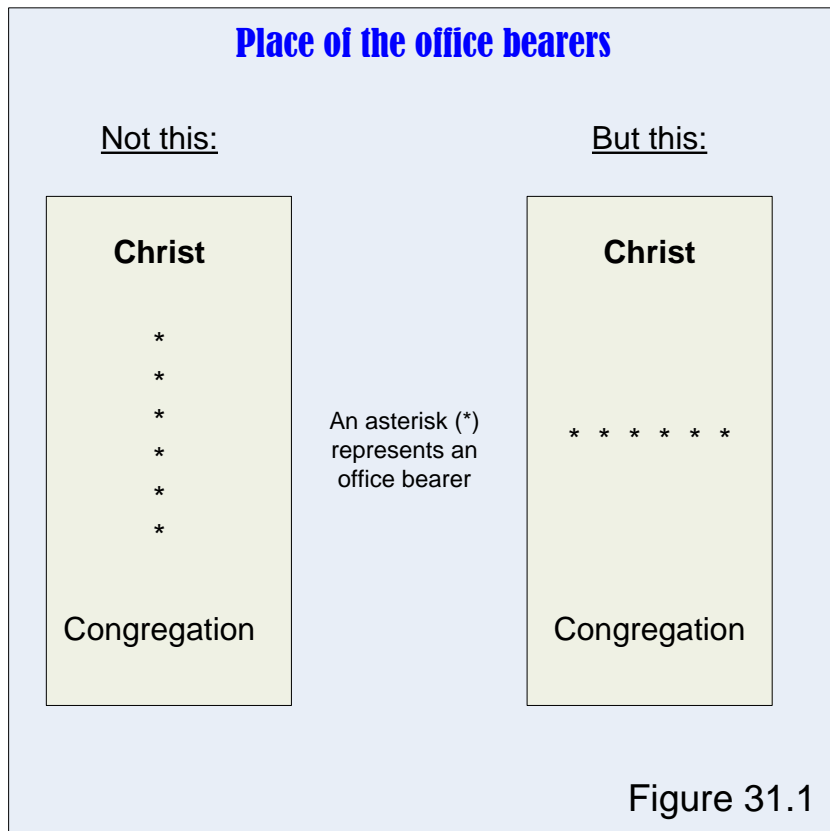
The fact that office bearers are sinful men does not mean that the congregation is therefore free to disregard them, disdain them, or point fingers at the brothers. Paul himself had a most notorious past, but he never permitted the congregations to whom he wrote to despise him on account of it. Rather, his past was for him an opportunity to point up God's mercy. Paul writes to Timothy, *"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and in insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus"* (1 Timothy 1:12-14). Though renewed by the Holy Spirit, Paul remained keenly aware that he remained a sinner. *"For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.... O wretched man that I am!"* (Romans

7:19,24). Every office bearer today equally has sins of youth he regrets, and continues to struggle with weaknesses. Yet Paul is emphatic to Timothy, “*Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses*” (1 Timothy 5:19). It is so easy to discredit an office bearer, and so hinder the work the Lord Jesus Christ has given this brother to do. That is of benefit to no one, for the Lord has given office bearers as *gifts* for the edification of His church. So DeBrès instructed his congregation to “*as much as possible be at peace with [the office bearers] without grumbling or complaining.*”

Yet being at peace with one’s office bearers is not sufficient for the good progress of their shepherding work in the congregation. Paul’s words to the Thessalonians are pertinent, “*And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake*” (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13). Similarly, “*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you*” (Hebrews 13:17). Notice: in both cases the apostle links esteem for the office bearers with the good progress of their work in the congregation. It is true that personal chemistries and awareness of weaknesses can make a congregation (member) cynical of an office bearer’s work. Yet the eye may never be on the man Christ has placed in the office, but must remain on the Christ who called the man to office.

EQUALITY AMONG OFFICE BEARERS

All office bearers in a given congregation are equal in authority. This conviction is rooted in Jesus’ words in Matthew 23:1-11. Jesus spoke to the multitudes and the disciples, “*The scribes and Pharisees ... love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the market places, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’*” In contrast, Jesus’ instruction to the disciples was, “*But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren*” (vs 8) and “*he who is greater among you shall be your servant*” (vs 11). Christ has not instituted any ranking amongst the offices. Each office bearer is equal to the other (See Figure 31.1). No one has more authority than another, despite the fact that one office bearer may have more gifts than another. Of him who has more gifts, God also requires more responsibility, but that does not make one office bearer more important than another. Therefore we also confess with Article 31, “*Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have **equal** power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ.*” This leaves no room for the Roman Catholic practice of assigning varying degrees of honor amongst those in the office of bishop, depending (for example) on the size of the congregation or the importance of the city wherein the bishop serves. Even the fact that one brother (commonly the minister) is chairman of the Consistory does not give him more power or authority. The chairman of the consistory is not the captain of the ship, or the CEO of the church board. He is an elder with the other elders, of equal power and responsibility with the others before the church’s Head. In no way may he act differently. The same principle, of course, extends to the elders and to the deacons. No elder has more power or authority than another elder, and no deacon has more than another deacon either. Every office bearer, according to gifts, is bound to *serve*.



PREPARATION FOR OFFICE

Serving as an office bearer in the church of Jesus Christ is a privilege, and so it is commendable to desire an office in the church. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work*” (1 Timothy 3:1). The term ‘bishop’ means ‘overseer’, and so describes the elder.

Why does the apostle Paul commend the desire for an office, and consequently encourage preparation for the office too? The answer is simple. If the Lord has given His own dear Son to pay for our sins in order to reconcile us to Himself, we in turn are to give ourselves wholly to the service of God wherever it is that God may call us to serve. It should not happen that the council finds it difficult to draw up a list of suitable candidates to fill vacancies for the offices. Gratitude for Christ’s redeeming grace drives God’s children to prepare themselves readily and eagerly for total service to the God who graciously saved us in Jesus Christ – even if that service be in the difficult (though beautiful!) task of being office bearer in the Church. All men in the congregation should be preparing themselves for the possibility that God may call them to the office – for the church (our children included!) are not served by ill-prepared men. One prepares by living close to the Lord in all the ups and downs of life already in one’s youth, and so being deliberate in His service before an open Bible all one’s days. This involves reading, thinking, meditating, and speaking of the will and way of the Lord in any question of life.

By the same token, the sisters in the congregation ought to prepare themselves well to be a good help to the men (for it was for this reason that she was created). In their work as an office bearer in Christ’s church, brothers need a helpmeet beside them as much as in any

other area of life. Let the sisters prepare themselves well to listen, analyze, support, encourage a husband or other brother in his work as office bearer.

Points for Discussion:

1. Who calls office bearers to office? How?
2. Who in the congregation are to be involved in choosing office bearers? Explain your answer.
3. Some churches call upon the men alone to cast a vote. Other faithful churches call upon both the brothers and the sisters to cast a ballot. Is resolving this discrepancy worth a struggle? Given the philosophical trends of our times, would it be wise (in churches where the sisters do not vote) to change the existing practice? Why or why not?
4. Which persons in the congregation may become office bearers? Discuss the criteria the Lord mentions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Why does He mention *these* criteria?
5. Is the minister the ‘boss’ in the consistory? Is he (or any other chairman) the CEO? Why or why not?
6. What should young men do with a view to possibly becoming office bearers one day? Have the young women a role here? If so, what is it?

Cross References:

Church Order of Dort, Articles 3-15

ARTICLE 32: THE ORDER AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

ARTICLE 32

We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded. Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God. To that end, discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God.

CHRIST THE ONLY MASTER

Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. From His place in heaven on high, He governs His Church by means of office bearers (Articles 30 & 31). Just how, though, are these office bearers to govern? How can they, in their manner of governing, do justice to Christ's headship?

DeBrès and the people of his day had been raised in a church governed by human principles. In the cities, towns and villages of Europe, the Roman Catholic churches were led by teams of men responsible to those above them – a hierarchy that climaxed in the Pope of Rome, the church's *de facto* master. Instead of genuine care for the members of the congregation, the system allowed those on top of the ladder to take (financial) advantage of the little people of the pew. One may think of the sale of indulgences used to finance the building of St Peter's Basilica in Rome. Through this papal system of church government, the people of the pew did not hear the Voice of the Shepherd.

DeBrès taught his reformed congregation that office bearers in Christ's church are not to use their positions to take advantage of the sheep, but are instead to govern according to principles "*Christ, our only Master, has commanded.*" As Christ did not fleece His sheep but instead laid down His life for their benefit, so office bearers who govern under Christ are to seek what is good for the sheep without regard to self. To achieve what is good for the sheep, "*we reject all human inventions*" as well as "*laws introduced into the worship of God*" which do not come from God Himself and so "*bind and compel the consciences in any way.*" Instead, "*we accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.*"

CHURCH ORDER

What does a form of church government agreeing with Christ's headship look like? Building on work done by the early church fathers (first, second and third centuries after Christ's ascension), the reformers of the sixteenth century developed a form of church government built squarely on the Bible. It is *presbyterial* church government, where the term 'presbyterial' catches the Scriptural notion that Christ governs through the presbyters, that is, the *elders*. See Articles 30 & 31 for more detail about the elders.

Leaders of the churches of the Reformation labored to put to paper how, according to Scripture, the Lord wanted His church to be governed. It took time for a consensus to develop, so that in DeBrès' day (1560s) the development was yet incomplete. Yet that took

nothing away from DeBrès' conviction that "*it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church,*" and in establishing and carrying out that Order office bearers "*must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded.*" Over the years consensus has grown and a Church Order has matured. The great Synod of Dort 1618-19 finalized the *Church Order of Dort*, the ripe fruit of years of discussion about how the church of Jesus Christ ought to be governed. It regulates church life in four areas:

1. Offices and supervision of doctrine – about how one becomes an office bearer and carries out one's task.
2. Assemblies – about the work of consistory, classis and synod.
3. Worship, sacraments and ceremonies – about what ought to happen in the worship services.
4. Discipline – about how the church ought to deal with sin in her midst.

Faithful Reformed Churches around the world still gratefully use this *Church Order of Dort* to this day. Both office bearers and church members do well to be familiar with this Church Order, and how it functions in church life.⁷

NOT THE SWORD BUT THE WORD

Faithful office bearers do not use the force of swords to direct their sheep in the way of the Lord. They have one tool alone, and that tool is the Word of God. Paul says that the Word is "***mighty in God*** for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3-6). The epistle to the Hebrews adds that the Word Christ gave His Church "***is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart***" (Hebrews 4:12). As office bearers speak that Word of God from the pulpit, in the Catechism classes and in the homes, the congregation members are comforted, instructed, admonished, and corrected. That Word drives the people to a choice in their specific circumstances, a choice to obey God or to disobey. Where there is obedience and a desire to submit to the will of God in one's circumstances, elders may comfort with the gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of life eternal. But where there is a refusal to obey God's commands and a rebellion against what the Lord in wisdom has placed on the path of a church member, elders must instruct and admonish, and ultimately declare in God's name that sins are not forgiven and life eternal is not granted to that church member as long as he does not repent and believe. This is the church discipline DeBrès spoke of in this article, "*We believe that ... discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God.*" Just what, though, does the Word of God teach us about church discipline? A discussion of the Keys of the Kingdom will lay out the matter.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

On the road to Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked His disciples who He, in their judgment,

⁷ The Church Order as adopted by the Synod of Dort is available in my *Spiritual Order for the Church* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 2000), together with two contemporary adaptations of this Church Order. The book in question seeks to explain how the articles of this Church Order are drawn from the Word of God. Rev vanOene, *With Common Consent* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1990) draws out the practical application of each article of this Church Order.

actually was. Peter was the first to reply: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Jesus, in turn, said to Peter, *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”* (Matthew 16:16-19).

Jesus’ imagery of the keys was lifted from the words of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 22:20-22 we read of the steward who controlled access to Israel’s king; no Israelite could approach the king for a judgment in a dispute unless the steward permitted him access (lest the king be burdened with too many bogus complaints). So it was said of the steward that he possessed the key to the king; when he gave permission the door to the king was open (and no one could shut it), and when he denied that access the door was closed – with finality. In Isaiah’s day, however, the steward (Shebna) was corrupt and so gave the wrong people access to the king. So the Lord told Isaiah to declare, *“The key of the house of David I will lay on [Eliakim’s] shoulder; so he shall open, and no one shall shut; and he shall shut and no one shall open.”*

The keys of which Jesus spoke did not give access to the Old Testamentic house of David, but to its New Testament fulfillment, the kingdom of heaven itself. The authority to grant access to the kingdom of heaven was given to Peter not as an isolated individual, but to Peter as the first one to verbalize Jesus’ true identity. God alone can forgive sins (and therefore permit sinners into His presence), but for some months now God’s Son on earth has forgiven sin (Matthew 9:6; Luke 7:48-49) and so granted life and righteousness to all who believe in Him. But Jesus was not to remain on earth. In preparation for His departure He gave to particular persons the authority to do what rightly only God can do, namely, determine who can access the King of heaven, enter the kingdom of God. That is the redemptive-historical significance of Matthew 16:19. Peter –the word means ‘rock’– becomes the foundation upon which the triumphant and ascended Christ shall build His Church.

PREACHING

After Christ’s triumph on the cross Jesus told Peter and all His disciples to preach the gospel to the entire world (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15). On the day of Pentecost the same Peter whom Jesus addressed in Matthew 16 took the initiative in obeying that command (Acts 2:14). His Pentecost sermon impressed upon his hearers the confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Acts 2:36). This preaching threw open the doors of the kingdom of heaven to all who believed – and 3000 answered the call (vs 41). These believers received forgiveness of sins, and therefore the right to access the King of heaven. Over the days and years

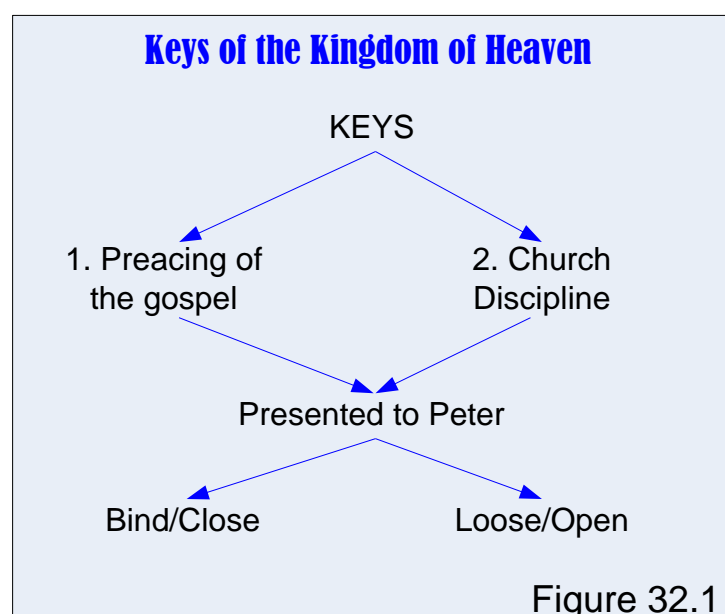


Figure 32.1

that followed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Peter continued to preach, and so permit sinners access to the kingdom of heaven (cf Acts 3:12-18; 4:10-12; 5:17-25; etc).

Yet it was not Peter alone who used the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The authority Jesus gave to Peter in Matthew 16 is granted to all the disciples, and so all the disciples preached the word in the Pentecost church. Similarly, when the apostles could preach no more, the authority to open and close the kingdom of heaven was passed on to those who continue to preach the gospel of Jesus' work and identity. Today still the kingdom of heaven is opened by the preaching of the gospel "*when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel.*" The opposite is true also; today still "*the kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent*" (Lord's Day 31.84). Unbelief manifests itself by its fruits (Matthew 7:17-19). Such fruits include the works of the flesh, and "*those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*" (Galatians 5:19-21).

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

What, then, is to happen to the person who has joined the assembly of the redeemed (the Church, according to Article 27), but later refuses to abide by the preaching of the gospel and gives himself to a life of unbelief? The Holy Spirit moved Paul to give the following instruction to the Galatian believers: "*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness***" (Galatians 6:1). This echoes Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:15: "*if your brother sins against you, **go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.** If he hears you, you have gained your brother*" (Matthew 18:15). These two verses give a general instruction to all Christians to be the brother's keeper.

What is to happen, though, if a brother will not heed your admonitions? Sin destroys one's relation with God; you cannot have peace with God and at the same time live in sin. There is no access for such a person to the kingdom of heaven, and love for an erring brother dictates that this terrible fact must be impressed upon him before it is too late. So Jesus gave further instruction: "*But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, **tell it to the church.** But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*" (Matthew 18:16-19). Here is the same notion of binding and loosing as we encountered in Matthew 16, but this time it is the Church (through the elders) that does the binding and the loosing (see also John 20:22,23).

The elders of the church have received great responsibility. The church is the assembly of the redeemed (Article 27), the gathering of people who look forward to seeing the face of God in heaven. In the church are hypocrites, as well as covenant children who refuse to embrace in faith the promises God extended to them in their baptism. Such people may *assume* that they enjoy the forgiveness of their sins and that they will receive the crown of glory, but as long as they do not live by faith they are *self-deceived*. It is the task of the congregation to show this self-deception to those brothers and sisters who show themselves in doctrine or life to be unbelieving. Where the congregation's efforts do not produce the desired results, the elders (with the continued cooperation of the congregation) need to complete the task by cutting such persons off from the assembly of the redeemed, the church

of Jesus Christ.

EXCOMMUNICATION

Cutting a person off from the church of Jesus Christ comes across to us as a harsh and cruel thing to do. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes clear that excommunication is no crueler than radiation treatment for cancer; it's a necessary trauma to bring about improved spiritual health. Three foci may be mentioned.

1. Save the Sinner

Paul relates that in the Church at Corinth a member was living in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother – explicitly contrary to God's ordinance in Leviticus 18:6-8. So Paul gave instruction what the church was to do. *"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* (1 Corinthians 5:4,5). Note here that Paul is addressing the congregation as a whole, not just the elders. Yes, the elders have the authority and they take the initiative when it comes to excommunication, but church discipline is the responsibility of the entire congregation. More importantly, note that Paul's motivation for demanding this course of action is *"that his spirit may be saved."* Paul does not want this person to go to hell, to have to live eternally under the dominion of Satan. Out of love for the brother, Paul instructs the congregation to deliver him to Satan so that he may reconsider what he's doing and repent. See also 1 Timothy 1:18-20. This is the first purpose of church discipline and excommunication: to bring the sinner to repentance.

2. Prevent Spreading

Paul adds a second reason why this brother needed to be excommunicated. 1 Corinthians 5:6, *"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?"* Sin acts like leaven; in time it permeates the whole batch of dough. Perhaps more graphic in our modern times is a comparison with cancer; sin, like cancer, will spread and eventually kill the whole body, and must therefore be cut out. In fact, as one needs to act immediately upon a diagnosis of cancer, so congregation and office bearers need to act immediately on evidence of sin in the congregation and cut it out – lest the sin spread to other members of the body and destroy others for whom Christ died. Excommunication, then, is an act of kindness not just for the sinning brother, but also for his friends, family and contacts in the congregation.

3. Glory of God

In the chapter in question Paul hints at a third reason for excommunication. Said Paul concerning the sexual immorality of the brother tolerated in the Church at Corinth, *"... such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father's wife"* (1 Corinthians 5:1). Corinth was well known for its sexual immorality, but such a sin as was tolerated in the Church was unheard of outside of it amongst the heathen. So it potentially brought disdain upon the church and the name of the God the church preaches. Allowing the sinner concerned to remain part of the congregation would give the heathen cause to blaspheme God. For the sake of God's honor, then, the sinner must be distanced from the church of holy God.

LIKE A HEATHEN AND A TAX COLLECTOR

Wherein lies the sting in excommunication? Is it simply in the fact that you are told –first privately and then publicly– that your beliefs and/or lifestyle is offensive to God so that He will not welcome you into His kingdom? Anyone with a conscience will certainly feel the

sting of such a message! But given our depravity and the dullness of a sinful conscience, those who have embraced sin have hardened themselves to such a message. That is why more is required. Excommunication breaks friendships and puts distance between brothers. This is the command of the Lord Jesus Christ concerning the sinner you admonished and eventually reported to the church: *“If he refuses even to hear the church, **let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector**”* (Matthew 18:17). The Jews of Jesus’ day kept their distance from the heathen and the tax collectors, and refused to associate with them (see Luke 15:1,2). In like manner the godly were to put distance between oneself and a “brother” (Matthew 18:15) who gives himself to sin and refuses to heed admonition. The isolation the sinning brother experiences gives a small taste of what isolation from God in hell is like – and is intended to drive him to reconsideration.

Paul repeated Jesus’ instruction. *“But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you **withdraw** from every **brother** who leads a disorderly life and not according to the tradition which he received from us.... And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and **do not keep company with him**, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother”* (2 Thessalonians 3:14,15). Elsewhere: *“I wrote to you in my epistle **not to keep company** with sexually immoral people”* (1 Corinthians 5:9). The Corinthians had apparently understood Paul to mean that one was not to rub shoulders with any one who was immoral. Yet that would mean that one would need to go out of the world – since the world is full of immoral people. So Paul clarifies, *“But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone **named a brother**, who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – **not even to eat with such a person**”* (1 Corinthians 5:11). The point here is this: if a person such as described in 1 Corinthians 5 is living in blatant sin, can I possibly act towards him in a way that might indicate to him that all is well? That would be deception. As long as he persists in his sin, his future is the agony of hell; he will *not* be present with all the saints at the eternal marriage feast of the Lamb. To drive that point home to the sinner, friendships need to be broken and social habits changed. That is bold love.

Conversely, one is not to treat the excommunicated like an enemy. Jesus Himself sought out the heathens and tax collectors in an effort to show them the gospel of God’s grace (Matthew 9:10-13; Luke 15:1,2). That is why Paul told the Thessalonians not only to “*not keep company*” with the erring brother, but also to “*not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother*” (2 Thessalonians 3:14,15). The contact that remains needs to keep the heat on the brother so that he comes to repentance.

WITHDRAWAL

There is no difference between the way one is to deal with a person who has withdrawn himself from the church, and a person who has been excommunicated from the church. It may seem to us that as church discipline progresses toward excommunication, it may be advisable simply to withdraw from the church – and save oneself and one’s family the trauma of being excommunicated. One will not be cured of cancer, though, if one flees the radiation program. One will not enter the kingdom of heaven either if one flees the admonitions intended to produce repentance. Short-circuiting the church discipline process is harmful primarily to oneself. When, therefore, a brother or sister opts to withdraw, he needs the same ‘treatment’ as Jesus prescribed in Matthew 18: *“if he refuses even to hear the church, **let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector**”* (Matthew 18:17).

ADMONITIONS ARE TO BE RECEIVED IN HUMILITY

None in the congregation of Jesus Christ is above the need for possible admonition on account of sin. Noah “*found grace in the eyes of the LORD*,” but after the flood gave himself to sins of drunkenness (Genesis 6:8; 9:21). Abraham “*believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness*,” but allowed a third party to come into his marriage with Sarah (Genesis 15:6; 16:1-4). Moses was “*very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth*,” but at Kadesh he disobeyed God’s command and took matters in his own hands (Numbers 12:3; 20:10-11). David was “*a man after [God’s] own heart*,” but he gave himself to sins of adultery and murder (1 Samuel 13:14; 2 Samuel 11:4,15). Job “*was blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil*,” but he had to repent in dust and ashes for his rash challenge of God’s dealings with him (Job 1:1; 13:3; 42:6). If such ‘giants’ of the faith could fall so tragically, who of us is above sin? “*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Never, then, should I be surprised when a brother approaches me with an admonition on account of something he’s seen in my life. One can only respond with humility and a desire to hear the brother out – and engage in careful self-examination and, perhaps, repentance.

In fact, I’ve promised to consider all admonition seriously and humbly. The *Form for Public Profession of Faith* includes this question: “*Do you promise to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the Church, if it should happen, and may God graciously prevent it, that you should become delinquent either in doctrine or in conduct?*” (*Book of Praise*, p. 593). I promised I would submit. As a child of God renewed by His Spirit, it is for me to keep my word – for my own salvation’s sake.

Points for Discussion:

1. Is a Church Order actually necessary? To what degree are the churches bound to the stipulations of the Church Order?
2. What are the keys of the kingdom? Explain how these keys function.
3. Who exercises these keys? Explain.
4. Is being placed under church discipline a bad thing or not? Explain.
5. People under church discipline habitually complain of being wronged. Evaluate this response. What implication follows for the complaints you might hear concerning the consistory? See 1 Timothy 5:19.
6. What is the task of the congregation in relation to church discipline?
7. What are the three purposes for excommunication?
8. How ought we to relate to those who have been excommunicated?
9. How ought we to relate to those who have withdrawn from the church?
10. Discuss the promise made in the last question of the Form for Public Profession of Faith.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31.83, 84, 85
Forms for Excommunication, *Book of Praise*
Form for Readmission, *Book of Praise*
Church Order, Articles 66-73

ARTICLE 33:THE SACRAMENTS

ARTICLE 33

We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and weakness, has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace towards us. He did so to nourish and sustain our faith. He has added these to the Word of the gospel to represent better to our external senses both what He declares to us in His Word and what He does inwardly in our hearts. Thus He confirms to us the salvation which He imparts to us. Sacraments are visible signs and seals of something internal and invisible, by means of which God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore the signs are not void and meaningless so that they deceive us. For Jesus Christ is their truth; apart from Him they would be nothing. Moreover, we are satisfied with the number of sacraments which Christ our Master has instituted for us, namely, two: the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of Jesus Christ.

MEANS OF GRACE

Through the fall into sin in Paradise, all people have become slaves to sin and Satan (Article 14). In boundless mercy the Lord God has sent His Son into the world to redeem sinners from bondage to the Devil and reconcile them to God (Article 17). God's work of redemption through Christ is mine through *faith* (Article 22). Faith, extending the hand of the soul to receive God's grace in Jesus Christ, is a mighty work of the Holy Spirit in hearts by nature dead in sin (Article 24).

How, though, does the Holy Spirit work faith? Does He pour faith into sinners as water into a bottle? Does He let faith ooze its way slowly into our hearts by having us breathe the pious air of a godly home? Does He instill faith in sinners by their sitting in the sun or observing the flowers? It is true that the Holy Spirit has the might to work faith into sin-filled hearts in any such way. Yet God in His good pleasure has bound Himself to different means to work faith. He uses particular tools known as the "means of grace." The primary tool is the Word; the second tool is the Sacraments (see Figure 33.1). Since the Lord God has ordained the Word and the Sacraments as the means by which He works and strengthens faith, I am obliged to make use of these means.

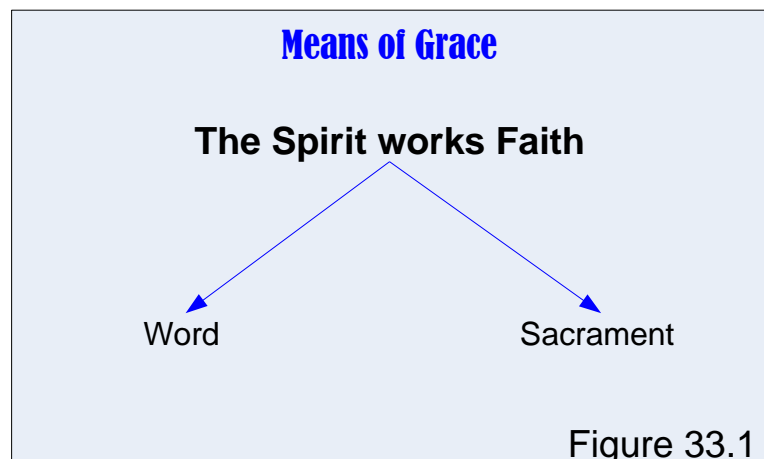


Figure 33.1

THE WORD

Of the two means the Spirit uses, the Word is primary. The Word of God is effective, and produces great results. In the beginning "*God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light*" (Genesis 1:3). This is the pattern of creation; God "*spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast*" (Psalm 33:9). The work of God whereby He raises people from spiritual

death and makes them believe in Him is no less mighty a work as His work of creation in the beginning. That is why *“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”* (Romans 10:17). The Word the Lord uses to work faith is the *“gospel of Christ”*, which *“is **the power of God** to salvation for everyone who believes”* (Romans 1:16). Since the Holy Spirit does His mighty work of recreation through the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples before His ascension into heaven to *“go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”* (Mark 16:15). This is equally why the apostles after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit set out to preach (Acts 2:14; 4:2,20; 5:21, etc), and why the apostle Paul told Timothy and Titus to keep preaching (2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 2:1,15) – and even to ensure that there be preachers for the future (2 Timothy 2:2).

As God’s word in the beginning produced results, so the preaching of the apostles produced results. On Pentecost Day 3000 persons came to faith (Acts 2:41). In the weeks that followed, the number of believers grew astronomically (see Acts 4:4; 6:1). It is as the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, *“So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it”* (Isaiah 55:11). To the Hebrews the apostle says, *“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart”* (4:12). The towns where the apostles preached experienced mightily the powerful effect of the Word as the Lord through the Word changed hearts and worked faith in everyone appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). Faith comes *“from the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the **preaching of the gospel**”* (Lord’s Day 25, Q & A 65).

This ties in with the responsibility alluded to in Articles 28 and 29. *“There is no salvation outside of”* the church because the Voice of the Shepherd is heard *in* the Church. So one must join that church which preaches the Word of God faithfully and completely.

SACRAMENTS

Holy Scripture does not speak of the sacraments nearly as often as it does of the Word. Repeatedly we read that the Levites taught, the prophets prophesied, Jesus proclaimed the good news, and the apostles preached; the pages of Scripture contain countless of their sermons. In comparison, the number of references to the sacraments is very few. Though this observation does not make the sacraments insignificant, it does put the Word and the sacraments into their proper relation. Vital to salvation is the Word (see above), not the sacraments. Let no one overvalue the sacraments.

Having said that, let no one undervalue the sacraments either. The Lord gave them for a distinct purpose. In humility of faith we need to embrace that purpose.

GOD’S SENSITIVITY TO OUR INSENSITIVITY

The Lord God approached Abraham in his old age with the remarkable promise of a covenant: *“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you”* (Genesis 17:7). The covenant God established with Abraham was a bond of love between Himself and this sinner, a promise to care richly for Abraham and enfold him with love and protection. Inherent in this wonderful covenant relation was the promise of children – made, we need to realize, to a man nearly 100 years old.

Human nature doubts the incredible and the wonderful. It was to be expected that Abraham

would question the truthfulness of God's covenant promises. For this reason God did more than give sinful Abraham simply a promise. God added: "*Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and **it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you***" (Genesis 17:10-11). Abraham should have an abiding reminder of the truthfulness of God's promise in the covenant. The reminder should involve drawing blood because a relation between a sinner and holy God is possible only through the atoning blood of another. The reminder should involve incision in this particular organ because the covenant promise included the gift of salvation through a Child that only God could supply – for the human race was no more able to bring forth a Savior than aged Abraham could bring forth a son. In the face of inevitable doubt, the sacrament of circumcision should function for Abraham and his offspring as a constant reminder of God's covenant promises and faithfulness.

The same is true for me. Life knows so many struggles and trials, and with the trials come doubts about the truthfulness of God's promises. Yet the Lord would not have us doubt. That is why He had me baptized many years ago when He claimed me for Himself in His covenant of grace. I do not recall my baptism, for I was too young to be aware. But the Lord in His mercy allows me to witness so many baptisms in the course of a given year. Each baptism I witness is a reminder to me of what God promised me at my baptism. So God, in the midst of life's struggles and questions, reminds me again and again of my privileged status as a covenant child of God.

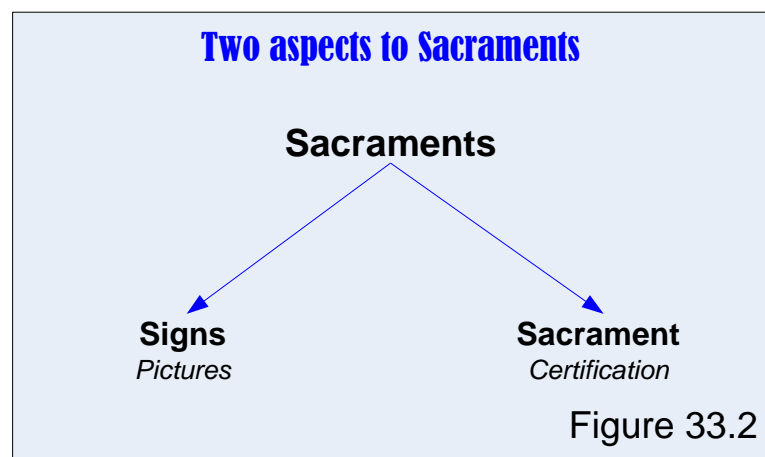
With DeBrès, the church echoes this care of God in His gift of sacraments. Says the church in Article 33: "*We believe (i.e., this is a confession of faith!) that our gracious God, **mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity**, has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace towards us.*" My God knows well that I have my doubts about His promises in the gospel; He knows about my struggles of faith. He knows that I question from time to time whether His promises are *really* valid for me in my circumstances, and He knows that at times I wonder whether God really loves me. By means of the sacraments God would confirm to me that He is sensitive to my "*insensitivity and infirmity*." In His care for me, He has given pictures both to illustrate more clearly the message of the gospel and to certify to me that His Word is for *me*. What a love this God displays to me!

TWO ASPECTS

To appreciate God's sensitivity to our insensitivity and infirmity, we need to highlight two aspects characterizing sacraments (see Figure 33.2).

1. The Sacraments are signs.

Illustrations in a book are meant to communicate the same message as that conveyed by the words of the book. In a similar way, the sacraments communicate the same message as is conveyed by the preaching of God's Word. By means of the sacraments it is as though the Lord paints a picture beside His Word in order to spell out to dull hearers what His Word is



all about. Sacraments do not add to or subtract from the Word, but serve to complement the Word and illustrate it – for God is never confusing or contradictory in the messages He gives (though we may be deaf to hearing it, but that’s another matter). As the Church confesses in Lord’s Day 25: “*both the Word and the sacraments [are] intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation.*”

2. The Sacraments are seals.

The purpose of a seal is to certify that something is true, real. Official documents such as passports contain a stamp or a seal in order to certify that they are not counterfeit but real. The sacraments are not just pictures to complement the Word, but they also certify that what God has said in His Word is true *for me*; they make the promise of the gospel *personal*. So the water of baptism is not sprinkled on a doll (so that I see a picture of washing away of sins), but is applied to the *individual*, to *me* – so that I am assured that *my* sins are washed away. Similarly, the bread of Lord’s Supper is not broken at the table and eaten by one man, but is given to each (mature) member of the congregation individually – in order to convince each member that Christ’s death was truly intended for *one’s personal* benefit.

USE

By definition, one could receive the Old Testament sacrament of circumcision only once in a lifetime. God’s command concerning the Old Testament sacrament of Passover was that it be celebrated once per year (Leviticus 23:5). Yet this frequency did not mean that the people of Israel could not ‘use’ the sacraments more often. On the contrary, God’s intent in giving these sacraments was precisely to encourage His people in the struggles of daily living. So the saints of the Old Testament were repeatedly to *use* the gospel captured in their circumcision and in the Passover. They were to do so through daily reflection on the significance of the mark circumcision made in their flesh. Similarly, every supper gave opportunity to remember the glorious message of the Passover meal. Such *use* of the sacraments strengthened and encouraged God’s Old Testament people in their daily struggles.

The same is true for the church today in relation to the sacraments of the New Testament. One hears pleas that the sacrament of Lord’s Supper ought to be celebrated more frequently, perhaps even every Sunday. Yet we are not to confuse frequency of use with frequency of reception. By definition one receives the sacrament of baptism once only, and yet God intends us to use that sacrament daily. In Reformed Churches the Lord’s Supper is traditionally celebrated rather infrequently, but God intends us to use this sacrament daily too. One can receive a sacrament often without actually using it; one can also use a sacrament daily without receiving it over and over again. The focus needs to lie on the *use*, not on the frequency.

CHRIST INSTITUTED TWO SACRAMENTS

Christ instituted only two sacraments: baptism and holy supper. The Anabaptists of DeBrès’ day belittled the sacraments altogether, whereas the Roman Catholics insisted on seven. (They were baptism, confirmation, confession of sin, Lord’s Supper, anointing of the sick, marriage, and ordination to priesthood.) In reaction to this, DeBrès saw it necessary to conclude Article 33 with the words, “*...we are satisfied with the number of sacraments **which Christ our Master has instituted for us, namely, two: the sacrament of baptism and the holy supper of Jesus Christ.***” In subsequent articles we will uncover the biblical basis for these two sacraments.

Points for Discussion:

1. How does the Lord work faith? What does this mean for the centrality of the preaching? What can be done today to ensure that there are sufficient preachers for our children in fifteen years' time?
2. Sacraments are signs and seals. In what way are they signs? In what way are they seals? Explain.
3. Why did God give sacraments in the first place? What 'weakness' is God addressing?
4. How can one 'despise' the sacraments?
5. Does the difference between *receiving* the sacraments and *using* the sacraments.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 25.65, 66, 67, 68

ARTICLE 34: HE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

ARTICLE 34

We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law (Romans 10:4), has by His shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood that one could or would make as an expiation or satisfaction for sins. He has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism. By baptism we are received into the church of God and set apart from all other peoples and false religions, to be entirely committed to Him whose mark and emblem we bear. This serves as a testimony to us that He will be our God and gracious Father for ever.

For that reason He has commanded all those who are His to be baptized with plain water, into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). By this He signifies to us that as water washes away the dirt of the body when poured on us, and as water is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled on him, so the blood of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, does the same thing internally to the soul. It washes and cleanses our soul from sin and regenerates us from children of wrath into children of God. This is not brought about by the water as such but by the sprinkling of the precious blood of the Son of God, which is our Red Sea, through which we must pass to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh, that is, the devil, and enter into the spiritual land of Canaan.

Thus the ministers on their part give us the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives us what is signified by the sacrament, namely, the invisible gifts and grace. He washes, purges, and cleanses our souls of all filth and unrighteousness, renews our hearts and fills them with all comfort, gives us true assurance of His fatherly goodness, clothes us with the new nature, and takes away the old nature with all its works.

We believe, therefore, that anyone who aspires to eternal life ought to be baptized only once. Baptism should never be repeated, for we cannot be born twice. Moreover, baptism benefits us not only when the water is on us and when we receive it, but throughout our whole life. For that reason we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism received only once, and who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers. We believe that these children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as infants were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises which are now made to our children. Indeed, Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, as the Lord commanded in the law that a lamb was to be offered shortly after children were born. This was a sacrament of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Because baptism has the same meaning for our children as circumcision had for the people of Israel, Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2:11).

BAPTISM REPLACES CIRCUMCISION

DeBrès begins Article 34 by reminding us of what we confessed in Article 25 concerning Christ's fulfillment of the ceremonial laws. All the Old Testament ceremonial laws foreshadowed the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Circumcision was one of these ceremonies and symbols. Circumcision involved the drawing of blood by making an incision

in the flesh. This blood pointed to the blood Christ would shed on the cross as payment for sin. Now that Christ has shed His blood and reconciled sinners to God, there is no more need for blood to be shed. For that reason circumcision was discontinued. Writes DeBrès, “*We believe and confess that Jesus Christ, who is the end of the law, has by His shed blood put an end to every other shedding of blood that one could or would make as an expiation or satisfaction for sins. He has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism*” (Article 34). As much as the sacrifices of animals in the Temple were fulfilled and abolished by Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, so too was circumcision fulfilled and abolished through Him.

Accordingly, Jesus Christ replaced the sign of circumcision with a new sign, the sacrament of holy baptism. The Lord God told Abraham that all belonging to the people of Israel were to be circumcised, on penalty of being “*cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant*” (Genesis 17:14). Yet when Abraham’s great Son Jesus Christ was about to ascend into heaven, He instructed His disciples to preach the gospel to all creation and then did not add that all must be circumcised; He instead added, “*He who believes **and is baptized** will be saved*” (Mark 16:16; see also Matthew 28:19). As circumcision was required in the Old Testament, so baptism is required in the New Testament as replacement for circumcision. That is why the apostle calls baptism “*the circumcision of Christ*” (Colossians 2:11). Accordingly, the church confesses in Lord’s Day 27, “*This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, **in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.***”

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM: SIGN

Why did the Lord give as new sacrament the picture of *baptism*? Why did He not have circumcision replaced by, for example, shaving one’s head bald? Or decreeing that His people wear a purple armband?

Essential to the sacrament of baptism is the use of “*plain water*”. We use water daily for washing our hands, an action that assumes the presence of dirt and the desire to get rid of that dirt. Behind the sacrament of baptism is the confession that I am dirty before God, sinful. See Article 15, concerning the doctrine of original sin. Christ, however, shed His blood on the cross, and by His blood He washes me clean of my sins in the sight of God. As an illustration, now, of what Christ’s blood does for sinners, the Lord has given us the sacrament depicting washing. As the Catechism puts it, “*... as surely as water washes away the dirt from my body, so certainly His blood and Spirit **wash away the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sins***” (Lord’s Day 26, Q & A 69). That’s why *water* is used, plain water. This water points up for us the very heart of the gospel. DeBrès puts it this way: “*By this (ie, baptism) He signifies to us that as water washes away the dirt of the body when poured on us, and as water is seen on the body of the baptized when sprinkled on him, so the blood of Christ, by the Holy Spirit, does the same thing internally to the soul. It washes and cleanses our soul from sin and regenerates us from children of wrath into children of God.*”

Similarly, the “Form for the Baptism of Infants” (*Book of Praise*, page 584) echoes this understanding of baptism, ie, that it signifies the washing of souls filthy with sin. In no uncertain terms the Form says that the doctrine of baptism teaches that we, and the children we receive, are dirty, dead in sin, and are therefore in need of washing. To quote the Form, “*The doctrine of holy baptism is summarized as follows: First, we and our children are **conceived and born in sin** and are therefore by nature children of wrath, so that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God unless we are born again. **This is what the immersion in or sprinkling with water teaches us.** It signifies the **impurity of our souls**, so that we may*

*detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our **cleansing** and salvation outside of ourselves. Second, baptism signifies and seals to us **the washing away of our sins** through Jesus Christ. We are therefore, baptized into the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”*

Yet Jesus’ choice to replace circumcision with the picture of washing does not lie ultimately in people’s daily habit of washing hands. Baptism as a symbol of washing away sin finds its vital root in the Old Testament. In the tabernacle there was need from time to time for the priests to wash themselves, or for sick people to wash themselves before offering sacrifices, lest they appear before God as unclean (cf Exodus 30:18ff; Leviticus 14:8f; 15:5ff). One also reads of washing in Ezekiel 36:25, “*Then I will sprinkle clean **water** on you, and you shall be clean; I will **cleanse** you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.*” In agreement with this Old Testament imagery, one can understand the actions of John the Baptist: “*John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins*” (Mark 1:4,5). The message of John’s baptism was clear to people steeped in Old Testament teaching; he was insisting they were filthy on account of sin and needed to be cleansed through the blood of the coming Messiah. When Jesus Christ, then, shed His blood to atone for the sins of His people, it is no surprise that He commanded the same Old Testament picture of washing to be used as a sacrament of the gospel in place of circumcision (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). As a result, we read repeatedly in the book of Acts that people were baptized when they came to faith (cf Acts 2:38,41; 8:12f, 36ff; 9:18; 10:47f; 16:15,33; 18:8).

Baptism, then, is a graphic picture of what the gospel is all about. Through this sacrament, the Lord portrays me as unclean, dead in sin, and at the same time through this sacrament God portrays that my sins are washed away in Jesus Christ. Where sins are washed away, one is righteous before God! How rich the picture of baptism is for persons by nature filthy before God on account of their sins!

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM: SEAL

God commanded that every male in Israel was to receive the sacrament of circumcision in his flesh. In His providence the Lord could have given Israel a picture of the gospel that remained at a distance from each individual. Yet in His care He did not do so; each male Israelite was to carry in his own flesh the sign of God’s covenant of grace with him. God particularized the sacrament so that He might impress on each individual Israelite the fact of God’s covenant with *him*; no one was to think that God’s promises were true for Israel-in-general, but not true for himself specifically. (Of course, the women in Israel were included with their men; the sign granted to the male was equally valid for the female – and evident in marriage when the two became one.)

In line with God’s personalizing of His promise in the Old Testament, Jesus Christ in the New Testament commanded that each believer be baptized individually (cf Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16). So the book of Acts mentions numerous instances of persons who were baptized individually (cf Acts 2:38,41; 8:12f, 36ff; 9:18; 10:47f; 16:15,33; 18:8). Baptism is more than a sign, an illustration of the gospel; like circumcision, baptism is also a seal by which God certifies that the truth signified in the sacrament is true for *me*. When God in His providence has a particular *individual* receive the sign of baptism, the Lord assures that particular person that the promise of the gospel is not a general truth valid for everybody in general and no one in particular. Rather, by having a particular individual receive the sign of

baptism, the Lord assures that person that the promise of the gospel is true specifically for *him*. He may, then, not doubt the truth of what God has done for *him*.

SPRINKLING OR IMMERSION?

One reads of sprinkling in Ezekiel 36:25: “*Then I will **sprinkle** clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.*” In Hebrews 12:24 the apostle speaks of “*the blood of sprinkling.*” These texts have been used to justify that baptism ought to occur by means of sprinkling.

On the other hand, proponents of baptism by immersion refer to a passage as Romans 6:3,4: “*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*” The picture presented by these words is of a baptized person disappearing under the surface of the water as a symbol of his being buried with Christ. The baptized person arises again from under the water as a symbol of his being raised with Christ to a new life. A case can certainly be made, then, for the argument that immersion gives a clearer representation of the wealth of the gospel. This is also the reason why baptism on the mission field tends to be done by immersion.

At the same time, one ought not to become dogmatic about whether baptism is done by sprinkling or by immersion, since the Scriptures do not specify about the manner of baptism. Two practical arguments have contributed to the practice of sprinkling being dominant in Reformed circles. These are 1) immersion is not practical for infants; 2) extremes of temperature in Europe (where the Reformed have their roots) have historically discouraged immersion.

GOD TOOK THE INITIATIVE AND IMPOSED HIS COVENANT

Jesus has given baptism in place of circumcision (see above). Despite the change of picture, though, the essential message of baptism is the same as was the message of circumcision. That is evident from Paul’s characterization of baptism as “*the circumcision of Christ*” (Colossians 2:11).

One first reads of circumcision in Genesis 17:1-14. God took the initiative in coming to Abraham: “*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, **the LORD appeared to Abram** and said to him, I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And **I will make My** covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly*” (vss 1,2). It was not Abraham who approached God seeking a relationship, but God who sovereignly approached Abraham. God did not offer to negotiate with Abraham, nor did He ask Abraham to jump certain hurdles before He would establish a relation with him. How could a creature approach his Creator for a deal, let alone a sinner approach the Holy One?! God’s very identity as **God** dictates that any relation between Him and man must come completely from Him. “*Almighty God*” imposed Himself upon Abraham: “***I will make My covenant between Me and you***” (see also Article 17). As a sign and seal of God’s claim upon the man Abraham, Abraham was to be circumcised.

The same is true in the New Testament. Because His eye was set on Lydia the Lord sovereignly sent the messengers of His glad tidings to her town and proclaimed to her the gospel of forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Jesus Christ – and that’s exactly the content of the covenant God made with Abraham; God would be Lydia’s God. Sovereignly

“the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Here was no negotiation, nor did the Lord give Lydia any options. He imposed on her His bond of love. In accordance with Christ’s command in Mark 16:16, she was baptized when she believed (Acts 16:15), as a sign and seal to her of God’s wonderful claim upon her.

Abraham and Lydia –though removed from each other by centuries of time and hundreds of kilometers– received from the same God the identical promises and gifts that characterize the covenant of grace. Though both by nature belonged to Satan and both by nature were filthy before God on account of sin, God promised to be **Father** for them both, promised to *“provide [them] with all good and avert all evil or turn it to [their] benefit”* (as the “Form for Holy Baptism” puts it). He would be ‘Father’ for them because He would give up His own **Son** to death so that He might wash away all their sins and return them to God’s side (justification). On top of that God promised to give His **Holy Spirit** to dwell within their hearts so that in turn they both might receive a new, changed heart (sanctification). This is the gospel of redemption God impressed upon them both in the covenant – of which the sacrament of circumcision and baptism was the sign and the seal. How marvelously rich this was for them both!

GOD’S COVENANT SPANS THE GENERATIONS

Yet the covenant God established with Abraham was not made with Abraham-by-himself. God was emphatic: *“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you **and your descendants** after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you **and your descendants** after you”* (Genesis 17:7). When Abraham some time later received a son, he could know that the infant in his arms was a covenant child (with all the wealth of that!) on grounds that God had earlier said so. Offspring of Abraham were not God’s children because they earned it, or because Abraham wanted it that way; they were children of God because God imposed His decision upon them. Just as Abraham had no input as to whether there would be a relation between God and him, so also his children would have no input. This fact is made so abundantly clear from God’s express command that *“he who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations”* (Genesis 17:12) – long before they can give their consent. It is God who initiates the covenant, never man, and He includes also the children.

CHILDREN ARE ALSO TO BE BAPTISED

Prior to and during the days of DeBrès, it was said that children should not be baptized. It is still said today. The reasons given for not baptizing children include:

- the New Testament does not in any text command infant baptism,
- the New Testament does not cite any example of infant baptism,
- children do not understand baptism, and
- we do not know if the children in question indeed believe.

DeBrès argued strongly against the notion that children were not to be baptized. He writes, *“we reject the error of the Anabaptists, ... who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers. We believe that these children ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant.”*

In Lord’s Day 27.74 the *Heidelberg Catechism* gives three reasons why infants must also be baptized:

- “*Infants as well as adults belong to God’s covenant and congregation.*” This is a reference to Genesis 17:7, where God told Abraham that His covenant was made with Abraham “*and your descendants after you.*” This notion is repeated in Acts 2:39, “*For the promise is to you **and to your children.***” God does not just make His covenant with individuals but also with the children He in His sovereign providence gives to believing parents. To the Corinthians, amongst whom there were families in which only one of the parents came to faith, Paul writes, “*For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but **now are holy***” (1 Corinthians 7:14). That can only mean that the children of a believing parent are special in God’s eyes, set apart from the other children of town. That, in fact, is why God sovereignly and graciously gave the child (a) believing parent(s).
- The second reason the Catechism mentions in support of infant baptism is, “*Through Christ’s blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to [infants] no less than to adults.*” See again Acts 2:39, “*and to your children.*” For that reason Christ also laid His hands on the children and blessed them, acknowledging the children, too, as heirs of the kingdom of heaven. “*Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven,*” Jesus taught, in keeping with the Old Testament word of God to Abraham (Matthew 19:14). That is also why Lydia was not the only one baptized when she came to faith, but “*she **and her household** were baptized*” (Acts 16:15; see also Acts 16:33). Paul told the elders of Ephesus to “*take heed to ... all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood*” (Acts 20:28). He himself set the example as to the scope of the word ‘all the flock’ when he later instructed the children of Ephesus to “*obey your parents in the Lord*” (Ephesians 6:1). These children belonged.
- In the third place the Catechism supports infant baptism on the ground that children of believing parents “*must be ... **distinguished from the children of unbelievers.** This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.*” The children of believers are different because they are God’s children. (See proof-texts above.)

Over the years and centuries of church history, there was general uniformity within Reformed churches on the correctness of infant baptism. That uniformity is eroded today, due to a strong Arminian strain in today’s evangelicalism. The Gospel speaks of God sending His Son to pay for my sins when I have not even desired or asked Him to do so. It was God who sent Christ into the world, and it was God who imposed His covenant gospel –redemption in Christ– on me and on the children He is pleased to give. Since He is God and I but a man, I do not have any say in His laying a claim on me and giving me rich promises. Here we come to the deciding factor with regard to baptizing or not baptizing infants: *How does one view the relationship between Almighty God and the sinner?* In Arminian thinking the distance between God and the sinner is shrunk. See Figure 14.3. In that diagram, the distance between God and man is absolute. Today’s theological climate, however, brings God down somewhat from the top of the page, and raises man somewhat from the bottom. The lessened distance between God and man gives man (he thinks) the right to express an opinion toward God and consider himself a negotiating partner. So, instead of baptism spelling out God’s sovereign work upon me, baptism is made into a sign that I agree to a relation with God, that I consent to receive God’s promises and believe in Him. Since this baptism now expresses my agreement with God’s gift, baptism can only be administered to those who have come to an age of discretion.

This attack on the relation between God and man does not pass Reformed churches by. How

long will the Church continue to embrace the notion of infant baptism? The Church will do so for as long as it holds on to the fact that God is **God**. As long as God is seen as the Almighty who sovereignly imposes His work of salvation upon people dead in sin, there shall remain in our thinking a place for infant baptism. When man is given a place in the covenant in the sense that the reality of God's promises is dependent in some way on man's answer, there is no longer room for a sacrament that impresses upon sinners God's sovereign gift of salvation. The Church will continue to administer infant baptism for as long as she holds on to the opening section of the Form for the Baptism of Infants – which in no flattering terms describes us as lost sinners. As soon as one raises the self, and so lessens the distance between God and man, the doctrine of infant baptism is at stake.

That is also when we lose our comfort. If baptism no longer signifies God's claim upon me, if baptism instead signifies that I have faith in my heart, then I am left with no objective sign of God's claim upon me. We all experience that our faith fluctuates daily. One day we feel strong in the faith, while the next day we doubt whether that sin of years ago, or perhaps of last week, is really forgiven. If my baptism signifies the faith in my heart, this baptism cannot remind me of God's unchanging promises to me, but it can only remind me that once upon a time, in a pious moment, I said I believed in God. In times of doubt a reminder that I once embraced the faith is not really helpful. Comfort and security come not from recalling the conviction I used to have, but come from focusing on a God who does not change. That is what God intended with the sacrament of baptism; sinners' attention should be focused on the God who once laid claim to us and never changes.

In view of the riches of this doctrine, DeBrès could tell his congregation how rich they were in spite of the tensions of their day, including the threats and realities of persecution. They were rich because God had made His covenant with them, and signified and sealed it to them in baptism. Hence DeBrès writes concerning baptism, *"This serves as a testimony to us that He will be our God and gracious Father for ever."*

I AM TO EMBRACE THE CONTENTS OF GOD'S PROMISES

God, then, establishes His covenant with believers and the children He entrusts to their care. This work of God makes believing parents and their children so very rich. Does this mean, however, that every child also automatically receives the *contents* of the promises? Is every child entrusted to believing parents guaranteed a place in heaven?

The point is this: God's covenant contains two parts, promises and obligations (see Article 17). In order to get the contents of the promises of the covenant I must answer the obligations of the covenant. Consider receiving a cheque. I do not have the \$1000 mentioned in the cheque as long as the cheque remains in my drawer; my bank balance has not grown and I have no cash in hand to spend. The \$1000 mentioned in the cheque does not help me a penny unless and until I do something with the cheque, namely, cash it. The cheque itself is no more than a promise with which I must *do* something in order to receive what has been promised. So it is with the covenant. In baptism as sign and seal, the Lord God graciously imposed His glorious covenant upon me. How do I obtain the contents of what He promises me in His covenant? I obtain the contents by *responding* to the promises made to me in baptism. *I need to respond to my baptism!* This response is *faith*. In faith I need to embrace what God promises me. If I fail to believe those promises, I will not receive the contents of those promises. (See the explanation on Article 22 for more on Faith).

Jacob and Esau serve to illustrate the point. Father Isaac could set both boys on his two

knees, and reassure both that the Lord God had claimed them to be His children (see Genesis 17:7). Both had the promise that God was their Father, both had the promise of the forgiveness of their sins through Christ, and both had the promise that God would dwell in them through His Holy Spirit. Yet Jacob went to heaven and Esau went to hell (see Malachi 1:2,3). How can this be? **Faith** is the deciding factor. *“Since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation, we are, through baptism, **called and obliged by the Lord to a new obedience. We are to cleave to this one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to trust Him, and to love Him with our whole heart, soul and mind, and with all our strength**”* (“Form for the Baptism of Infants”, *Book of Praise*, page 585). Esau did not embrace God’s promises in faith, while Jacob did; Esau did not ‘deposit his cheque’, while Jacob did. I, too, need to believe what God has promised to me in His covenant with me, on penalty of forfeiting the wealth inherent in the covenant. I may not take the wealth contained in my baptism for granted, but need to respond to my baptism.

Responding to God’s promises, believing them and working with them, is not a ‘once off’ action’ but a daily exercise. Today God leads my life in a particular way. As I digest the feelings awakened by singing birds or a carping boss, I am to work with the promises of Scripture that *“all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose”* (Romans 8:28). The “Form for the Baptism of Infants” paraphrases this promise of Scripture like this: God the Father *“provides me with all good and averts all evil or turns it to my benefit”*. My response to God’s promises in the nuts and bolts of daily living shows whether I appreciate His covenant bond with me or not, whether I am ‘cashing in’ on His promises or not. The same is true in relation to the sins I commit daily. As I reflect upon my sins of the day and repent of them, I respond to God’s promises by remembering and believing that *today’s* sins are washed away in the blood of Christ, forgiven – for that is what God signified and sealed to me at my baptism. Similarly, in the face of the failures I daily see in myself in my struggle against sin, I respond with faith to the promise of God every time I believe again that God gives me His Holy Spirit to renew my heart. Responding to God’s promises in baptism is a daily exercise, giving daily benefits.

CURSES ON UNBELIEF

If, on the other hand, I decline (daily) to respond in faith, my unbelief does not undo the covenant God made with me, for God’s covenant stands eternally. If I despise His promises, I shall receive the greater punishment –eternally– *“for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more”* (Luke 12:48). Through his unbelief the child of Christian parents who spurns God’s covenant of grace invariably brings the curses of God upon himself – unless he repents. That in turn is why parents can continue to lay the promises of the covenant before their straying child. Promises of curse and of blessing remain, dependent on how we respond to the covenant.

NO REPEAT BAPTISMS

“We believe, therefore, that anyone who aspires to eternal life ought to be baptized only once.” After all, God’s promises are sure. He always means what He says, and therefore He needs to say it once only. Besides, baptism portrays that we are raised to new life with Christ, and as *“we cannot be born twice ... baptism should never be repeated.”*

We understand that for a people persecuted on account of the faith (as they were in DeBrès’ day), God’s gift of baptism was a source of great encouragement. How true is DeBrès’ word, *“baptism benefits us not only when the water is on us and when we receive it, but throughout*

our whole life.” One is not to be baptized repeatedly, but one may and certainly must keep on using this gracious gift of God to His struggling children.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why is circumcision no longer the sign and seal of God’s covenant with His people?
2. Why does the new sign revolve around the illustration of washing? What encouragement does the kitchen tap daily give us?
3. Is sprinkling or immersion the preferred method for baptizing? Why?
4. In what way is baptism a *sign* of the covenant?
5. In what way is baptism a *seal* of the covenant?
6. Why did the Lord not negotiate a covenant with you? Why did He impose the covenant long before you could express your interest (or rejection)?
7. Do all (baptized) children of believers automatically receive the goods promised in baptism? Explain.
8. Argue from Scripture that children of believers are to be baptized.
9. Explain why the practice of adult baptism is popular among evangelical Christians.

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 26; 27
Form for Baptism of Infants (and Adults), *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 35: THE SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

ARTICLE 35

We believe and confess that our Saviour Jesus Christ has instituted the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and sustain those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His church.

Those who are born anew have a twofold life. One is physical and temporal, which they received in their first birth and is common to all men. The other is spiritual and heavenly, which is given them in their second birth and is effected by the word of the gospel in the communion of the body of Christ. This life is not common to all but only to the elect of God.

For the support of the physical and earthly life God has ordained earthly and material bread. This bread is common to all just as life is common to all. For the support of the spiritual and heavenly life, which believers have, He has sent them a living bread which came down from heaven (John 6:51), namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and sustains the spiritual life of the believers when He is eaten by them, that is, spiritually appropriated and received by faith.

To represent to us the spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body and wine as a sacrament of His blood. He testifies to us that as certainly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands and eat and drink it with our mouths, by which our physical life is then sustained, so certainly do we receive by faith, as the hand and mouth of our soul, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Saviour, in our souls for our spiritual life.

It is beyond any doubt that Jesus Christ did not commend His sacraments to us in vain. Therefore He works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs. We do not understand the manner in which this is done, just as we do not comprehend the hidden activity of the Spirit of God. Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ. However, the manner in which we eat it is not by mouth but in the spirit by faith. In that way Jesus Christ always remains seated at the right hand of God His Father in heaven; yet He does not cease to communicate Himself to us by faith. This banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ makes us partakers of Himself with all His benefits and gives us the grace to enjoy both Himself and the merit of His suffering and death. He nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of His flesh, and refreshes and renews them by the drinking of His blood.

Although the sacrament is joined together with that which is signified, the latter is not always received by all. The wicked certainly takes the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament. Thus Judas and Simon the sorcerer both received the sacrament, but they did not receive Christ, who is signified by it. He is communicated exclusively to the believers.

Finally, we receive this holy sacrament in the congregation of the people of God with humility and reverence as we together commemorate the death of Christ our Saviour with thanksgiving and we confess our faith and Christian religion. Therefore no one should come to this table without careful self-examination, lest by eating this bread and drinking from this cup, he eat and drink judgment upon himself (1 Corinthians 11:28,29). In short,

we are moved by the use of this holy sacrament to a fervent love of God and our neighbours. Therefore we reject as desecrations all additions and damnable inventions which men have mixed with the sacraments. We declare that we should be content with the ordinance taught by Christ and His apostles and should speak about it as they have spoken.

PURPOSE OF LORD'S SUPPER

The people of DeBrès' congregation had been raised in the Roman Catholic faith. In relation to the Lord's Supper, these people had been taught that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary so many centuries earlier did not ultimately help a sinner today unless a priest offered Christ to God again and again. According to Roman Catholic teaching, this recurring sacrifice of Jesus Christ took place in the sacrament of Lord's Supper (known in Roman Catholic circles as the 'mass'). The Church of the Reformation caught this teaching in Lord's Day 30.80 of the Heidelberg Catechism: *"the mass teaches, first, that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the suffering of Christ [on Calvary's cross many years ago] unless He is still offered for them daily by the priests...."*

In Article 21 DeBrès had already echoed Scripture's teaching on the value of Christ's sacrifice on Calvary: Christ *"presented Himself in our place before His Father, appeasing God's wrath by His full satisfaction, offering Himself on the tree of the cross, where He poured out His precious blood to purge away our sins."* If, then, Christ's sacrifice does not need to be repeated, what is the correct understanding of this sacrament? What has the Lord revealed about the purpose of His supper? For the benefit of His congregation, DeBrès summarized Biblical instruction on the point like this: *"We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has instituted the sacrament of the holy supper to nourish and sustain those whom He has already regenerated and incorporated into His family, which is His Church."* Notice DeBrès' emphasis on nourishment as purpose of this sacrament. We are weak (see Article 33); so God, mindful of our weakness, gives us this supper to nourish us. How does that work?

THE REGENERATED HAVE A TWOFOLD LIFE

DeBrès speaks about two forms of life. *"One is physical and temporal ..., the other is spiritual and heavenly."* The physical, temporal life describes our physical bodies, which require food in order to survive. *"For the support of the physical and earthly life God has ordained earthly and material bread. This bread is common to all just as life is common to all."* It's something we all observe and experience daily: all people depend on earthly foodstuffs in order to survive.

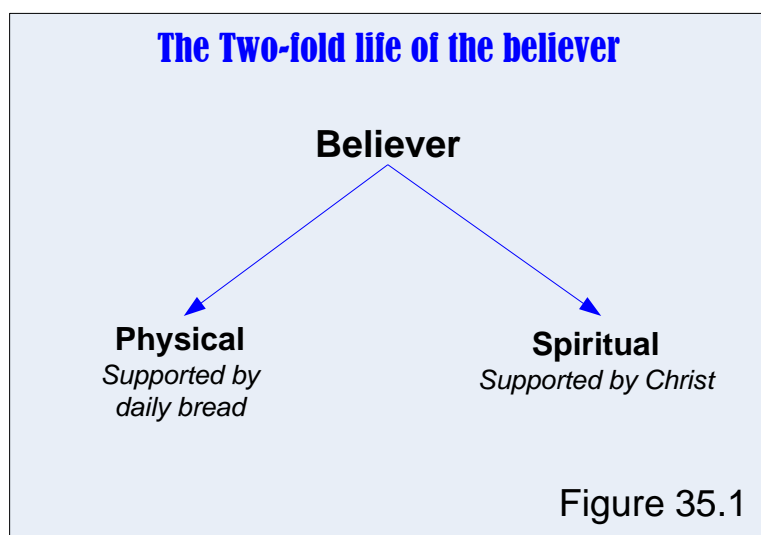


Figure 35.1

All people, however, have a second aspect to their beings, and that is their spiritual, ‘religious’ side. Because of the fall into sin, this spiritual ‘self’ is dead (Ephesians 2:1) – which is to say that one’s focus and hope is not on the living God but on some created thing (be it self or an idol or even Satan). By the grace of the Lord God, some people have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit so that they are raised to new life; their spiritual ‘self’ is alive with a heavenly life (see Article 24). Like physical life, this spiritual life also requires nourishment and sustenance in order to live and thrive. *“For the support of the spiritual and heavenly life, which believers have, [God] has sent them a living bread which came down from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ, who nourishes and sustains the spiritual life of the believers when He is eaten by them.”* Christ is the spiritual food for the soul of the believers, the regenerated.

DeBrès learned this from Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus once told the Jews, *“I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. **I am the living bread** which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and **the bread that I shall give is My flesh**, which I shall give for the life of the world”* (John 6:48-51). Manna could only nourish and sustain the physical body in its temporal existence, but Christ’s flesh, spiritual food, nourishes and sustains unto eternity.

THE LORD’S SUPPER

How, though, does Christ nourish regenerated sinners with His own flesh, *“the living bread”*? Like all things spiritual, spiritual food and drink are invisible to the naked eye. In order to reassure us therefore that He does indeed nourish and refresh our souls with spiritual food and drink, Christ has given us a sign and seal of this reality in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. *“To represent to us the spiritual and heavenly bread, Christ has instituted earthly and visible bread as a sacrament of His body and wine as a sacrament of His blood. He testifies to us that as certainly as we take and hold the sacrament in our hands and eat and drink it with our mouths, by which our physical life is then sustained, so certainly do we receive by faith, as the hand and mouth of our soul, the true body and true blood of Christ, our only Savior, in our souls for our spiritual life.”* That brings us to a discussion of what this sacrament is all about.

THE SUPPER AND PASSOVER

The New Testament sacrament of Lord’s Supper replaces the Old Testament sacrament of Passover – just as Baptism replaced Circumcision (see Article 34). Accordingly, the meaning of the New Testament Lord’s Supper is essentially identical to the meaning of its Old Testament predecessor.

The Lord God instituted Passover in the context of Israel’s exodus from Egypt. The angel of death was to come to Egypt on a given night and kill all the firstborn of the land. To escape the deadly work of the death angel, the people of Israel were to kill a lamb and spread its blood on the lintel and doorposts of their homes. The Israelites were no better than the Egyptians and so deserved God’s judgment as much as their Egyptian neighbors, but by God’s gracious ordinance the Passover lamb would die in their place. The menu for the Passover meal included not just the Passover lamb, but also some bitter herbs and unleavened bread. See Exodus 12:1-8.

Two elements can be distinguished in the Passover. It involved 1) an offering, and 2) a meal.

The offering of the lamb pointed to Calvary, how Christ as “*Lamb of God*” (John 1:29) would die in place of the sinner. To Israel the offering functioned as a visible presentation of the glorious gospel of redemption, namely, God granted deliverance from sin and from His judgment on sin through the death of Another. The people of Israel should eat this Passover lamb not just to receive strength for the coming Exodus journey out of Egypt, but especially to receive reassurance that God’s gift of redemption was really *for them* (see Article 33, about the Sacraments as Seals).

This is why the Lord commanded His people to celebrate the Passover every year anew (Leviticus 23:4ff; Numbers 28:16ff; Deuteronomy 16:1ff). Each year the people of Israel were required to remember both the *slavery* they experienced in Egypt (symbolic as it was of slavery to sin and Satan) as well as the *deliverance* from this slavery (symbolic of deliverance from sin and Satan through Jesus Christ). Israel was not to forget; repeatedly the people were to slaughter a lamb to remind them of the coming Savior, and repeatedly they were to eat that lamb as source of spiritual nourishment in the ongoing struggles of life’s journeys.

INSTITUTION OF LORD’S SUPPER

As a Son of Israel, Jesus also ate the Passover (Matthew 26:26), including the lamb that foreshadowed His own death. In fact, though thousands of lambs had been slaughtered at hundreds of Passover celebrations over the centuries, those lambs could never take away sin and deliver sinners from God’s Angel of Death (Hebrews 10:1-4); the lambs of each Passover insisted that “*the Lamb of God*” (John 1:29) go to the cross to pay for sin. Jesus knew He was “*the Lamb of God*”, and so knew when He ate the Passover lamb that He had to die for sin Himself.

In that context, “*as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to the disciples*” (Matthew 26:26). How intriguing! Why did Jesus take *bread*, while there was on the table the meat of the Passover lamb – the lamb that symbolized Himself? Would that meat not be the natural representation of Himself – Lamb of God that He was who would be sacrificed in place of sinners? He chose bread instead of meat because His coming sacrifice on the cross would put an end to every shedding of blood – including that of lambs killed to pay for sin. Here is the good news of the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb! Just as the sacrificed lamb of the Old Testament sacrament of Passover illustrated to Israel the coming sacrifice of “*the Lamb of God*” on Calvary’s cross, so the (bloodless) bread of the New Testament sacrament of Lord’s Supper illustrates to the Church the completed sacrifice of “*the Lamb of God*” on Good Friday. As Israel ate the lamb so that each Israelite might be assured that the coming “*Lamb of God*” would die *for them*, so Church members are told to eat the bread as reassurance that Christ truly died *for their benefit*.

THE LORD’S SUPPER AND THE COVENANT

During the institution of the new sacrament, Jesus held up a cup and said to His disciples, “*Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins*” (Matthew 26:27,28). The word ‘covenant’ usually directs our thoughts to the sacrament of Baptism. However, the word ‘covenant’ should equally make us think of the Lord’s Supper, for the reality of the covenant is driven home to us also in this sacrament.

Jesus’ phrase “*My blood of the new covenant*” comes from Exodus 24. After the Lord God delivered Israel from their bondage in Egypt (Exodus 14), He established with His people His covenant of grace at Mt Sinai (Exodus 20). God, then, on grounds of the gospel of the lamb,

instituted a bond of love between Himself and this nation of sinners; He claimed the people as His own. The people, of course, should then live as God's people, and God spelled out what that should look like in Exodus 21-23. Once that covenant was made, Moses "*built an altar*" and then (says Exodus 24:5-8) Moses "*sent young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. And Moses took half the blood and put it in basins, and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant*" –that's the laws of Exodus 21-23– "*and read [it] in the hearing of the people*" – for the people needed to know how to live holy lives befitting people of such a God. Once the people heard the stipulations of God's bond of love with them, "*they said, 'All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient.'*" And Moses took the blood" which he'd earlier set aside in basins, and "*sprinkled it on the people, and said, 'Behold the **blood of the covenant** which the LORD has made with you according to all these words.'*"

Notice: there is one blood collected from the sacrificed animals. Moses sprinkled some of that blood on the altar for God, and sprinkled the other half on the people. This one blood links God to the people, and the people to God; it is because of blood that a bond of love can exist between holy God and this sinful people. The blood sprinkled on the altar (God) and the people spells out the *unity* between God and these people, and so makes graphically visible the wealth caught in the gospel of the Passover lamb: sinful Israel is spared God's sentence of death so that God might establish His bond of love with them. In truth, here is glorious gospel, pure and sparkling!

Now Jesus, after He has replaced the Passover lamb with the bread, took the cup and blessed it, and then spoke of "*My blood of the new covenant*". No, we do not read of the cup containing blood, or of blood being sprinkled, for Christ Himself is the Lamb who would die once for all. The content of the cup would from now on symbolize the blood this Lamb shed once for all on the cross. That's also the import of the word 'new'. This covenant is not different from the covenant of Mt Sinai (with its animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins), but is new inasmuch as it has entered a new phase with its focus on Christ's completed work.

This cup Jesus now "*gave to*" each disciple (Matthew 26:27) with the command to "*drink from it.*" Each disciple should know that God's covenant of love was established with and was real for each of them on the ground that Christ's blood on the cross took their sins away. Just as the Israelites of Exodus 24 received in the blood sprinkled on them a visible proof of God's covenant with them, so the disciples –and we today– have tangible evidence of the reality of God's covenant with us by receiving the cup. As I drink from this cup, I am assured of God's hearty love for me; He made His covenant even with *me*. The cup, then, spells out the wonderful consequence that follows from the Lamb's sacrifice; for Christ's sake I actually belong to God!

Given such a glorious message caught in the sacrament of Lord's Supper, DeBrès can confidently confess, "*It is beyond any doubt that Jesus Christ did not commend His sacraments to us in vain.*" One may not be able to understand precisely how eating and drinking the body and blood of the Lord in the sacrament strengthens faith and nourishes the soul. Yet the fact of the matter is that at His table we are united with the same Christ who is today in heaven as our Head and Mediator, and we are assured that we are fully His – and His riches are ours.

A MEAL AT THE LORD'S TABLE

In Matthew 26 we read that Jesus and His disciples were eating around a table. Christ was

the host, with His disciples around Him. Though the Passover was a sacrifice *and* a meal (see above), the Lord's Supper which Christ instituted had no sacrifice, no offering, because Christ Himself would die the next day. So Paul could later write, "*Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us*" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The New Testament picture, then, knows only the element of a meal, and not the element of the sacrifice.

One enjoys a meal with friends, not with enemies. Yet with whom did Christ eat? He ate with sinners, persons who by nature are enemies of God! Jesus knew that the disciples at table with Him were so depraved that they would shortly desert Him (see Matthew 26:31), and He knew too that one would soon declare three times that he had nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth in His hour of need (see Matthew 26:34). Yet with men as these Jesus sat down to a meal, and even offered them bread with the instruction to "*take, eat; this is My body,*" and gave a cup with the command to "*drink from it, all of you.*" The reality of sin did not cause Jesus to withhold the sacrament from these men. Rather, since Christ would go to the cross for the benefit of sinners and reconcile them to God, Jesus the Son of God now sat at table with sinners! How different the circumstances in Genesis 3, when we were driven out of Paradise on account of our fall into sin, exiled from the presence of God! Now we're told to sit at table with the Son of God; how marvelous the gospel!! Well does DeBrès connect sitting at table with Jesus Christ and the strengthening of faith: "*This banquet*" –notice that delightful word– "*is a spiritual table at which Christ makes us partakers of Himself with all His benefits and gives us the grace to enjoy both Himself and the merit of His suffering and death. He nourishes, strengthens, and comforts our poor, desolate souls by the eating of His flesh, and refreshes and renews them by the drinking of His blood.*"

SIGNS AND SEALS

Should Thomas doubt that the Lamb of God would die for him? Should Peter remain uncertain as to whether God's covenant of grace was really valid for him – crass liar that he was? How comforting Jesus' words to each disciple when He extended the bread to them, "*Take, eat; this is My body*" (Matthew 26:26). And how pastorally sensitive was Jesus' formulation when He held out the cup to His disciples, and said, "*Drink from it, all of you*" (Matthew 26:27). Christ's command was addressed to each of the disciples – to Peter and to John and to Thomas and to Matthew. He did so in order to personalize the message of the sacrament; none should doubt that the gospel of the sacrament was true *for the self*. The picture of the sacrament, with Christ's body being broken and His blood shed, was not to remain at arm's length from the participants, as if its message was a general truth not necessarily valid for them personally; rather, each was to eat and drink personally so that each might be reassured that Christ's body was broken and His blood shed *for them*. As the church confesses in Lord's Day 28: "*as surely as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and the cup of the Lord as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely does He Himself nourish and refresh my soul to everlasting life with His crucified body and blood.*" No individual child of God may be left doubting whether Christ's sacrifice benefits him.

NOURISHMENT BY FAITH

Does my sitting at the table automatically make me partake of the riches of the table? DeBrès gives this answer: "*Although the sacrament is joined together with that which is signified, the latter is not always received by all. The wicked certainly takes the sacrament to his condemnation, but he does not receive the truth of the sacrament.*" One can sit at a table laden with food, but this food will not nourish the body unless it is eaten. So it is with the table of the Lord. It is laden with rich food for the soul, but the soul will not be nourished

unless one eats this food, not with the mouth, but by faith.

To appreciate what it means to eat ‘by faith’, we do well to consider the instructions God gave to Israel concerning the first Passover. Israel was told (Exodus 12:1-14) on the first day of the month (vs 2) to set aside a lamb on the tenth day of the month (vs 3) to be killed on the fourteenth day (vs 6). On the first day of the month they were told what to do two weeks later with the lamb’s blood; they were to smear it on the doorposts and lintel of the door of their home (vs 7). They were also told on the first day that on the fourteenth they had to eat the lamb roasted (not raw or boiled) as well as eat unleavened bread (which is bread made without yeast) and bitter herbs (vs 8). More, when they ate this meal on the fourteenth day, they had to wear “*a belt on your waist, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand*” (vs 11).

There was something very distasteful, even offensive, about the meal God wanted His people to eat on the fourteenth of the month. Eat a meal when there’s blood around your door..., and the menu is bitterly distasteful herbs for vegetables and a heavy piece of unleavened bread?! It’s anything but appetizing! Yet for two weeks the people could think on the coming meal..., could think about whether to obey or not.... To top it all off, God announced that an angel of death would come through the land checking the doors.... Who had heard of such a thing before?! To obey took *faith*.

What was God’s purpose in all this? God was teaching His people to live and walk by faith. They had to embrace as true God’s promise that He would deliver them from Egypt’s slavery, and had to entrust themselves and their loved ones to His course of action. So they had to obey God’s instructions, never mind whether they found those instructions agreeable or offensive, logical or foolish. Embracing God’s promises, entrusting oneself to His care, obeying His commands: these actions are the evidence of faith. The apostle to the Hebrews describes faith repeatedly as *action*; “*by faith Abel offered..., by faith Noah ... prepared an ark..., by faith Abraham ... went..., by faith Isaac blessed..., by faith [Moses] kept the Passover*” (Hebrews 11:4-28). Israel’s obedience to God’s commands in the days before their Exodus pointed up that they believed God and so took His instructions seriously. At the same time God strengthened their faith through that sacrament when they could witness that the Angel of Death actually did pass their houses by (though not their Egyptian neighbors’), and they actually did escape the slavery of Egypt in the Exodus itself.

So it is, too, at the table of the Lord. Sitting at the Lord’s Table only benefits me if I believe that Christ saves me from Satan’s bondage through His sacrifice on the cross – as the bread and the wine signify. This faith is strengthened when I look past the bread and wine to the work Christ has done for me on the cross. I *embrace as true* His work of deliverance, I *entrust myself* to His work as Mediator before God, I *obey* His instruction to eat that little piece of bread and drink that small drop of wine as tokens of His body and blood. The Lord at His table strengthens the faith I exhibit in actions of obedience, and reassures me in the midst of life’s storms and questions that I really am a child of His. That’s how, at His table, my soul is nourished to everlasting life.

Here lies the difference between the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is a sacrament I *receive*; I am passive, for as a child I am yet unaware. With the Lord’s Supper I am active, I *respond* to what God says. In the Lord’s Supper I reply to what God has promised me in baptism, when He established His covenant with me and declared that I was His child. I respond by going to the Table and eating the tokens of His work for me. As

DeBrès writes, “*the manner in which we eat [the body of Christ] is not by mouth **but in the spirit by faith.***”

THE ELEMENTS

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, He used bread and wine (see Matthew 26:26-29). Are we to use bread today, regardless of whether bread is commonplace in one’s culture? Are we to use only wine, irrespective of whether one struggles (has struggled) with alcohol abuse?

Our Savior has instituted the Lord’s Supper so that sinners’ attention might be directed to His perfect sacrifice in our place. The “Form for the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper” in the *Book of Praise* (page 600) catches this notion well: “*Brothers and sisters, in order that may now be nourished with Christ, the true heavenly bread, we must not cling with our hearts to the outward symbols of bread and wine, but lift our hearts on high in heaven, where Christ, our advocate, is, at the right hand of His heavenly Father.*” A participant’s gaze, then, may not be fixed on the bread (is it cut right, is it leavened or unleavened, is it barley bread or wheat – or even sago bread), and on the cup (is there one cup or many, does it contain alcoholic wine or fruit juice – or even tea). Debates on questions as these serve only to tear one’s eye away from the Savior and the glorious gospel He prepared – just what Satan wants. Jesus used bread and wine as signs and seals of His gospel; let the church use bread and wine – and insist that this matter is too secondary to receive much attention. If a brother or sister is so convinced that the content of the cup hinders his strengthening, let the church recognize his weakness and give an alternative. As long as the focus of each participant remains on Christ!

FENCING OF THE TABLE

Ought the table of the Lord to be open to all and sundry who have the whim to attend? The answer is obviously negative. The sacrament is given to the church for the strengthening of faith. It follows that those who attend must possess faith – else their faith cannot be strengthened.

Yet faith is not a static something that sits on a shelf so that I can point to it and say, ‘See, I have faith, there it is.’ Rather, faith is *action* (see Article 22), is dynamic; it manifests itself in deeds (James 2:14-26). Deeds give opportunity for self-examination, as well as for others to evaluate what makes you tick. As we speak about the question of who may attend the table of the Lord, we need –in line with Scripture– to consider three layers of responsibility. The first is the individual, the second is the communal, and the third is the pastoral.

FIRST LAYER – SELF-EXAMINATION

Paul’s instruction to the Christians of Corinth was clear: “*let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup*” (1 Corinthians 11:28). That the apostle placed primary emphasis on the individual is nothing new. In the Old Testament the Lord God gave responsibility first of all to the individual in Israel. If a person in Israel became unclean (through bodily discharge, touching a dead body, etc), it was primarily the responsibility of the unclean individual to stay away from the tabernacle, wash oneself, and make the necessary sacrifices before God (see, for example, Leviticus 12). The same emphasis on personal responsibility pervades the New Testament.

The Corinthian Christians had the practice of eating a meal together. This congregational meal was common in the early church, and appears to have flowed into a Lord’s Supper

celebration (see Acts 2:42). In Corinth, though, the rich of the congregation ate luxuriously while the poor looked on, and when the rich had eaten sufficiently (and the poor were still hungry), the Lord's Supper was celebrated (see vss 21, 33-34). Since the brotherly love that must characterize the Lord's Table was so sadly lacking in this conduct, Paul admonished the Corinthians for selfishness and greed, and instructed them to have their meals at home (vss 22,34).

In this context Paul drew attention to Christ's example. *"For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you [when I first preached the gospel to you]: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'"* (vss 23-25). If in this Supper Jesus Christ gave evidence of His selfless obedience to God and His trust in God by denying Himself and going to the cross to benefit another, how proper it is for His people also to deny self in obedience to the Lord. Action gives evidence of faith!

For that reason each Christian of Corinth was instructed to *"examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup"* (vs 28). If the bread and cup of the Lord's supper point up what Christ did for me in having His body broken on the cross and His blood shed for my salvation, it will not do for me to act selfishly and cold-heartedly to my poorer brothers and sisters. So Paul says: *"whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner"* –and that's to say, without the spirit of self-emptying Christ displayed– *"will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord"* (vs 27). So: *"let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of that cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body"* (vs 28,29). The well-to-do in the Corinthian congregation were by their selfishness in fact eating and drinking the Lord's supper *"in an unworthy manner"* and the result was that *"many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep"* (vs 30). In other words: their selfish attitude at the Lord's Table prompted God to bring sickness and death within their congregation. Hence the desperate need for fencing the table in relation to oneself.

What does self-examination involve? The "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" (*Book of Praise*, page 595) elaborates on this notion of self-examination. The "Form" mentions the following three parts:

- *"Let everyone consider his sins and accursedness so that he, detesting himself, may humble himself before God."* The point of self-examination is not to discover whether or not one has sinned. The Form takes one's *"sins and accursedness"* for granted, and asks us to *"consider"* these *"sins and accursedness"*, to evaluate what we think of our sins. Considering our sins rightly makes one *humble* before God. 'Humble' is the key word here. (See also the first part of the Catechism, which deals with our Sin and Misery, Lord's Days 2-4).
- In second place, each is to *"search his heart whether he also believes the sure promise of God that all his sins are forgiven him only for the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ...."* The significant word here is 'believe'. The point is, then, whether one's eyes are fixed on Christ's sacrifice, whether one is convinced that Christ's sacrifice covers one's sins. It is not that hard to determine whether or not one's focus is on Christ such that he finds in Christ all he needs for his salvation. (See the second part of the Catechism, which deals with Our Deliverance in Lord's Days 5-31).

- The third aspect of self-examination revolves around the cause of your conduct. “*Let everyone examine his conscience whether it is his sincere desire to show true thankfulness to God with his entire life....*” What makes you tick? Are the things you do prompted by gratitude for what God has done in Christ, or are they prompted by fear of God, or perhaps by confidence in oneself? Gratitude to God for what He did for us in Christ of necessity prompts love for the neighbor – for we reflect what God has done for us. (See the third part of the Catechism, which deals with Our Thankfulness, Lord’s Days 32-52).

As I examine myself, will I confess that I am a lost sinner? Do I believe that Christ has paid for all my sins? Do I, in thankfulness to God, seek to live a life of obedience to God and love to my neighbor? Where the answer to such questions is Yes, God *commands* me (sinner that I am) to sit down at His table. For He wants to impress upon me what He has done for me in Christ. Therefore He tells me to eat the bread and to drink the wine. And He tells me that as surely as I taste these, so certainly has He given Christ for *me*. How encouraging His word of promise!

On the other hand, what am I to do if I actually quite enjoy my sins, or see my faith in Christ as little more than an insurance for the day of death? In such a situation, the responsibility to stay away from the table of the Lord is first of all my own! The Lord of the table is a holy God, and all my actions –and the motivations behind them– are well known to this God. I dare not defy the holiness of this God and His table, and so eat and drink judgment upon myself. Fencing is first of all my personal responsibility!

SECOND LAYER – COMMUNAL CARE

As the Lord God loved undeserving sinners (and so sent His Son to earth to redeem them), so the Lord would also have people love people – irrespective of whether the other is friendly or abhorrent. The Lord God instructed His Old Testament people to be the brother’s keeper: “*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him*” (Leviticus 19:17). The Lord Jesus Christ said that the second great commandment of the law was to “*love your neighbor as yourself*” (Matthew 22:39). If in Corinth the consequence of unholy attendance at the Lord’s table was that “*many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep*” (as the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to explain, 1 Corinthians 11:30), then care for the brotherhood means that the congregation discourage from attending a brother or sister they know is erring – lest they allow God’s judgment to fall upon them (1 Corinthians 11:31). So Paul instructed the *congregation* (see 1 Corinthians 1:2) to “*deliver ... to Satan for the destruction of the flesh*” the man who “*has his father’s wife*” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

There is a distinct parallel here with the task God gave to the Old Testament. “*When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling, a scab, or a bright spot..., then he shall **be brought** to Aaron the priest*” (Leviticus 13:2). The priest in turn pronounced the man leprous and therefore unclean for long periods of time, even cutting him off from the communion of the people and forbidding his coming to the tabernacle for the long term. One can understand that one would not readily volunteer to go to the priest for fear of such consequences. Hence the passive formulation in the text is striking. In care for the holiness of the tabernacle and the people of God, one might need to *instruct* the neighbor to go to the priest, or even *bring* him there. The passage, then, indicates that responsibility for one’s going to the Lord in the tabernacle went beyond the individual to include also the community as a whole. This communal responsibility, we realize, is also behind the instruction to admonish a brother when he sins (see Matthew 18:15; Galatians 6:1; see also Article 32).

THIRD LAYER – THE ELDERS

Only after one has understood personal and communal responsibility in maintaining the holiness of the Lord's table can one rightly speak of the pastoral role of the elders. They need to "*shepherd the flock of God*" (1 Peter 5:2), and shepherding can mean that one forbids a member from attending the table of the Lord – lest he eat and drink judgment on himself and God's wrath be provoked against the congregation (see 1 Corinthians 11:12-32). As the priest of the Old Testament could forbid an Israelite from entering the tabernacle of the Lord due to leprosy (Leviticus 13), so the elders of the New Testament can forbid a child of God from attending the table of the Lord due to unresolved sin.

To carry out their task of guarding the table of the Lord, elders speak with those in the congregation who wish to attend the Lord's table. Before such a member makes profession of faith, the elders visit, speak, listen, and attempt to gauge what lives in the heart of this (young) brother or sister. Elders will respect the prior responsibility of the congregation and let the congregation know that a particular person desires to attend the table – and so give the congregation opportunity to register its dissent before public profession of faith. Further, elders remain in constant touch with congregation members, officially through an annual home visit and unofficially through regular contact in the ebb and flow of daily living. They also keep their ear open to reports they receive from congregation members about a brother's refusal to accept admonition (Matthew 18:17). On the basis of their knowledge about a member's spiritual health, the elders may deny a given member access to the table of the Lord. Fencing the table is also their responsibility.

GUESTS?

Altogether, individual, communal and pastoral responsibility places a good fence around the table of the Lord. The churches give clear expression to their conviction that the Lord of the table is holy.

Should the fence, now, be less restrictive when it comes to guests? A testimony from elders elsewhere (an 'attestation') can cover the third layer (and therefore the second) for a visitor in the congregation. But a personal testimony from a guest can never do more than cover the first layer. Even a supporting testimony from his friend in the congregation can do no more than nibble at the edges of the second layer – to say now nothing of the third layer. Is it then upright for a consistory to be satisfied with a less restrictive policy in relation to guests than for congregation members?

CHILD PARTICIPATION

The attendance of children at the Lord's Supper was not a point of discussion in church history until recently. Nowhere do we find any prohibition in the Old Testament that children could not participate in the sacrament of Passover. Yet Reformed churches have understood that the Lord Jesus Christ has instituted the Lord's Supper for the strengthening of faith. At the very least, then, those who participate must have faith, and the community and the elders must be convinced that the faith is real. More, Reformed churches have understood that those who would attend need to "*rightly examine*" themselves (1 Corinthians 11:28), and one can rightly question whether children have that ability. For this double reason, Reformed churches have historically not given children a place at the table of the Lord's Supper.

Meanwhile, we do well to reiterate that the promises of God remain true also for children. Those promises have been signified and sealed to them in holy baptism. Let parents and churches impress those riches on the children of the covenant, and teach them to respond in

maturity to those promises and learn to examine themselves rightly. More, let parents and churches teach their members of all ages to use the sacrament – where the word ‘use’ means much more than the word ‘receive’ (see the discussion of Article 33). Even without sitting at the table of the Lord children (and others) can be encouraged through the use of the sacrament. Then, at an age of discernment, they most certainly are welcome at the table of the Lord.

Points for Discussion:

1. Why does DeBrès speak in this article about twofold bread? What is he referring to?
2. Explain the meaning of the Passover.
3. What is the connection between Passover and the Lord’s Supper?
4. Why did Jesus not give His disciples meat to eat in His supper (like in Passover)? Is there any encouragement in the fact that He gave bread instead of, say, an olive?
5. How is the sacrament of Lord’s Supper a *sign* of the covenant?
6. How is it a *seal* of the covenant?
7. How does the Lord’s Supper spell out the friendship between Christ and us?
8. Is it possible to eat of the Lord’s Supper and not actually *receive* its nourishment? Explain.
9. How important the chemical nature of the substance in the cup?
10. Is it fitting for children to receive a place at the table of the Lord? Why or why not?
11. Why is fencing of the Lord’s table necessary? Whose responsibility is this fencing? Outline the different levels of responsibility and what they entail.
12. How does one examine oneself? What is one to examine oneself for? When is the self-examination to take place?
13. Should elders have different criteria for permitting guests at the Lord’s table than they have for members? Explain your answer.
14. May you expect to ‘feel’ something special when you eat or drink at the Lord’s table?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 28; 29; 30

Foirm for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 36: HE CIVIL GOVERNMENT

ARTICLE 36

*We believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers. He wants the world to be governed by laws and policies, in order that the licentiousness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order. For that purpose He has placed the sword in the hand of the government to punish wrongdoers and to protect those who do what is good (Romans 13:4). Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the church and its ministry in order that *the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word.*

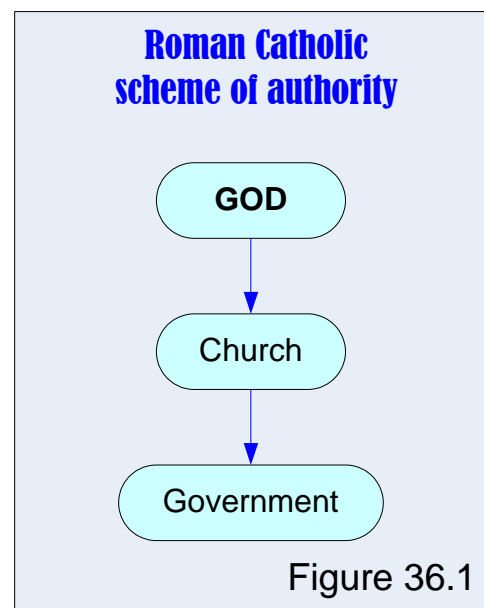
Moreover, everyone - no matter of what quality, condition, or rank - ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God. We ought to pray for them, that God may direct them in all their ways and that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way (1 Timothy 2:1,2).

For that reason we condemn the Anabaptists and other rebellious people, and in general all those who reject the authorities and civil officers, subvert justice, introduce a communion of goods, and confound the decency that God has established among men.

*The following words were deleted here by the General Synod 1905 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland): *all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed.*

BACKGROUND

Guido DeBrès did his work in a context of persecution. Official government policy was that all members of the community were to be obedient adherents to the Roman Catholic faith, if not willingly then by force. This government policy was built on the Roman Catholic understanding of how authority in a society came about. God in Christ as supreme Ruler has invested earthly authority, it was said, in the church. The church in turn sets the standards for public authorities; the governments of the world must listen to and submit to the authority of the church. See Figure 36.1. In practice this meant that Protestants –those who protested against the teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic Church– were to be brought to heel through the force of the government’s sword. As a result, DeBrès and his congregation lived in uncertainty; at every moment their freedom, their property or their persons were endangered.



In that environment, the temptation was real for DeBrès and his fellow believers to develop feelings of disrespect and disdain towards the persecuting authorities. That temptation was the more real because there were people around them who actually embraced such feelings of disdain. These were the Anabaptists, who considered the regenerated to be citizens of the heavenly kingdom of Jesus Christ, and therefore no longer subject to the kings and kingdoms of this earth. They considered earthly governments as worldly and beneath the attention of the heaven-bound Christian, and so declined to participate in governmental affairs, resisted paying taxes, refused to join an army, and disavowed the oath (see Lord's Day 37 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*). To their way of thinking, they ought to listen strictly and only to King Jesus. Figure 36.2 reflects their understanding. This mindset resulted in acts of rebellion against earthly authorities, as the revolt of Munster (1534) illustrates.

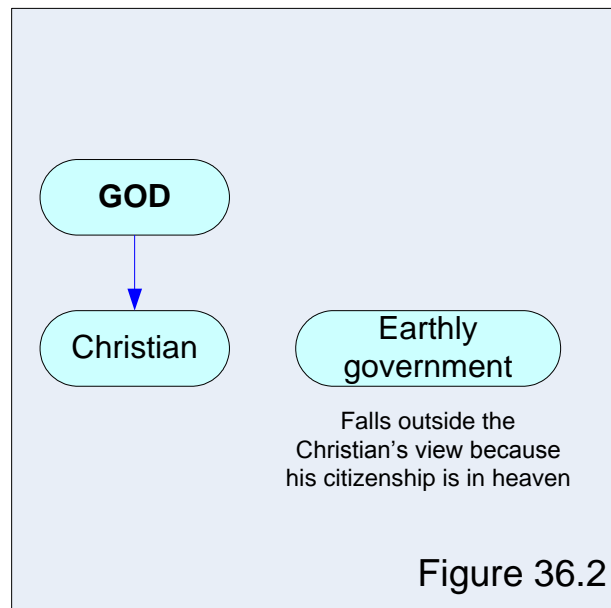


Figure 36.2

One can understand that persecuted Protestants, rejecting as they would the Roman Catholic authority scheme, would be tempted to write off earthly authorities and find the position of the Anabaptists attractive. In fact, Roman Catholic authorities painted all Protestants with one brush, and considered them all Anabaptists – and therefore radical revolutionaries worthy of oppression.

In the face of this two-fold danger, DeBrès included in his Confession an article on Civil Government. In this article he sought to

1. teach his people what the Lord God actually reveals about earthly authorities (neither the Roman Catholic nor the Anabaptist view is correct), and
2. show the earthly authorities that the Reformed were not to be grouped with the Anabaptists as seditious and untrustworthy citizens of the public community.

Though popular thinking on authority is today vastly different than it was in DeBrès' day, and the circumstance of Christians in the western world is greatly different too, the revelation of God concerning authority remains important for today's Christian – be he in government or a member of the community. If Christ is King in all of life, His authority extends to the world's presidents and prime ministers too, and the Christian readily acknowledges that and acts accordingly.

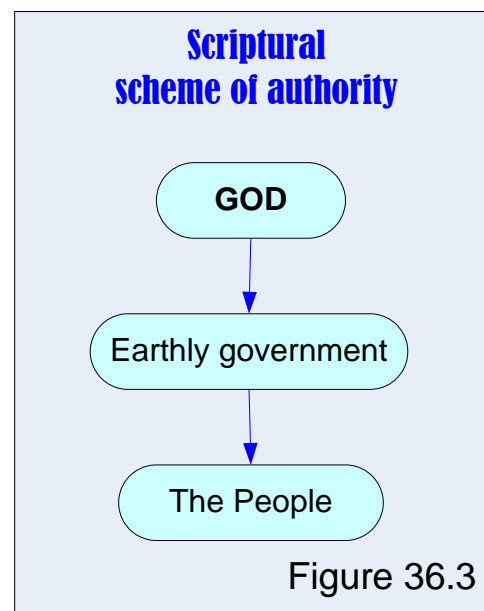
SCRIPTURE ON GOVERNMENT

The Old Testament pictures the world's Creator as the world's King. The psalmist exalts, "*The LORD reigns, He is clothed with majesty.... Surely the world is established, so that it cannot be moved. Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting*" (Psalm 93:1-2). In another place he declares, "*...the LORD is the great God, And the great King above all gods. In His hands are the deep places of the earth; The heights of the hills are His*

also. *The sea is His, for He made it; And His hands formed the dry land*” (Psalm 95:3-5). And again, *“The LORD reigns; Let the peoples tremble”* (Psalm 99:1).

The prophet Isaiah points up the sovereignty of Israel’s God over all government. The news of the day was about wicked Sennecherib of Assyria marching on Jerusalem, and his reputation was evil indeed – for his army pillaged and raped and killed at will. Isaiah speaks God’s word to Israel concerning Assyria: *“Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, And against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, To seize the spoil, to take the prey, And to tread them down like the mire of the streets”* (Isaiah 10:5-6). Notice how the Lord describes mighty Assyria as *“the rod of My anger”*. So great is the Lord’s kingship that this superpower is but a stick in the Lord’s hand. In other words, this government was a servant of God to do His bidding.

The New Testament shows us how the Lord Jesus Christ conquered sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary. As a result, God *“raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all”* (Ephesians 1:20-23). The terms *“principality and power and might and dominion”* are a reference to the powers of darkness, the forces of evil (the demons) that seek to overthrow the Lord’s dominion. The forces of evil seek to use governments to carry out their hellish plans (see Daniel 10:13; Isaiah 24:21). Yet the Holy Spirit assures the people of God that the Lord Jesus Christ has received authority even over such powers of darkness, and therefore also over any and every earthly government that might do the bidding of such forces of evil. As Paul writes to the Romans: *“there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God”* (Romans 13:1). DeBrès echoed this Scriptural instruction in Article 36, *“We believe that ... our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.”* The Biblical picture concerning authority, then, can be schematized as in Figure 36.3.



That the world knows of offices as kings, princes, presidents, prime ministers, etc, is God’s work, and that particular persons fill the office of a king or a president or a prime minister is equally God’s work. This confession leaves no room for the understanding that authority arises from a decision of the people to appoint rulers over themselves from their own midst, who in turn are responsible to the people alone (John Locke’s social contract theory). Scripture teaches that rulers receive authority from God, and not from the people. So rulers are to carry out the will of God, and not necessarily the will of (sinful) people. Equally, rulers are responsible to God, and not, ultimately, to the people. This is where the democratic model of government so typical of the free western world does not do full justice to God’s revelation. I should hasten to add, though, that in our broken world the democratic model may well be the most preferable model of government.

BE SUBJECT

Given that the Lord Jesus Christ stands behind the authorities of a given land, it follows that all who honor Christ will honor the authorities He gave. Paul is emphatic on the point: *“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God”* (Romans 13:1). Similarly, Peter gave instruction to his readers to *“submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by Him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good”* (1 Peter 2:13-14). Peter’s statement is remarkable since the king at the time Peter wrote his letter was none other than Nero, that thoroughly godless, pleasure loving, self-seeking emperor in Rome who did not hesitate to tar living Christians and use them as candles in his garden parties. Yet Peter believed that this emperor received his office from his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and it was not for Peter to criticize the man to whom Christ had entrusted the Roman Empire and to dishonor him. Emphatically Peter adds, *“Honor the king”* (1 Peter 2:17). David’s attitude in relation to King Saul is instructive; *“do not destroy him,”* he said to those who would kill the king, *“for who can stretch out his hand against the LORD’s anointed, and be guiltless?”* (1 Samuel 26:9).

There is, of course, a limit to the obedience a child of God can give to the authorities. The final authority in any land rests with the King of that land, the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, when a ruler-under-Christ demands conduct that flies in the face of God’s instruction in Holy Scripture, no citizen is permitted to obey those demands. Jesus put it this way, *“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”* (Matthew 22:21). In his answer to the chief priests Peter recast the thought in his own words, *“We ought to obey God rather than men”* (Acts 5:29).

DeBrès repeated after God what he heard God say in Scripture. The rule is easy: *“everyone – no matter of what quality, condition, or rank – ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honor and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God.”* As long as Christ is King on earth, this rule is applicable for all men everywhere. Christians, of course, need to set the example.

WHY GOD GAVE AUTHORITIES

God gave authorities for a reason. DeBrès catches Scripture’s instruction, *“We believe that, because of the depravity of mankind, our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers.”* The point is not that there would not have been authority had we not fallen into sin. Even in heaven there is authority, with God having countless angels at His command (Matthew 26:53), and the angels even having a hierarchy amongst them (Jude 9; Revelation 12:7). The point is rather that the mandate God has given to earthly governments in this fallen world focuses particularly on man’s inclination to do evil. Governments are to make laws that uphold the public order, are to enforce those laws, and are to punish those who disobey such laws. The point is illustrated in what Paul wrote in Romans 13.

This well known passage about the need to *“be subject to the governing authorities”* (vs 1) follows Paul’s instruction in chapter 12 about Christian behavior. In a fallen world there are those who will take advantage of you, even persecute you. Predictable responsive behavior would include anger, bitterness, vengeance, and bullying the other in turn. Paul’s instruction, though, is to *“bless and do not curse”* (vs 14) and to *“repay no one evil for evil”* (vs 17). In fact, *“do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord”* (vs 19). Just how, though, does the Lord repay those

who harm His people? God, of course, is mighty to repay the evildoer through sickness or natural disaster, etc, and may at His time do so. The apostle, though, answers the question with reference to “*the governing authorities*” (13:1). “*He is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil*” (vs 4). Instead, then, of a citizen using own initiative to exact reprisal on a fellow citizen who has hurt him, the Lord God has given “*governing authorities*” (vs 1) so that they, as “*God’s ministers*” (vss 4, 6) may punish the wrongdoer and protect the victim.

Correctly, then, did DeBrès see government as a gift from “*our gracious God*”. In His care for people in a society marred by the effects of the fall into sin, God from heaven has given “*kings, princes, and civil officers,*” presidents, prime ministers and parliaments, “*in order that the licentiousness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order. For that purpose He has placed the sword in the hand of the government to punish wrongdoers and to protect those who do what is good.*”

What, then, is left of the Anabaptist notion that earthly government is something of ‘this world’, while the Christian belongs to the kingdom of heaven – and therefore ought to have as little as possible to do with the government? DeBrès confesses –and teaches his congregation– that such a view on government is unscriptural. The governments of *this* world received their mandate and task from the Christ who rules over *this* world – for there is not a square inch of life in *this* world that falls outside of Christ’s jurisdiction. Behind the governments of our age are ultimately not the powers of hell, but the mighty hand of the ascended and sovereign Victor over sin and Satan. On account of what he learned from Scripture, DeBrès’ view on the government is distinctly *positive*. How remarkable, given that the government of DeBrès’ day made a point of persecuting the Protestants on account of their beliefs. Here is truly the language of faith!

PROTECTION OF THE CHURCH AND ITS MINISTRY

The mandate God gave to authorities is not limited to making laws that restrain the licentiousness of men and punishing those who transgress the law. The Holy Spirit has Paul pass on this instruction to Timothy: “*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle –I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying– a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth*” (1 Timothy 2:1-7). Notice the flow of the argument. Prayers for “*kings and all who are in authority*” are of prime importance in order that Christians “*may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.*” Yet why are Christians to lead a quiet and peaceable life? Is it so that Christians can relax and enjoy life? The apostle gives a different reason. Paul’s next sentence is not a change of topic, but an explanation for the quiet and peaceable life: “*this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved,*” and one can be saved only through the redemptive work of the “*one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.*” Christians, then, are to pray that governments promote an environment of peace and quiet in the land so that the church can safely and openly preach the gospel in the nation, for the salvation of many.

This is the notion DeBrès echoes in his confession. In a context in which the authorities were persecuting a segment of the population on account of their faith, DeBrès insisted that God would have earthly governments protect “*the Church and its sacred ministry in order that the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honored and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word.*” In practical terms this means that the authorities are (for example) to discourage Sunday labor, are to protect public worship, are to make possible the building of churches and mission work, are to penalize public blasphemy, are to protect the family, etc. Such a task is the direct consequence of the fact that Christ is King of our land. His kingship is to be acknowledged by parliament and population alike. “*Now, therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way*” (Psalm 2:10-11).

SOME WORDS REMOVED

The version of the *Belgic Confession* printed at the head of this chapter does not contain the full text of what DeBrès wrote. An asterisk toward the end of the first paragraph directs the readers’ attention to an endnote after the article, indicating that a number of words were deleted from the article by a Synod some 100 years ago. If one slips the removed words back into the paragraph at the point of the asterisk, one could conclude that DeBrès would have the authorities do to others what they were doing to DeBrès, ie, force conversions to the true Christian faith so that “*all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented*” so that in turn “*the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed.*” In fact, though, DeBrès never intended that authorities compel people to renounce their faith in favor of the truth of Scripture. DeBrès’ point with the removed words was that when the government gives the church space to preach the gospel, idolatry and false worship in fact are being removed from the community – for the only way to break an evil heart and work the true faith is through the preaching of the gospel. When read sympathetically, DeBrès’ words are fully Scriptural. This should be said for the sake of DeBrès’ reputation.

CHURCH AND STATE

Many in today’s western world insist on a complete separation between Church and State. Religion, we are told, may not affect actions or decisions on the part of government officials. Politicians should stand above religion, should be religiously neutral in making policy, and treat all religions alike.

The notion could perhaps be defensible if there were no God in heaven (as in fact many in our culture insist). In that case, no religion would be true anyway. As it is, though, there is a God in heaven, and He has given the throne of the universe to the Lord Jesus Christ. This King of the world governs all nations through the medium of “*governing authorities*” (Romans 13:1). That is why all government officials are obligated before God to acknowledge Christ’s kingship, and that is equally why all citizens of a land need to honor the government. Yet this King of kings is busy in the world He governs not only through government officials; through the preaching He is also busy gathering, defending and preserving His church. As a result, people come to faith – including, perhaps, persons to whom Christ has entrusted high office in a land. These persons, be they kings or presidents or cabinet ministers, are called to join the church Sunday by Sunday to hear God’s instruction and receive encouragement and admonition through the preaching. These persons, irrespective of high office, need reassurance through the use of the sacraments that their sins are forgiven through Jesus’ blood – the very One who is now King over kings and presidents and cabinet ministers. These persons (just as any other child of God) also need the pastoral

care of the office bearers God gives to a congregation, and so must expect home visits from the elders. As such brothers and sisters carry out the very high and responsible office Jesus Christ has given to them, they need repeatedly and deliberately to seek the will of God for them, and to pass and uphold laws that conform to God's revelation in Holy Scripture.

At the same time it should be noted that the Lord Jesus Christ during His earthly sojourn did not instruct the governors of Galilee and Judea in public policy, and the apostles did not dictate to the authorities of their day how to run the land. Office bearers of the church do not have a mandate from God to meddle in the official running of the country. Church leaders in the past who took upon themselves the role of advising civil authorities have acted beneath their high calling to be preachers of the gospel.

To insist on a separation of Church (religion) and State (government) is to pretend that there is a part of life (government) over which Christ is not sovereign. Christ is lord over all of life; there is not a square inch of life of which Christ does not say 'Mine'. As citizens who recognize Christ's sovereignty over all of life, we need to insist that our politicians recognize that they are responsible to the King of kings. More, we need to insist that the nation recognizes Jesus Christ in the public square. Since Christians know the King of kings, it ought to be Christians first of all who volunteer for public office. Government, after all, is not a 'worldly' entity, but a gift of "*our gracious God*".

PRAYER

DeBrès added Article 36 in his confession in order to teach his people what the Lord God revealed about the civil government. He added it also to show the persecuting authorities of his day that Reformed believers were not seditious and rebellious people; on the contrary. Though DeBrès ensured that a copy of his confession found its way into the hands of the government of the day, their persecution did not stop and the government did not repent of its sins. That, however, was no reason for the believers to give up on Paul's command to pray. DeBrès echoed this command in his confession, "*We ought to pray for them, that God may direct them in all their ways...*" It's clear: believers alone will beseech the King of kings on behalf of His governing servants; unbelievers will not do it.

Points for Discussion:

1. Explain the climate in which Article 36 was written.
2. What impact does the doctrine of Christ's ascension have on the believer's appreciation of governments? What attitude to authorities ought the Christian to have?
3. How can DeBrès say that authorities are a gift of God's *grace*?
4. Is it ever permissible for a Christian to rebel against the powers governing one's country? Explain your answer.
5. Society as a whole does not mind belittling the authorities. Can the Christian participate in this? Why or why not?
6. Why ought we to pray for the authorities?
7. Should a government promote pluralism in religion within a land? Why or why not?
8. Ought religion to be kept out of the government of a nation? Explain.
9. Profession of Faith implies that one takes responsibility of one's own actions. In the 5th commandment God commands us to "honor your father and your mother." How do you, at your age, actually obey the 5th commandment with regards to your parents?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19.50; 37.101; 39.104; 40.105

Prayer #2, *Book of Praise*

ARTICLE 37: THE LAST JUDGMENT

ARTICLE 37

Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, that when the time, ordained by the Lord but unknown to all creatures, has come and the number of the elect is complete, our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as He ascended (Acts 1:11), with great glory and majesty. He will declare Himself Judge of the living and the dead and set this old world afire in order to purge it. Then all people, men, women, and children, who ever lived, from the beginning of the world to the end, will appear in person before this great Judge. They will be summoned with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet of God (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Those who will have died before that time will arise out of the earth, as their spirits are once again united with their own bodies in which they lived. Those who will then be still alive will not die as the others but will be changed in the twinkling of an eye from perishable to imperishable. Then the books will be opened and the dead will be judged (Revelation 20:12) according to what they have done in this world, whether good or evil (2 Corinthians 5:10). Indeed, all people will render account for every careless word they utter (Matthew 12:36), which the world regards as mere jest and amusement. The secrets and hypocrisies of men will then be publicly uncovered in the sight of all. And so for good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to the wicked and evildoers but it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. For then their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labour and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.

The wicked will be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences and will become immortal, but only to be tormented in the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). On the other hand, the faithful and elect will be crowned with glory and honour. The Son of God will acknowledge their names before God His Father (Matthew 10:32) and His elect angels. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Revelation 21:4), and their cause - at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil authorities - will be recognized as the cause of the Son of God. As a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as the heart of man could never conceive. Therefore we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! (Revelation 22:20).

CONTEXT

The lives we're given to live have a distinct beginning and a marked end, birth and death. No one can observe what becomes of us beyond the grave, except to say that our bodies decompose. Given that life is finite, it seems logical that one ought to make the most of life while it lasts. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (Isaiah 22:13; 1 Corinthians 15:32).

The temptation to focus on the here-and-now was great for DeBrès and his congregation too. By decree of the authorities, the Protestants were persecuted so that the faithful could not be

sure of their lives or their freedom. If, then, there is nothing beyond the grave, if life is simply what the eye sees, how tempting to make the most of the few years one has on earth – and so give up the faith to get the persecuting authorities off one's back!

However, God's revelation assured DeBrès that reality went beyond what the eye could see. So, as a faithful shepherd of his flock, DeBrès drew his congregation's attention to God's revelation about Christ's return. Messengers from heaven had once assured the disciples that *"this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven"* (Acts 1:11). That Jesus Christ would return to this earth was incentive for the persecuted congregation to look beyond the sufferings and pressures of this life, and encouragement to keep the bigger picture in mind. Hence DeBrès' confession, *"Finally, we believe, according to the Word of God, that ... our Lord Jesus Christ will come from heaven, bodily and visibly, as He ascended, with great glory and majesty."*

KING

Christ ascended in kingly fashion. He told His disciples before He left that *"all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth"* (Matthew 28:18), and so it was fitting that at His ascension a cloud should receive Him out of their sight (Acts 1:9) – the same cloud that served as the vehicle of Almighty God in the Old Testament (Exodus 19:16; Ezekiel 1:4; see Psalm 104:3). Such is the royalty of the King of kings that when He comes again He will (as Jesus told the Sanhedrin at His trial) return *"on the clouds of heaven"* (Matthew 26:64; see Revelation 1:7).

The welcome He will receive at His return will befit His kingship. The loved ones we buried in the cemetery will acknowledge His Lordship at His coming. *"The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first"* (1 Thessalonians 4:16). For a King greater than Death has entered the land; yes, so great is this King that even those who succumbed to Death in the course of many centuries will hear His summons and obey (1 Corinthians 15:24-26), *"both ... the just and the unjust"* (Acts 24:15). Despite what the eye sees, then, death is not the end of one's existence. Life continues on and on, eternally beyond the moment of Death.

At the return of the King, *"the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air"* (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17). When the Roman emperor made an official visit to a city of his empire, his visit was formally announced with trumpets and fanfare, and the citizens of the kingdom made it their business to meet the emperor outside the city and escort him in. The greater the king, the greater his reception. So it shall be on the last day. So great is this King of kings that when the Lord Jesus returns to His kingdom, all the saints –those who were dead as well as those still alive at the time– will leave the ground to meet the Lord in the air – and so welcome Him into His kingdom.

All those made righteous through Jesus' blood will welcome Him eagerly. The unrighteous, on the other hand, will be overcome with terror at the appearance of this King. *"The kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?'"* (Revelation 6:15-17). Yet, despite their fear, every knee shall bow before Him and *"every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"* (Philippians 2:10,11). For the saints of

DeBrès' day who lived under the crushing hand of oppressive governments, here was a word of comfort and encouragement. *"Their cause –at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil authorities– will be recognized as the cause of the Son of God."* Despite what the eye sees, the people of God are on the winning team!

JUDGE

As King coming to His kingdom, Jesus Christ shall also serve as Judge. Exactly because He is King of the world, all residents of His kingdom are duty bound to acknowledge Him. In fact, though, over the years of earth's history countless residents of His kingdom have denied and continue to deny His kingship; they live in defiance of His commands and actively rebel against Him. As the righteous Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25), the Lord will give each their just reward. The following texts are relevant:

- Matthew 12:36,37: *"But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*
- Matthew 25:31-33: *"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left."*
- 2 Corinthians 5:10: *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad."*

Judgment from the Judge is, of course, not limited to the Last Day. The world in the days of Noah experienced the judgment of the righteous Judge, so that all people perished except for Noah and his family. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah also tasted the judgment of God, so that all perished except for *"righteous Lot"* (2 Peter 2:7) and his daughters. The Lord God judged the Egyptians in the days of Moses, and destroyed the Canaanites because of their sins. The people of Israel experienced the heavy hand of God on their unbelief in the days of the judges, and centuries later were carted off into exile. That was according to God's promises to Israel to bestow blessing on obedience and curse on disobedience (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28).

Though the Lord may cause sinners to experience His judgment in this life, the final judgment is reserved for the Last Day. In Jesus' parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), righteous Lazarus at his death *"was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom"* (vs 22). The rich man, on the other hand, was *"in torments in Hades"* and complained of his agony (vss 23,24). Jesus has Abraham tell the rich man in Hades, *"Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented"* (vs 25). The implication of Jesus' words is that a judgment has occurred at death, so that Lazarus and the rich man both received their just reward at the time of their death.

One of the two criminals on the cross with Jesus pleaded with the Lord to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus replied, *"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise"* (Luke 23:43). Jesus had no such word for the other criminal, from which we may conclude that he would not be with the Lord in Paradise but would receive his

reward elsewhere. The apostle Paul, righteous as he knows himself to be through Jesus' blood, could insist that for him "*to die is gain*" for then he shall "*be with Christ*" (Philippians 1:21,23). Conversely, the Holy Spirit relates concerning Judas Iscariot that he went "*to his own place*" (Acts 1:25), a euphemism for hell. Scripture is also clear that no one who has rejected Christ in this life will find a place in heaven at all. It is clear, then, that at one's death one appears before the Judge and receives his eternal reward.

Yet the Scripture is unequivocal that at Christ's return all people who ever lived, every rich person and poor, every man and woman, will appear before the King who comes to judge. To our minds such a 'second judgment' is unnecessary, for the Lord has already allocated our sentence at death. Yet the point is not whether we find such a judgment necessary; the point is that the Lord has revealed that it shall happen. All the righteous shall be gathered at Jesus' right hand, an innumerable crowd from every tribe and race and language, all needing to give account of every idle word they have spoken – and all shall point to the gospel of Jesus Christ, how the Son of God suffered the righteous wrath of God in their place, that they might go eternally free. All the ungodly shall be gathered at Jesus' left hand, an innumerable crowd, too, from any tribe and race and language, all needing to give account also of every idle word they have spoken – and they shall not be able to.... They have not embraced the Savior in faith, and so their sins are not washed away in His blood. The Judge –He is "*of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness*" (Habakkuk 1:13)– will cast these rebels "*into the furnace of fire*" where "*there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth*" (Matthew 13:42,50; 24:51) without end.

What purpose, then, does this final Judgment have? Why would the Lord have all nations gather before the Judge to give account of all their sins? The point is not that those who have died might perchance receive a different sentence than they received at their death. There shall on that day be no surprises or second chances. The point of the exercise will be that the King's glory will be displayed for all to see. That there shall be on the one hand an innumerable crowd delighting in the gospel of forgiveness of *their* sins –what mercy the Lord displays!– shall be cause for great rejoicing, and glory for the King of kings. That there shall be on the other hand an innumerable crowd who must hang their head in shame for their rejection of their King and His atoning work and therefore rightly receive their sentence of condemnation shall again give glory to the King of kings – how righteous is His justice! All of it together shall cause the angels, and every person also, to join in singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb: "*Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, For Your judgments have been manifested*" (Revelation 15:3,4).

For a people oppressed under the heavy hand of ungodly rulers and persecutors, here is enormous encouragement! DeBrès caught the matter so well, "*And so for good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to the wicked and evildoers but it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. For then their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.*" And: "*their cause –at present condemned as heretical and evil by many judges and civil authorities– will be recognized as the cause of the Son of God.*" It is a day to long for!

RENEWAL

Yet the delights of that Last Day lie not only in the vindication of the righteous over against the bullying of the kingdom's rebels. We live today in a vale of tears, subject to all the curses God pronounced over the human race as a result of our fall into sin. We know of pain, both physical and mental; we know of sickness that can bother us for a short time or lead us to death. We know of toil and sweat, of anxiety and stress (Genesis 3:16-19). But with the return of our Lord the King, all the brokenness and the frustration that marks our lives today shall be taken away – at least for the righteous. Peter tells us that on the day of the Lord *“the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up”* (2 Peter 3:10). All we've toiled to build up in the course of a lifetime will disappear; no church or house, no bunker or bank will survive. Everything touched by the fall into sin will be destroyed as the judgment of God breaks out over the earth. In its place the Lord will fashion *“new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells”* (2 Peter 3:13). It will be a place of splendor such that *“eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the hearts of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him”* (1 Corinthians 2:9). *“The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox,”* and none *“shall hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain”* – who would have anticipated that such a dream shall actually come true?! Yet that's the promise of holy Writ: because sin is taken away, every effect of the fall into sin shall be taken away also! Instead of people being driven from God's presence and exiled into a world of thorns and thistles (Genesis 3:18,24), God *“will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away”* (Revelation 21:3,4). God Himself will make His home on Planet Earth; *here* we shall live eternally with the Lord our God (Revelation 21:2,3).

Shall we work in the New Jerusalem, or sing all day? Shall we recognize those who are there, or not? Will there be animals, and what will they eat? Will we use the technology that the human race has developed over the centuries, or not? We have so many questions – and the Lord has not given an answer; we shall need to wait and see. Yet these questions are not so important in the big scheme of things. The purpose of our existence –today and forever– is to give glory to the King of kings. Scripture keeps directing us to that purpose, and does not want us to busy our minds on questions borne of curiosity. Jesus taught us to pray first of all, *“Hallowed be Your name”* (Matthew 6:9). It is how Jesus prayed before He went to the cross: *“Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world”* (John 17:24). We shall see His glory, and so much shall we be taken by that glory that everything else will fall into its proper place. DeBrès catches the point: *“as a gracious reward, the Lord will cause them to possess such a glory as the heart of man could never conceive. Therefore we look forward to that great day with a great longing to enjoy to the full the promises of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”*

TIMING

When, however, shall this great day be? The church for 2000 years has looked forward eagerly to the return of the Savior, but that great day has not yet come. May we expect it soon? Or must there first come many trials and tribulations upon the earth?

Our chief Prophet and Teacher has answered the question this way: *“But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. But as the days of Noah*

were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Matthew 24:36-44). Thieves do not announce their intentions, yet we all take precautions against the possibility of a break-in. The Son of Man too will not announce His coming and ring no doorbell. Suddenly, while people are doing their regular, daily activities, the trumpet will sound and the King will be there.

The apostle Peter picks up on Jesus’ instruction about the thief. “*But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night*” (2 Peter 3:10). Paul repeats the comparison: “*But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape*” (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3). This means in practice that King Jesus is able to come into His kingdom *today*. Paul considered it possible that the Lord could come while he himself was still alive (see 1 Thessalonians 4:15) – now nearly 20 centuries ago. Jesus Himself declared, “*Surely I am coming quickly*” (Revelation 22:20). That He has not yet come is not because the Lord “*is slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9). With what anticipation, then, shall the church await the arrival of the King! We shall do the work He gives us daily to do, but we shall keep (so to speak) one eye on the sky, watching for the coming of the Lord – waiting for Him, ready for Him. Well did DeBrès quote John’s inspired cry at the end of Scripture: “*Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!*” (Revelation 22:20).

LIFESTYLE

Such eager anticipation of Christ’s return must, of course, affect the way one lives one’s life in this vale of tears.

- Paul readily concedes that if life is no more than the eye sees between birth and death, “*let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*” (1 Corinthians 15:32). As it is, though, life is much more. When Christ returns all people will rise from the dead – for life continues beyond the wall of death. For that very reason Paul was willing to “*stand in jeopardy every hour*” (1 Corinthians 15:30), was willing to put up with dangers of every sort (2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 11:23-28). He knew there was laid away for him –and for all who love the appearing of the Lord– a great reward in heaven that made the sufferings of this life insignificant. “*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen*” (2 Corinthians 4:17,18). How encouraging for persons burdened by the weight of wrongful persecution!
- The same encouragement extends to those who struggle with sicknesses and weaknesses – as we all do in one form or another, sooner or later. “*For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens*” (2 Corinthians 5:1). In the midst of life’s tears and struggles, one may look forward to receiving the crown of glory – and who would begrudge anyone that crown?!

- If all the works of our hands shall be burned up on the day of Christ's return (2 Peter 3:10,13), it makes no sense to invest my talents in building up an earthly kingdom. The Lord will not return, and so the grief of this life will not be replaced by the delights of the New Jerusalem, *"until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed"* – said the Lord to the souls under the altar (Revelation 6:11). The gospel, then, needs to be brought to all men (Matthew 24:14). Would I, then, desire the Savior to return quickly? I can *"hasten the coming of the day of the Lord"* (2 Peter 3:12) by being strategically busy in His kingdom, be it in causing the gospel to go forth through mission work, be it in teaching my children who their heavenly Father is and training them to live for Him, be it in living as a light in a dark world. Being caught up in work or pleasure or consumerism does not hasten Christ's coming – and is not conduct fitting for the child of God who longs for the coming of the King. The people of God are *"pilgrims"* (1 Peter 1:1), en route to the Promised Land.
- Again, it is tempting for any one wronged through the bullying tactics of another to seek revenge under the banner of justice. The fact that the Judge comes soon is incentive for the child of God to leave revenge to the Lord. Paul writes, *"it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"* (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9).

As the conscientious child of God observes the developments of world history, he may be inclined to feel discouraged. There is so much evidence of the power of sin, in our culture, our work environment, our homes, even in our churches and in ourselves. The devil and his rebels, it would seem, have the upper hand. Yet the reality of the King's return in glory on the day of the Lord puts it all into consoling perspective. Jesus Christ rules over this world from heaven above until it is time to come to His kingdom. There is no force anywhere in the world that can stop His appearance in glory, and there is no force either that can sabotage His judgment over men and demons. Without a doubt, the day is coming when all who today resist the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and the cause of His people will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15) – after they have bent the knee to the King of kings.

Today we wait patiently, with eager anticipation, for that glorious Tomorrow! And as we await that Day, we carry on doing the things God has given us to do today – faithful servants obeying the command of their Lord.

Yes, come, Lord Jesus! Maranatha!

Points for Discussion:

1. Why does DeBrès in Article 37 long for Christ's return?
2. Does Satan hate you? How is that evident? How does this reality affect the way you live?
3. The reality of Christ's return affects the way the Christian lives. Explain how this is so.
4. Explain what will happen when the Lord returns. Will all our questions be answered? Why is that (not) important?

5. Does the Lord's prophecy concerning what will happen at Christ's return seem credible? Need it be? Why or why not?
6. Why is the thought of the last judgment horrible for unbelievers?
7. If sins are forgiven today, why do we on the last day have to give account of every idle word we have spoken in this life? How can we?
8. When will Christ return? Will we receive warning?
9. Does collecting a fortune and a palace make sense? Explain your answer.
10. Discuss the lesson of Abraham and Sarah in Hebrews 11:8-16, with special reference to vs 14.
11. What does Philippians 3:20 tell us about our attitude to this world?

Cross References:

Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 19.52; 22.57, 58; 48.123