

**A Study Guide to the
Westminster Confession of Faith**
Rev. Peter Kemeny, Good News Presbyterian Church
P.O. Box 1051, Frederick, Maryland 21702
www.goodnewsPRES.org

Introduction: The Value of the Westminster Confession of Faith

We are a biblical church in that we regard Scripture as the Word of God, the only rule of faith and practice. We are also a confessional church: we look to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as our “subordinate standards,” useful tools that summarize and clarify our understanding of the Bible.

Why have confessions and creeds?

Confessions and creeds are summary statements of what a group of Christians believe. Creeds (from the Latin word *credo*, meaning, “I believe”) are shorter and less detailed than confessions.

Many Christians dispute the need for creeds and confessions of faith. One Christian denomination proudly proclaims, “No creed but Christ.” Larry Norman, a Christian singer back in the seventies said, “I don’t want to talk about theology, I just want to talk about Jesus.” Spiritual as that comment may sound, we must ask Larry, “Whose Jesus? The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Jesus? The Mormon’s Jesus? The Muslim’s Jesus?” As soon as you say that Jesus is God you are talking theology. As soon as you say that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead you are making a creedal statement.

Many churches and parachurch ministries that publish only short statements of their essential beliefs have very detailed *unwritten* doctrinal positions. To discover this all you need to do is teach a doctrinal detail that contradicts the view of the church’s leaders. Many conflicts could be avoided if those unwritten details of belief were made explicit.

Others say “no creed but the Bible.” Here, again, we run into problems because as soon as you stop quoting Scripture and summarize something the Bible teaches you are formulating a creed. If you have ever used the word *Trinity* to describe the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you were formulating a creed, for the Bible never uses the word *Trinity*. The word *Trinity* is merely an economical way to encapsulate large swaths of biblical data which teach that the one God exists in three persons.

Most Christians see the value of writing down summary statements of what the Bible teaches on subjects such as man’s nature, faith, repentance, redemption, and the end times. These summary statements, besides being a useful tool for Bible study, come in handy when discussing your beliefs with those who have different positions. After all, you typically cannot sit down with someone and examine every verse in Scripture related to a particular topic. Summary statements enable you to efficiently compare and contrast your beliefs with those of others.

But why write your own summary of the Bible’s main themes when, down through history, God has provided the church with gifted theologians who have skillfully articulated the themes of Scripture? Only the most conceited would deny that they could benefit from the insights of the great theologians that have preceded them. A.A. Hodge, Professor of Theology at Old Princeton Seminary in the 1800’s, said, “The real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God’s people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds” (A.A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary*, p. 2). And it is unlikely that any group of Christians today could compose

a more brilliant summary of Scriptural truth than that composed by the theologians of the Westminster Assembly.

Historical background of the Westminster Confession

In 1643 the English Parliament called an assembly of godly, scholarly men to write a confession of faith. This assembly, consisting of 121 ministers [Beveridge, Schaff, Leith (citing Briggs), DeWitt] and 30 laymen from Parliament and the House of Lords, with two scribes or clerks, convened at Westminster Abbey in London. The seventeenth century English Puritan, Richard Baxter, remarked "the Christian world, since the days of the apostles, had never a synod of more excellent divines (taking one thing with another) than this and the Synod of Dort."

The assembly met for at least 1,163 sessions over a course of five years. The fruit of their labors, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, came to serve as the doctrinal basis not only of the Presbyterians but also, with slight revisions, of early Congregationalists and Baptists.

The perfections of the Westminster Confession

Though not infallible, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms are the finest and most influential Protestant doctrinal standards ever composed. *The Methodist Advocate* magazine called the Westminster Confession "the ablest, clearest and most comprehensive system of Christian doctrine ever framed." The late Dr. Robert Strong called it an "incomparable summary of what the Bible teaches." Scottish theologian John Murray praised the Confession for its "fidelity to Scripture, precision of thought and formulation, fullness of statement, balanced proportion of emphasis, studied economy of words, and effective exposure of error..." (*Collected Writings*, IV, p. 260).

Consider, for example, how carefully the Confession articulates the relation between the human and divine natures of Jesus: "Two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man" (VIII.2).

If someone were to approach you on the street and ask "What is God?" what would you answer? Where would you begin? If you knew the Shorter Catechism you could reply promptly and crisply: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."

Church officers and the Westminster Confession

Our elders and deacons must affirm the doctrines of our church as summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms because they are entrusted with preserving and teaching our understanding of Scripture (II Timothy 1:13-14).

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is the standard by which we measure whether a potential officer's beliefs conform to the beliefs of our church. When elders and deacons are ordained they are asked to affirm the vow: "Do you accept the doctrines of this Church, contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, as founded on the Word of God and as the expression of your own faith and do you resolve to adhere thereto?"

God has given His Church a treasure in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. We don't regard those documents as highly as we regard the Bible, but we appreciate the servant role they play in enabling us to better understand and defend the teaching of the Scripture.

Chapter 1 – Holy Scripture

Many regard chapter 1 to be the finest statement on the nature of Scripture ever formulated.

1.1 God reveals himself through creation (general revelation), but Scripture (special revelation) is necessary to bring people to salvation.

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

God has revealed himself in 2 books: nature and Scripture (Psalm 19)

- What can we know of God through nature? Explain how this is so. Romans 1:20-24; 2:14-15.
- Why is scriptural revelation necessary (Rom. 1:18; I Cor. 2:14).

How does Hebrews 1:1-2 address the claim that God still gives prophecy through his people? How would you respond to someone who said, “God told me...”?

1.3 The books called the Apocrypha are not Scripture.

The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the canon of the Scripture, and therefore are of no authority in the church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.

“The canon of Scripture” (Gk. *kanon*, a rule, measure, or standard) refers to the 66 books of the Bible. The church has always recognized, more or less clearly, those books that are from God (II Peter 3:16), although it was not until 367 A.D. that the church father, Athanasius, formally listed the 66 books of the canon of Scripture.

Roman Catholics, at the Council of Trent (1546-63), defined 12 extra Old Testament books as part of their canon of Scripture. Protestants regard these 12 books as spurious (illegitimate). None of these books...

- were ever a part of the Hebrew Scriptures.
- were ever quoted by Jesus or the apostles
- were ever included in the lists of canonical books by the early church. Even the most learned Roman Catholic scholars rejected their authority until the Council of Trent made their inclusion in the canon an article of faith.
- claim to be inspired by God (Hodge, p. 33).

1.4 We believe the Bible is God's Word not because, for example, the Roman Catholic Church says so, but because of its self-attestation (II Peter 1:19-21; II Tim. 3:16; I Jn. 5:9; I Thes. 2:13).

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

1.5 The divine inspiration of the Bible is corroborated by the 10 points below, yet in the end, it is the testimony of the Holy Spirit that persuades the Christian of Scripture's divine authority.

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

John Gerstner restates these 10 evidences that the Bible is the Word of God:

The testimony of the church – Historically, the church has received the Bible as God's Word.

The testimony of the Bible itself – The Bible refers over 3000 times to its inspiration.

The spiritual subject matter – Read the Koran or Book of Mormon and compare them to the Bible.

The effectiveness of its teaching – The Bible works when we put it into practice (Jn. 7:17). James Russell Lowell wrote, "Show me a place on the face of the earth ten miles square where a man may provide for his children in decency and comfort, where age is venerated, where womanhood is protected, where human life is held in due regard, and I will show you a place where the gospel of Jesus Christ has gone before and laid the foundation."

The majesty of its style – For example, Psalms 23 and 73, Matthew 5-7.

The agreement of all its parts - Though the Bible contains 66 books written by 40 authors over a period of 1500 years, its major and minor themes are consistent throughout.

Its unified aim from beginning to end (to give glory to God) – The unrelenting focus of the Bible is to glorify God.

The full revelation it makes of the only way of man's salvation – The Bible brilliantly resolves the dilemma of how sinful man can be come before a holy God: through Jesus Christ.

Its many other incomparably outstanding features.

Its complete perfection. G.K. Chesterton wrote, that if Christianity "is right at all...it's elaborately right. A stick might fit a hole or a hollow by accident. But a key and a lock are both complex. And if the key fits the lock, you know it is the right key" (*Orthodoxy*, 149).

Though the above traits demonstrate the Bible to be God's Word, sin has blinded us, so in the end the Holy Spirit is needed to persuade us of its divine origin (I Cor. 2:10-14).

1.6 Everything we need to know about salvation and the Christian life is either expressly or implicitly stated in the Bible. There are many things of which the Bible does not speak; these things are to be determined by common sense and wisdom.

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

For example, the Bible tells us to gather for corporate worship on the Sabbath, but it does not define the hour of worship, how long we should worship, or whether or not to have Sunday school.

1.7 There are difficult sections in the Bible, but its main message will be clear to anyone who diligently studies it.

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

God gave teachers to the church to help with the difficult parts (Eph. 4:11-12). Because the main message of Scripture is clear, we reject those who come along and claim to have discovered in the Bible a key to the Christian life that the church has overlooked for the past 2000 years (e.g. Bruce Wilkinson's "The Prayer of Jabez" or John Wimber's "Power Encounters").

1.8 The Bible should be translated into people's known tongues.

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

1.9 Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture. The less clear passages should be interpreted in light of the clearer passages.

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

Read books of the Bible in light of their purpose (e.g. John 20:31; Ex. 2:24; Acts 1:8).
Less clear passages should be interpreted in light of clearer passages (e.g James 2:24).

Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament and the Gospels in light of the epistles.

What role should commentaries or Bible dictionaries play in helping you understand the Bible?

1.10 The Bible is our final court of appeal in debate.

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

As Martin Luther said to Emperor Charles V in 1520, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils, since...they have often erred). I am bound by the Scriptures...and my conscience. I cannot do otherwise; here I stand; may God help me. Amen.”

Conclusion: Do you study the Scriptures? Do you test the way you order your family, your priorities, what you hear in sermons, and how we operate as a church against the Scriptures?

Chapter 2 – God and the Holy Trinity

If somebody came up to you on the street and asked you to define God, how would you answer? The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers: “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.”

2.1 God with regard to his attributes

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek him; and withal, most just, and terrible in his judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.

- a. Great benefit comes from studying the greatness of God (Jeremiah 9:23-24; Isaiah 40)

On January 7, 1855, the great English preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who was only 20 years old at the time, began his sermon with these words: “It has been said by someone that ‘the proper study of mankind is man’. I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father...there is in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in His immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.”

- b. God's attributes can be divided into two categories:

Incommunicable attributes – those that are true of God alone and are in no way shared with his creatures; his absolute attributes.

“immense”- Omnipresent. God is present at all times in every point of space with his whole being. That is to say, for example, that he is not partly present in your house.

“without ...passions” – human emotions. But God is frequently described in the Bible as having some emotions analogous to human ones. R.L. Dabney identifies these as “active principles” in God, which “must not be conceived as emotions, in the sense of ebbing and flowing accessions of feeling....They lack that agitation and rush, that change from cold to hot, and hot to cold, which constitute the characteristics of passion in us. They are, in God ...a fixed, peaceful, unchangeable calm....”

Hodge writes, “When the Scriptures, in condescension to our weakness, ...speak of [God's] repenting, of his being grieved, or jealous, they use metaphorical language” (p. 49).

“incomprehensible” – God can be truly known, but not completely or exhaustively.

Communicable attributes – those that may to a degree be characteristic of his creatures; especially his moral attributes.

In II.1 of the Confession, which of the listed attributes are incommunicable? Communicable?

- c. A.W. Pink wrote, “The God of this century no more resembles the Sovereign of holy writ than does the dim flickering of a candle the glory of the midday sun.” How should a clearer awareness of God’s character influence:
- The content of our prayers and the amount of time we spend in prayer?
 - Our concern for personal holiness?
 - The tone and content of our worship services?
 - Our view of adversity?

2.2 God in relation to His creation

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of himself; and is alone in and unto himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting his own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleases. In his sight all things are open and manifest, his knowledge is infinite, infallible, and independent upon the creature, so as nothing is to him contingent, or uncertain. He is most holy in all his counsels, in all his works, and in all his commands. To him is due from angels and men, and every other creature, whatsoever worship, service, or obedience he is pleased to require of them.

God is independent / all-sufficient.

God is the source of all things.

God is sovereign over all things (Isaiah 40)

God knows all things.

God’s purposes, works and commands are holy.

God is worthy of our worship.

Again, the confession reminds us, as J.B. Philip’s titled a book, “Your God Is too Small.”

2.3 God in relation to Himself

In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.

What do the three persons of the Godhead hold in common? How are they distinguished?

Is the Holy Spirit an “it” or a “He”? (Jn. 14:16,17,26)

The persons of the Trinity are not subordinate to one another in their essential being. However, in the logical (not temporal) order of their existence the Father is first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third.

The Father generates the Son (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5), and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and Son (Rom. 8:9; Jn. 15:26; 16:7).

This order also reflects itself in the work of redemption.

Hodge elaborates, “The Father sends and operates through both the Son and the Spirit. The Son sends and operates through the Spirit. Never the reverse in either case. The Son is sent by, acts for, and reveals the Father. The Spirit is sent by, acts for, and reveals both the Father and the Son” (p. 60).

How would you respond to someone who said he didn’t believe the doctrine of the Trinity because it can’t be found in the Bible (cf. Larger Catechism question 11).

Memorize Shorter Catechism questions 4 & 6.

Further Study:

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP)

A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Baker)

B.B. Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Presbyterian and Reformed)

Chapter 3 – Of God’s Eternal Decree

The Shorter Catechism defines God’s decrees as “his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.”

3.1 God has foreordained everything that comes to pass, yet God is not the author of sin, man’s will is not forced, and secondary causes are real.

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.

Isaiah 45:7 – “I form light and create darkness, I make well being and create calamity, I am the Lord who does all these things” (cf. 46:9-11).

3.2 God’s foreordination of all events is not merely his carrying out what he sees will happen anyway. See Romans 9:11-18.

Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

3.3 God has predestined some to eternal life and permits the rest to remain in their lost condition.

By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death.

This section brings up the doctrine of predestination, which teaches that God determined our final destination, heaven or hell, before we are born. God choose some to save some and to pass over others, allowing them to reap the consequences of their sin.

Predestination does not come from John Calvin; it comes from the Bible.

- The word “predestined” is found in Romans 8:29,30 and Ephesians 1:5,11.
- The words “elect” and “election” are used 14 times in the New Testament.
- The idea of God’s sovereignty (control) in the salvation of sinners is found throughout the Bible (Mt. 24:22; Mk. 13:27; Rom. 11:7; II Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; I Peter 1:1; Acts 13:48; Jn. 6:37; 10:27-29; 6:39, 44, 65; 17:6,9)

Romans 9:22-23 – “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory....”

Ephesians 1:5-6 – “In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace....”

Proverbs 16:4 – “The Lord has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.”

Predestination is not fatalism. It is not the case that some people want to come to Christ but cannot since God has not predestined them. Critics of predestination jest, *"You can but you can't, you will but you won't, you're damned if you do, and damned if you don't."* This is not the case.

Predestination does not cancel out human responsibility. The Bible holds election and human responsibility side-by-side. Dutch theologian R.B. Kuiper compared the balance between God's sovereignty and human responsibility to two ropes coming down through two holes in a ceiling; they appear as two ropes, but actually are one rope suspended by a pulley above the ceiling. If you wish to support yourself by them, you must grasp both ropes; clinging to just one rope will be disastrous. Similarly, it will one day become clear that the twin strands of divine sovereignty and human responsibility are of a piece.

Predestination does not cancel out the free offer of the gospel. Christ offers salvation freely to all who would receive it.

- Mt. 11:28 - "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."
- Jn. 3:16 - "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."
- Acts 17:30 - "he commands all people everywhere to repent"
- Rom. 10:13 - "'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"
- Cf. John 6:37, 40, 47; Rev. 22:17

Predestination is necessary. If God were not sovereign in granting salvation none would be saved.

Thomas Boston, the great Scottish theologian (1636-1732), illustrated man's spiritual condition by comparing the unconverted person to a man in a pit. He can only get out of the pit by grabbing hold of the rope of gospel let down by Christ and be pulled out of his misery. Yes, he may decide to pull himself up by the rope of the gospel, but there's one problem: the unconverted man is dead in the pit. Can a dead man grab the rope of the gospel? Can a dead man reach out in faith for Jesus?

We are unable to save ourselves.

- Eph. 2:1,4,5 - "you were dead in your transgressions and sins...But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions -- it is by grace you have been saved."
- I Cor. 2:14 - "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Predestination is difficult to understand.

What objections do people, perhaps you, have to the doctrine of predestination?

Can such objections be comprehensively answered? (III.8; Romans 11:33; Deuteronomy 29:29)

What are some examples of other doctrines that the Bible does not fully explain?

3.4 The number of those who are saved and those who are lost is fixed.

These angels and men, thus predestinated, and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

- Acts 13:48 – “as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”
- II Timothy 2:19 – “The Lord knows those who are his.”
- John 13:18 – “I know whom I have chosen.”

3.5 God’s choice to save some is of his free grace and not dependent on any virtue or faith exercised by the Christian.

Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving him thereunto; and all to the praise of his glorious grace.

See Romans 9:11-16, especially verse 16: “it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

II Timothy 1:9 – God “saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...”

3.6 God uses means (calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, preservation) to bring his purposes to pass.

As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he, by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only.

3.7 God chooses to pass by some.

The rest of mankind God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extends or withholds mercy, as he pleases, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by; and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.

3.8 This doctrine should be handled with great care. The doctrine of election should promote worship, humility, assurance of salvation, and diligent Christian living.

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in his Word, and yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

Why should the doctrine of election be an incentive rather than a disincentive to evangelism?

Assurance of salvation

Our assurance of salvation is based not on our feeble hold on Christ, but on his sure grip on us (John 10:28).

Diligent Christian living

“Be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure” (II Peter 1:10).

Evangelism

Over the centuries, the greatest Protestant evangelists and missionaries have been convinced of that the doctrine of election is biblical, including William Carey, the founder of the modern missionary movement; the great Puritan preachers; John Newton, who wrote "Amazing Grace"; John Bunyan, who wrote Pilgrim's Progress; George Whitefield, perhaps, outside of the apostles, the greatest evangelist of all time; Jonathan Edwards; Charles Spurgeon; Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ; and D. James Kennedy, the author of Evangelism Explosion.

We should take the gospel to all kinds of people, trusting that if we scatter the seed, our Sovereign God can change the hardest heart. Paul wrote, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth” (I Cor. 3:6).

Further Study:

R.C. Sproul, *Chosen By God* (Tyndale)

Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Presbyterian & Reformed)

J.I. Packer, “Introductory Essay” to John Owen’s *The Death of Death* (Banner of Truth) – This article can be found on www.goodnewspress.org.

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Chapter 4 – Of Creation

The creation of the universe and the creation of man.

4.1 For his own glory, God created all things.

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

All three members of the Trinity were active in creation: the Father (I Cor. 8:6), the Son (John 1:2-3), and the Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4). In Genesis 1:26 God speaks in the plural: “Let *us* make man in our image....”

God created all things “in the beginning.” This expression is used because before the creation there was no time.

Ever since the days of Augustine (4th c.), the church has wrestled with how to interpret Genesis. The two most common interpretations of Genesis 1 in evangelical and Reformed circles follow.

1. **Literal, sequential, 24-hour days**

The following considerations support interpreting the days of creation as 24-hour days:

- a. Down through church history, the majority of interpreters have embraced this view.
- b. The genre of Genesis is historical narrative and 24-hour days are the most natural way to understand the text.
- c. The numbering of the days in Genesis 1 and the mention of mornings and evenings supports the view that the word "day" is not being used metaphorically.
- d. Exodus 20:11 seems to regard the days of creation as literal 24-hour days when it says that "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them...."

2. **The Literary Framework Interpretation**

- a. This view holds that Genesis 1 provides a logical rather than a chronological order of creation, noting the symmetry Genesis 1 provides between the first 3 days and the last 3 days

Days of forming

Day 1 - Light (v. 3)

Day 2 – Sky/seas (v. 6)

Day 3 – Land / vegetation (vv. 9-11)

Days of filling

Day 4 – Sun/moon/stars (v. 14)

Day 5 – Fish/birds (v. 21)

Day 6 – Animals/man (vv. 24-30)

- b. Framework proponents contend that (1) the style of Genesis 1 seems to be a combination of poetry and prose; (2) the symmetrical framework of the six days looks like a literary device; (3) the repetition of key words and phrases may be poetic devices (e.g. 10 times we find "God said"; variations of "Let there be" occurs 10 times; the verb "to make" occurs 10 times; the completion formula, "and it was so", occurs 7 times; further evidence of poetic forms can be found on page 33 of In the Beginning by Henri Blocher).
- c. This view solves apparent problems like (1) the creation of light on the 1st day (v. 3), before the creation of the stars on the 4th day and (2) having 24-hour solar days before the creation of the sun (v. 14).

While Christians who affirm the authority of Scripture differ on how to interpret the *days* of Genesis 1, most agree that the focus of Genesis 1 is not on *how* God created, but rather on God himself ("In the beginning, God..."). Further, the key truths Genesis 1 teaches are that ...

- God as the sovereign Creator (Gen. 1:1)
- Man is made in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27)
- Man is to exercise dominion over creation (Gen. 1:28)
- Man is to rest on the Sabbath (Gen. 2:2; Ex. 20:8-11)

4.2 God created man, male and female, in his image.

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endowed with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it: and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.

In the broadest terms, *the image of God* is all that makes man distinctively human. The image of God cannot be identified as one particular attribute (e.g. a soul or rationality). Yet there are many attributes that we can identify as aspects of God's image in man: knowledge (Col. 3:10), righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24), creativity, rationality, exercising dominion over creation (Gen. 1:28).

In the early 1980s I lived in Gent, Belgium. Down the street from where I lived there was a castle that had been built in the 1600s. It was still standing, but time had taken its toll. Some of the walls were crumbling. The weather had worn down the stones. Moss covered it. Though time had taken its toll, it was still apparent that, in its day, it was a glorious castle. Likewise, though sin has taken its toll on us, you can still see something of man's original glory. The image of God in us has not totally obscured. It is, however, to borrow Mother Teresa's phrase, "in such distressing disguise."

Because man bears God's image: (1) All human life is valuable. As Horton the elephant said, "A person's a person, not matter how small." (2) All people are to be treated with respect.

Creation manifests God's glory (Romans 1:20) and God's law is written on our hearts (Romans 2:14-15). What confidence should this give you when you share your faith with someone who claims to be an atheist?

Before the fall, man was able to sin or not to sin. After the fall his moral ability became the ability only to sin.

Theological liberals deny the historicity of the story of Adam and Eve. They say it is a myth (defining myth as fanciful and untrue). How does such a view undermine the analogy Romans 5:12-21 makes between Adam's representative headship of mankind and Jesus' representative headship of his people?

Chapter 5 – Of Providence

The Shorter Catechism (Question 10) defines God’s works of providence as “his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.”

5.1 God maintains everything according to his will and for his glory.

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

Matthew 10:29 – “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father.”

Acts 17:28 – “In him we live and move and have our being.”

Ephesians 1:11 – “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will....”

Hebrews 1:3 – “he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (see also Acts 17:26-28)

R.C. Sproul remarked, “there is not a stray molecule in the universe,” yet we at times have trouble believing that God governs all events. Why?

5.2 God ordinarily carries out his providence through the agency of second causes.

Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, he orders them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

God ordinarily brings his purposes to pass through the agency of second causes.

John Gerstner explains, “of these second causes some are ‘necessary’ – as an apple falls when dropped. Others are ‘free’ – as a man *may* choose to drop the apple – or ‘contingent’ – as the apple’s falling *depends* on the choosing of the man holding it.”

5.3 Though God ordinarily carries out his providence through the agency of second causes, at times he effects his purposes by the direct exercise of his power.

God, in his ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

Ordinarily, if you step out of boat onto a lake you will sink. However, God may work without, above, and against gravity (a second cause) and enable a body to walk on water, as happened when Jesus walked on the sea.

The purpose of these miracles is explained in the next section.

5.4 God's providence even extends to the fall of man and all other sins, yet God is not the author of sin.

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.

The *how* and *why* of God's providence extending even over sin is a mystery, but it is affirmed in Scripture.

God works all things "to his own holy ends." How is this seen in...

- (1) the story of Joseph being sold into slavery (Genesis 37:12-36; 45:5; 50:20)?
- (2) God hardening the hearts of the Egyptians so that they would pursue the Israelites after they fled Egypt (Exodus 14:17)?
- (3) the death of Jesus (Acts 2:23)?

God ordained Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery for his good purposes, but Joseph's brothers were still responsible for their sinful deed.

Though we cannot read into God's providence, many can recall painful events in their own lives out of which good came. Can you?

5.5 God's providence even extends to his allowing Christians to be tempted and succumb to sin.

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.

To say that God *allows* us to sin means that he makes it possible, not that he morally permits it.

James 1:13 – "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one.'"

This sections lists five reasons that God allows Christians to sin:

- (1) To administer fatherly discipline to us.
- (2) To reveal the power of the sin that remains in us.
- (3) To humble us.
- (4) To make us more dependent on Christ.
- (5) To make us more vigilant against future temptation.

5.6 Those whom God condemns he hardens in their sins.

As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous Judge, for former sins, doth blind and harden, from them he not only withholds his grace whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon in their hearts; but sometimes also withdraws the gifts which they had, and exposes them to such objects as their corruption makes occasions of sin; and, withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan, whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others.

God withholds his saving grace from them.
 God sometimes withdraws other blessings.
 God exposes them to opportunities to sin.
 God gives them over to the flesh, the world, and the devil.

The reprobate hardens himself even under those circumstances that God uses to soften others. This is why Paul writes that gospel preachers “are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life” (II Corinthians 2:15-16; cf. I Peter 2:7-8). The reprobate and the saved are responding to the same circumstances differently.

5.7 All things work for the good of Christ’s church.

As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposes all things to the good thereof.

Most Christians need to become more fully persuaded of the fatherly providence and love of God over their lives.

“God Moves In a Mysterious Way”

William Cowper

God moves in a mysterious way
 His wonders to perform;
 He plants his footsteps in the sea,
 And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
 Of never-failing skill
 He treasures up his bright designs,
 And works his sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
 The clouds ye so much dread
 Are big with mercy, and shall break in
 blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
 But trust him for his grace;
 Behind a frowning providence
 He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
 Unfolding every hour;
 The bud may have a bitter taste,
 But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
 And scan his work in vain.
 God is his own interpreter,
 And he will make it plain.

Chapter 6 – The Fall of Man

“Whatever else is true or is not true, this one thing is certain: man is not what he was meant to be.”
G.K. Chesterton

What is the meaning of the following statements?

- You cannot understand the cross of Christ without understanding the fall of man.
- The rest of the Bible is just a footnote on Genesis 3:15 (This verse states that after Adam and Eve fell, God said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.”)

This chapter teaches us how man sinned, why God permitted sin, and the consequences of sin.

6.1 The two ingredients of the fall: the temptation of Satan and the permission of God.

Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin, God was pleased, according to his wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to his own glory.

The Bible does not explain how a good man could have succumbed to evil. It merely states that he did. And our sovereign God permitted it to happen, and even this was for God’s glory.

6.2 The results of the fall: Loss of righteousness, loss of fellowship with God, death and defilement.

By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.

Understanding man’s fallen nature has practical implications for...

- a. Civil Government – When James Madison drafted the U.S. Constitution, man’s fallen nature figured prominently in his thinking. The establishment of checks and balances within the three branches of government (judicial, legislative, and administrative branches) was influenced by Madison’s having been taught for years by the Presbyterian theologian, John Witherspoon of man’s fallen nature.
- b. Church Government - Rule by a plurality of elders recognizes the danger of putting one man in charge (I Peter 5:1-3).
- c. Our presentation of the gospel. How?

6.3 All of Adam’s descendents have the sin of Adam. He is the root of the human family.

They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.

Imputed = credited; reckoned.

Since Adam was the representative (or federal) head of the human race we share his “guilt” and “corruption.” In other words, we have a bad conscience and a bad record.

Why do we share in Adam’s original sin? Because of the principle of *representative* or *federal* headship. When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, he spoke for you. Though you were not present when he wrote it, the Declaration of Independence represents you as if you had been there.

We see the principle of representative headship in Romans 5:12 and I Cor. 15:21-22. Does this seem fair?

Representative headship is appealing when we consider the flip side: I Cor. 15:21-22; Rom. 5:19.

- We are saved not because we are righteous *like* Christ, but because we are righteous *in* Christ. He is our representative head.
- In a like manner, we are condemned not because we sinned like Adam, but because we sinned in Adam, he was our representative head.

The 17th century Englishman Thomas Goodwin asserted, “There are two men – Adam and Jesus Christ – and these two men have all other men hanging on their girdle strings.”

6.4 Man lacks all virtue and is possesses all vice.

From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.

This is stated, for example in Romans 3:10-12; 7:18; 8:7 (cf. Gen. 6:5).

The resulting corruption is referred to as “total depravity.” Adam and Eve became completely polluted in body and soul. To say that man is “totally depraved” does not mean that he is not as bad as he could be, but rather that every aspect of his person is tainted by sin. Sin has tainted us from the crown of our heads to the soles of our feet. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “When wicked men come to be in hell, there will be no new corruptions put into their heart; but only old ones will then break forth without restraint” (“Men Are Naturally God’s Enemies”).

Before a person can recognize his need of Christ’s saving work, he must first recognize his condition outside of Christ.

6.5 After conversion and regeneration, sin remains.

This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin.

But it is pardoned and deadened through Christ. Sin remains, but it no longer reigns (Rom. 8:7-14).

Some Christians incorrectly teach that you can attain a state of sinlessness in this life. This is called “perfectionism” (I Jn. 1:8 10).

The recognition of the Christian’s fallen-ness affects the content of our public worship services. We sing not just happy songs, but songs that acknowledge our fallen nature (e.g. “Alas and Did My

Savior Bleed”). We confess our sins. We seek to magnify the grace of God and rejoice in our salvation. We look forward to our full redemption (I Corinthians 11:26).

6.6 The unpardoned person will face the wrath and God and death.

Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.

Romans 6:23 – “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Sin can be divided into the categories of “original” and “actual”:

(1) “Original sin” refers to the fact that all people, after the fall, are born in a sinful condition.

We inherit Adam’s *original guilt*: His guilt is imputed to us.

We inherit Adams *original corruption*: We have an inherent disposition to sin.

G.K. Chesterton remarked, "I find it amazing that moderns reject the notion of the doctrine of original sin when it's the only Christian doctrine that can be empirically verified."

(2) “Actual sin” refers to the outward acts as well as inner thoughts and choices that proceed from original sin.

Chapter 7 – God’s Covenant with Man

God has acted to restore sinful people to relationship with himself by entering into a covenant with them. In making a covenant with us God has taken an oath that he will be our God and we will be his people.

The covenant

A. Its prevalence

- We find the word *covenant* some 297 times in the Bible.
- Some of the key passages that speak of the covenant are Genesis 9:8-17; 12:1-3; 15; 17:1-14; Exodus 19; II Samuel 7:1-14; Jeremiah 31:31-34.

B. **Its definition:** A solemn agreement that God unilaterally imposes that binds him to his people.

C. **Its unilateral imposition:** Because God is the King, he sets the terms of the covenant (its promises, commands, and penalties) and calls us to respond by believing his promises and obeying his commands.

D. **Its goal:** fellowship with God:

- Genesis 17:7 – “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you* and to your offspring after you.”
- This promise of fellowship is reiterated throughout Scripture: E.g. Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 29:13; II Samuel 7:14; Jeremiah 31, 33; Hebrews 8:10.
- It is consummated in Revelation 21:3 – “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.”

7.1 The separation between God and man could only be bridged by God reaching down to us and in establishing a covenant with us.

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

7.2 The first covenant was a covenant of works – God promised Adam that he would receive life for himself and his descendents on the condition of perfect obedience (Gen. 2:16,17; 3:22; Hosea 6:7).

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

- Adam was the representative head of the human race (Rom. 5:12-21).
- The penalty for breaking the covenant was death (Genesis 2:17 – “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”).

7.3 When Adam and Eve failed to obey the covenant of works, God revealed his covenant of grace, in which man’s future bliss became contingent upon Christ’s obedience.

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

It is a covenant of grace because...

- God initiates the covenant (Gen. 17:1-2; Romans 5:8).
- the fulfillment of the covenant depends not on what we do, but on what Christ has done (Genesis 15:6; Titus 3:5). Another term for the covenant of grace is the gospel.
- God enables us to acknowledge our sin and turn to Christ (John 6:44).

The only thing required of us to enter into this covenant is that we accept the covenant and its promises by faith.

7.4 The covenant of grace is often called a testament (will) because Jesus' death puts the covenant into effect (Heb. 9:15-17).

This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.

A last will and testament is granted to the heirs upon the benefactor's death.

7.5 There is but one plan of salvation (or one covenant of grace). In the Old Testament this plan was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover lamb, and other types and ordinances -- these all foreshadowing Christ. In the New Testament it is administered by the word of God and the sacraments.

This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

Abraham was saved by trusting God's promise to save him: Abraham "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6; cf. Romans 4:9b-11).

Believing Jews in the Old Testament were saved by faith in the Christ, whom their sacrifices foreshadowed (cf. Larger Catechism 34,35).

7.6 Under the gospel the same covenant of grace comes, but by fewer ordinances, more simply administered, to more people (all nations)

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper: which, though fewer in number, and

administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

“more fullness” - describes the Lord’s Supper, which more fully pictures the sacrifice of Christ than the sacrifice of a lamb.

“evidence” – Christ’s death is clear “evidence” that he was indeed the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

“more spiritual efficacy” – The Spirit of God works more powerfully and extensively than in the previous dispensation.

Sum: There are not two different covenants of grace, but one covenant under different dispensations. The substance of the covenant is the same in the Old and New Testaments: Christ, who died to redeem sinners.

Implications

The covenant reminds us that God had a plan from all eternity to save his people.

The covenant serves as an “organizing principle” by which we can understand the whole of the Bible.

God has been faithful to his covenant promises (II Cor. 1:21).

Much of the information in this study was gleaned from John Gerstner’s commentary on the Westminster Confession.

Chapter 8 – Christ the Mediator

This chapter is about the person and work of Christ and how he applies his redemption to us. To understand this chapter is to understand the gospel.

8.1 From all eternity, the Father chose Jesus to be the mediator between God and man. Jesus' is our Prophet, Priest, and King. He is the Head and Savior of the church, the Heir of all things, and the Judge.

It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Savior of his church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world: unto whom he did from all eternity give a people, to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

Mediator – Someone who brings together two parties who are separated (I Tim. 2:5).

What are some ways Jesus exercises the above offices? (see Shorter Catechism questions 25, 26, 27)

Redeem – To free by payment by payment of a ransom (Mark 10:45; I Tim. 2:6).

Jesus accomplished our redemption by his death and resurrection. The Holy Spirit applies that redemption to God's elect (Romans 8:28-39).

Calling – The Holy Spirit bringing us to faith, convicting us of our sin and persuading and enabling us to come to Christ (see Shorter Catechism 31).

Justification – God declaring us not guilty, but rather righteous, on the basis of Jesus' perfect obedience to the law and death for our sin (see Shorter Catechism 33).

Sanctification- The Holy Spirit's work of progressively transforming us into the likeness of Christ (see Shorter Catechism 35).

Glorification – The final phase of our redemption in which we will be conformed to the image of Christ in body and spirit.

8.2 Jesus is the God-Man.

The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

Jesus' human and divine natures, although inseparable, are “without conversion” (i.e., either nature altering the other), “without composition” (i.e., being merged so that they are disunited and so cannot constitute one true person), or “without confusion” (i.e. mixing together).

Theologian Roger Nicole writes that the “union of deity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ...is not like a chemical compound, where both elements lose their individual characteristics and form a new substance, such as oxygen and hydrogen in the formation of water. It is not like an alloy where two or more metals are pressed together so completely that only melting would segregate them, such as copper and tin in bronze. It is not like a mixture where conceivably patient work could separate the distinct elements, such as a package of stamps for collectors, or a bag of seeds to feed the birds. It is not like the union of marriage, where husband and wife are made one flesh but remain distinct persons. In the hypostatic union of deity and humanity in the God-man, the two natures remain intact but so intimately and indissolubly conjoined that together they constitute one person. This one person has access to both sets of characteristics in such a way that deity is not shrunk nor humanity enlarged.” (*Tabletalk* magazine, December 1992, p. 6)

I Tim. 2:5– “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”

Why did our Savior have to be God? Why did he have to be man?

8.3 Jesus was fully qualified and equipped to be our mediator.

The Lord Jesus, in his human nature thus united to the divine, was sanctified, and anointed with the Holy Spirit, above measure, having in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; in whom it pleased the Father that all fullness should dwell; to the end that, being holy, harmless, undefiled, and full of grace and truth, he might be thoroughly furnished to execute the office of a mediator, and surety. Which office he took not unto himself, but was thereunto called by his Father, who put all power and judgment into his hand, and gave him commandment to execute the same.

Surety – Guarantee (Hebrews 7:22).

8.4 Jesus’ saving work: He actively fulfilled the Law and passively suffered and died for sinners, rose again, ascended to heaven, and will return to judge the world.

This office the Lord Jesus did most willingly undertake; which that he might discharge, he was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfill it; endured most grievous torments immediately in his soul, and most painful sufferings in his body; was crucified, and died, was buried, and remained under the power of death, yet saw no corruption. On the third day he arose from the dead, with the same body in which he suffered, with which also he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth at the right hand of his Father, making intercession, and shall return, to judge men and angels, at the end of the world.

The Apostles’ Creed is reflected in this paragraph. Compare also Philippians 2:5-11.

Why didn’t Jesus go to the cross immediately after he was born into this world?

What is “the law”? How did Jesus both actively and passively fulfill the law?

8.5 Describes what Jesus accomplished for us in his perfect life and sacrificial death:

The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him.

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 1. He satisfied the justice of God | JUSTIFICATION |
| 2. He brought us back into fellowship with God | RECONCILIATION |

3. He made us a part of God's kingdom (Eph. 1:11,14) INHERITANCE

The kingdom exists now and is "within you" (Lk. 17:21), and yet it is also the sphere of an everlasting inheritance. That's why we pray, "Thy kingdom come."

"...For all those whom the Father hath given unto him" - Jn. 17:2

Other aspects of what Jesus accomplished on the cross include REDEMPTION (buying back; presupposes slavery) and PROPITIATION (appeasement; presupposes we are under God's wrath).

8.6 Jesus' death was effective not only for believers in the New Testament era, but also for believers in the Old Testament.

Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein he was revealed, and signified to be the seed of the woman which should bruise the serpent's head; and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world; being yesterday and today the same, and forever.

In the Old Testament people were saved by Christ. His atoning work was retroactive. Give some examples of "promises, types, and sacrifices" in the Old Testament that pointed forward to Jesus.

The gospel pervades the Old Testament (e.g. Gen. 3:15; 15:6 [cf. Rom. 4:9-12]; Exodus 12:1-13; Isaiah 6:1-7; Zechariah 3).

Jesus was not literally slain from the beginning of the world, but the power, effectiveness and benefits of his death were from the foundation of the world (Gn. 3:15).

8.7 A technical point: Both Jesus' human and divine natures were involved in his death and resurrection, each nature doing what is proper to itself.

Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.

Christ's eating, sleeping, suffering and dying pertain to his human nature. Jesus' statements like, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9) and "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn. 8:58) pertain to his divine nature. Did God die on the cross?

Scripture sometimes attributes what is proper to one nature to the person indicated by the other nature. For example, Acts 20:28 speaks of "the church of God which he obtained with his own blood." Here God, who is Spirit, is said to have blood (cf. I Cor. 2:8).

Jesus had two natures, but he was one person.

8.8 Jesus not only accomplished our salvation on the cross. He applies it to his people (Mt. 1:21): interceding for us, revealing himself to us and persuading us to believe and obey, guiding and protecting us.

To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, he doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same; making intercession for them, and revealing unto them, in and by the Word, the mysteries of salvation; effectually persuading them by his Spirit to believe and obey, and governing their hearts by his Word and Spirit; overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation.

Chapter 9 – Free Will

Wayne Spear writes that we are not “robots or puppets, with no power of choice, or that God’s sovereignty eliminates human responsibility. The Bible everywhere addresses us as those who make real decisions, and those decisions determine our destiny. But we do not have an absolute freedom of choice. We make our choices according to our nature. Apart from the working of God’s grace in our lives, we are hostile to Him and to his law, and will choose accordingly (Rom. 8:7)” (*Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 56).

9.1 God created man with the natural ability to choose good or evil.

God hath endued the will of man with that natural liberty, that it is neither forced, nor, by any absolute necessity of nature, determined to good, or evil.

James 1:14: “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by own desire.”

Deuteronomy 30:19: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live....”

9.2 The State of Innocence (Man before the Fall)

Man, in his state of innocence, had freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.

Before the fall man...

- was sinless
- desired and was able to do God’s will perfectly.
- also had the possibility of losing that ability (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:6). The Bible does not explain how man, created righteous and inclined to do good, chose to sin.

9.3 The State of Sin (Man after the Fall)

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

We only choose that which we desire, and fallen man has no desire to know Christ or submit to him.

When we say that fallen man does not have free will, we are not saying that...

- his will is coerced or forced by something outside of itself.
- he does not make genuine choices and decisions.
- he cannot choose to do some things that are relatively good (e.g., to be honest, to work hard, to protect the weak).

What we have lost is the ability to will “any good accompanying salvation. Left to ourselves we cannot love God, repent of our sins, or turn to Christ. Unbelievers only choose to do what they desire and, because their hearts are bad (Jer. 17:9), they do not desire to choose Christ.

John 3:19-20 – “this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”

Romans 3:10-11 – “As it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.’”

Romans 8:7 – “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.”

I Cor. 2:14: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

cf. Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13; John 6:44; 65

Martin Luther, in his discourse, *The Bondage of the Will*, explains that “a man devoid of the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, as though taken by the neck and forced unto it,...but he does it spontaneously and willingly. And this willingness and desire of doing evil he cannot, by his own strength, eliminate, restrain, or change. He goes on still desiring and craving to do evil.”

If our wills were free, we would freely choose Christ. But we are spiritually dead and spiritually blind.

Ephesians 2:1 – “you were dead in your trespasses and sins....”

2 Corinthians 4:4 – “The god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ....”

9.4 The State of Grace (Man regenerated by Christ)

When God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin; and, by his grace alone, enables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good; yet so, as that by reason of his remaining corruption, he doth not perfectly, nor only, will that which is good, but doth also will that which is evil.

When God converts someone, that person is delivered from his bondage to sin and, by God’s grace, is now able to will the good. Yet at the same time, he is still able to will evil.

John 8:36: “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

John Gerstner writes, “now the battle of Romans 7 begins. Before conversion the sinner was consistently and uniformly sinful. But now he wills both good and evil – because of his old sinful nature which, although dying, is far from dead.”

➤ Read Romans 7:15-25. Does this ring true to your experience?

Take heart. Before Christ saved us, we had no desire and no ability to do what was good. We were under the dominion of sin. Now we are no longer under sin’s dominion, so we have the ability, by God’s enabling grace, to make spiritual progress.

Phil. 2:13: “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

9.5 The State of Glorification (Man in heaven)

The will of man is made perfectly and immutably free to good alone, in the state of glory only.

The moral freedom to choose good alone comes only when we see God face to face (I Jn. 3:2; Jude 24).

FALLEN HUMAN BEINGS ARE BOTH FREE AND ENSLAVED

by J.I. Packer

“The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

JEREMIAH 17:9

Clear thought about the fallen human condition requires a distinction between what for the past two centuries has been called free agency and what since the start of Christianity has been called free will. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and others spoke of free will in two senses, the first trivial, the second important; but this was confusing, and it is better always to use free agency for their first sense.

Free agency is a mark of human beings as such. All humans are free agents in the sense that they make their own decisions as to what they will do, choosing as they please in the light of their sense of right and wrong and the inclinations they feel. Thus they are moral agents, answerable to God and each other for their voluntary choices. So was Adam, both before and after he sinned; so are we now, and so are the glorified saints who are confirmed in grace in such a sense that they no longer have it in them to sin. Inability to sin will be one of the delights and glories of heaven, but it will not terminate anyone’s humanness; glorified saints will still make choices in accordance with their nature, and those choices will not be any the less the product of human free agency just because they will always be good and right.

Free will, however, has been defined by Christian teachers from the second century on as the ability to choose all the moral options that a situation offers, and Augustine affirmed against Pelagius and most of the Greek Fathers that original sin has robbed us of free will in this sense. We have no natural ability to discern and choose God’s way because we have no natural inclination Godward; our hearts are in bondage to sin, and only the grace of regeneration can free us from that slavery. This, for substance, was what Paul taught in Romans 6:16-23; only the freed will (Paul says, the freed person) freely and heartily chooses righteousness. A permanent love of righteousness—that is, an inclination of heart to the way of living that pleases God—is one aspect of the freedom that Christ gives (John 8:34-36; Gal. 5:1, 13).

It is worth observing that will is an abstraction. My will is not a part of me which I choose to move or not to move, like my hand or my foot; it is precisely me choosing to act and then going into action. The truth about free agency, and about Christ freeing sin’s slave from sin’s dominion, can be expressed more clearly if the word will is dropped and each person says: I am the morally responsible free agency; I am the slave of sin whom Christ must liberate; I am the fallen being who only have it in me to choose against God till God renews my heart.

From: *Concise Theology: A Guide To Historic Christian Beliefs*

FREEDOM OF THE WILL
by R.C.Sproul, from One Holy Passion

Does God's foreknowledge eliminate human freedom? Does the immutability of God and the omniscience of God mean the end of all human freedom?

- If free human actions were not known in advance by God, then when He learned of them, He would undergo a change in His knowledge; He would learn something new. Here both immutability and omniscience would be compromised.

If human actions are known by God in advance, is it not certain that they will come to pass exactly as God has foreknown them? If God knows today what I will do tomorrow, then there is no doubt that when tomorrow comes, I will do what God already knows I will do. With respect to the mind of God my future behavior is absolutely certain. But, does that mean that my future actions are absolutely determined or coerced by God?

God can know the future in more than one way. He can know the future because He has determined the future, or He can know it as a spectator. Consider the following analogy. Suppose you are standing at the corner of the roof atop a five-story building. As you look down to the street directly below, you see two runners on the sidewalk. One of them is approaching the edge of the building below you from south to north. The other runner is approaching the edge from west to east. They cannot see each other because their view is obscured by the building. From where you are standing you can see that the two runners are going to collide. You want to shout for them to stop, but you know it is too late. They are a split second away from crashing into each other. All you can do is stand helplessly waiting for the collision.

The analogy suggests a human way of knowing the future without causing or forcing the future to happen. (Of course, like any analogy, it is far from perfect. It is possible that one of the runners will step into a manhole just before he reaches the corner, or one might be vaporized by a laser gun at the last second. Our knowledge of the future in this case is not really certain.) The point of the analogy though, is simply to illustrate that **we can have knowledge of future events without causing those future events.**

Some have approached the subject of God's foreknowledge from a different perspective. Their argument is based on God's relationship to space and time. The idea is this: God is eternal; He is above space and time. God sees all things from the vantage point of the present. There is no past or future with God. He sees all things as present. If God sees all things as present, then how He does it is completely beyond our comprehension. What God's ultimate relationship to time is remains a highly speculative matter. If what is future to me is present to God, then we know His knowledge of our future is perfect and that future is absolutely certain. God can make no errors in His observations.

It is one thing to say that God causes or coerces all things. It is quite another to say that God foreordains all things. If God forces or coerces all things, then He would have had to coerce the fall of man. If this were so, then God would be the cause, indeed the guilty perpetrator of sin. Not only would God be guilty of sin but His coercive actions would destroy the freedom of man.

To aid understanding we need to consider two models, two images of God, which lead to serious distortions of the divine character. First is the image of God as a *puppeteer*. Here God manipulates the strings of marionettes. The feet and the arms of the puppets jerk and dance as God pulls the strings. Puppets have no will. They have no heart or soul. Their bodies are filled with sawdust. If God were like this, not even the Wizard of Oz could make us truly free.

The second image of God is of the *spectator*. Here God sits on the sidelines of world history. He observes the game closely. He makes careful notes about the action and will turn in a scouting report. He is the ultimate armchair quarterback. He second-guesses the plays that are called. He roots for His favorite team. However, He is powerless to affect the outcome of the game in any way. The action is on the field, and He's not playing. This model of God destroys His sovereignty. The spectator God is a God who reigns but never rules. He is a God without authority. He observes history but is not Lord over history.

Neither of these images does justice to the biblical view of God. They serve merely to alert us to the pitfalls that lurk in the shadows. They represent borders over which we must not go.

- We must be careful not to so zealously maintain the sovereignty of God that we end up denying human freedom and responsibility.
- At the same time we must be careful not to so zealously preserve human freedom that we reduce God to an impotent spectator of world affairs.

The correct approach is to insist that God foreordains all things and that all future events are under His sovereignty. The future is absolutely certain to God. He knows what will take place, and He foreordains what will take place.

Foreordain does not mean coerce. It simply means that God wills that something take place. He may will future events through the free choices of creatures. This is the great mystery of providence - that God can will the means as well as the ends of future events. God can even will good through the wicked choices of men.

The greatest event of human history was at the same time the most diabolical. No greater shame can be tacked to the human race than that a human being delivered up Jesus to be crucified. Judas betrayed Christ because Judas wanted to betray Christ. The Pharisees pressed for His death because the Pharisees wanted Jesus killed. Pilate succumbed to the howling crowd, not because God coerced him, but because Pilate was too weak to withstand the demands of the mob.

Yet the Bible declares that the Cross was no accident. The outcome of God's eternal plan of redemption did not hinge finally on the decision of Pontius Pilate. What if Pilate had released Jesus and crucified Barabbas instead? Such a thought is almost unthinkable. It would suggest that God was only a spectator in the plan of redemption, that He hoped for the best but had no control over the events.

God did more than hope for the Cross. He willed the Cross. He sent His Son for that very purpose. Before Jesus was brought before Pilate, He pleaded with the Father for a different verdict. He begged that the cup might pass. Before Pilate ever raised his Roman scepter, the gavel had fallen in Gethsemane. The verdict was in. Jesus was delivered by the determinate forecounsel of God.

Augustine said that "In a certain sense God wills everything that comes to pass." He ordains things with a view to human freedom. He does no violence to our wills by His sovereign ordination. He is not a spectator and we are not puppets. **His knowledge is certain, and our actions are free.**

How the providence of God works out these matters of concurrence is mysterious but not contradictory. There is nothing that is rationally incompatible about God's sovereignty and human freedom. Scripture clearly teaches that God is sovereign and that man is responsible. Neither teaching is false. I am not proposing that freedom and sovereignty are not contradictions simply because the Bible teaches both. I am saying that the **two concepts are not contradictory because they are not mutually exclusive concepts. Divine sovereignty and human autonomy would be mutually exclusive.** If God is sovereign man could not be autonomous. If man is autonomous God could not be sovereign.

God is sovereign. Man is free. Man's freedom is limited, however, by God's sovereignty. God's sovereignty is not limited by man's freedom. This is simply to say that man is not God. God is free and man is free. But God is more free than a man. Man's freedom is always and everywhere subordinate to God's freedom. If we reverse these we pass from theism to atheism, from Christianity to humanism, from Christ to Anti-christ.

Chapter 10 – Effectual Calling

Calling Defined: The summons by which God brings us into the Kingdom.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (question 31) describes calling as: “the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he does persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.”

Preliminary Discussion: The order of salvation

The Father is the *author* of our salvation.

The Son *accomplished* our salvation on the cross.

The Holy Spirit *applies* that salvation to us.

The *application* of redemption is known as the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation): calling – regeneration – faith and repentance – justification – adoption – sanctification – perseverance – glorification.

Passages on which the *ordo salutis* is based include Romans 1:17; 8:28-29; John 1:12; 3:3,4; 6:44. This order describes not the chronological, but the logical relationship between the elements of salvation.

10.1 Those whom God predestines he effectually calls. Their minds are enlightened and their hearts and wills are changed.

All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by his Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by his almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace.

Calling is spoken of in...

- Romans 8:30 - “those whom he has predestined he also called” (cf. 9:11-12).
- I Cor. 1:9 - “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son.”
- Gal. 1:15 – Paul speaks of God “who called me by his grace....”

The ordinary means that God uses to call his elect are “his word and Spirit.”

II Thes. 2:13 – “God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.”

I Peter 1:23,25 – “...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God....this word is the good news that was preached to you.”

Since God calls people by his word and Spirit, the best form of evangelism is teaching and preaching the Bible (cf. John 20:31; Romans 10:14).

If you were converted in your adult years, do you happen to remember when God's call registered in your consciousness (II Cor. 4:6)?

Are you communicating the gospel to unbelievers?

10.2 **There is nothing that God foresees in man that leads him to call some and to pass over others.**

This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.

Conversion is God's work alone.

Some claim that God calls those whom He foresees will choose to believe in Christ. The following verses refute that view.

II Tim. 1:9 – “God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace.”

Romans 9:16 – “It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

Titus 3:4-5 – “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but because of his own mercy.”

The evangelist George Whitfield preached on Christ raising Lazarus from the dead: “Come, ye dead, Christless, unconverted sinners, come and see the place where they laid the body of the deceased Lazarus; behold him laid out, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes, locked up and stinking in a dark cave, with a great stone placed on the top of it. View him again and again; go nearer to him; be not afraid; smell him. Ah! How he stinketh. Was he bound hand and foot with grave-clothes? So art thou bound hand and foot with thy corruptions: and as a stone was laid on the sepulcher, so is there a stone of unbelief upon thy stupid heart. Perhaps thou hast lain in this state, not only four days, but many years, stinking in God's nostrils. And, what is still more effecting, thou art as unable to raise thyself out of this loathsome, dead state, to a life of righteousness and true holiness, as ever Lazarus was to raise himself from the cave in which he lay so long. Thou mayest try the power of thy own boasted free-will, and the force and energy of moral persuasion and rational arguments. . . but all thy efforts, exerted with never so much vigor, will prove fruitless and abortive, till that same Jesus, who said, “Take away the stone,” and cried “Lazarus, come forth,” also quicken you.”

10.3 **Elect dying infants and some adults incapable of being outwardly called may be regenerated by the sovereign Spirit of God.** Faith usually comes by hearing the gospel, but the sovereign Holy Spirit can apply Christ's work to them apart from the ordinary means.

Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth: so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word.

John 3:8 – “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

God promises believers, “I will God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7).

A.A. Hodge: “It is not positively revealed that all infants are elect, but we are left, for many reasons, to indulge a highly probable hope that such is the fact.”

10.4 **The non-elect may hear the external call of God (Mt. 22:2-14; 28:19), and some may show some evidences of conversion, but they do not truly come to Christ.**

Others, not elected, although they may be called by the ministry of the Word, and may have some common operations of the Spirit, yet they never truly come unto Christ, and therefore cannot be saved: much less can men, not professing the Christian religion, be saved in any other way whatsoever, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the laws of that religion they do profess. And, to assert and maintain that they may, is very pernicious, and to be detested.

Mt. 22:14 – “many are called, but few are chosen.” See also Mt. 7:22-23; 13:20-21.

Applications

- If we believe in a genuinely Fatherly invitation to sinners to come to Christ, how should this be reflected in the manner in which we present the Gospel?
- Whom are we to call to repent and believe in Christ?

Chapter 11 – Justification

Martin Luther declared that justification by faith alone is “the article by which the church stands or falls.”

Justification defined: To declare not guilty, but rather as righteous.

- Negatively, God forgives our sin; positively, he clothes us in Christ’s righteousness.
- Justification is not so much a moral quality as a legal status.
- God pronounces us righteous not because we are free from sin, but because God looks on us as having Christ’s righteousness.

11.1 This section underscores three essential differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism

Those whom God effectually calleth, he also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; nor by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on him and his righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

- (1) Roman Catholicism teaches that when God justifies us, he **infuses** righteousness into the believer, thereby changing his character. Scripture teaches that when God justifies us, Christ’s “obedience and satisfaction” is **imputed** to the believer (credited to our account).

To what was Christ obedient? What “satisfaction” of Christ is credited to us?

II Cor. 5:19,21 – “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them....For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

- (2) Justification is by faith, not by works

Roman Catholicism: Faith + Works → Justification

Protestantism: Faith → Justification → Works

Romans 4:4-8; 3:22-24; Titus 3:5,7

The gospel "is not *good advice*, but *good news*. It does not come to us to make known to us what we must do to earn salvation for ourselves but proclaiming to us what Jesus has done to save us. It is salvation, a completed salvation, that it announces to us." -- Benjamin Warfield

- When did you first understand that we are saved by faith and not by works?
- Can the Catholic understanding of justification provide assurance of salvation? Why or why not?

(3) Even the faith to believe is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29). This stands in distinction to the Roman Catholicism, which teaches that faith is the work of man; Catholicism teaches that faith is unregenerate man cooperating with the Holy Spirit.

How would you answer the objection, “If you are saved by faith and not deeds, then that removes the incentive to live a holy life”?

11.2 True faith will be accompanied by works / a changed life (James 2:17,22,26; Gal. 5:6).

Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.

- What is genuine, saving faith?
- Many evangelical Protestants, jealous to protect the grace of the gospel, say that you can still be saved, even if no change in your life follows. To put it another way, they say you can accept Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. What do you make of this claim? See Galatians 5:22-23 and Matthew 7:21-23.

11.3 There is nothing in us that merited Christ dying for our sins (Romans 5:8; 3:24,26)

Christ, by his obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf. Yet, inasmuch as he was given by the Father for them; and his obedience and satisfaction accepted in their stead; and both, freely, not for anything in them; their justification is only of free grace; that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

11.4 Although our justification was decreed from eternity (I Peter 1:2,19,20; Romans 8:30) and accomplished 2000 years ago on the cross, we are not justified until the Holy Spirit does actually apply Christ to us (i.e. works faith and repentance in us).

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.

Justification is *by faith*, which is not eternal. You are justified when you believe in Christ.

11.5 How does this section answer the questions...

God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God's fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.

- Since I am justified once for all, is there no need for a Christian to pray, “Forgive us our debts”?

- What happens to my standing before God when I sin after becoming a Christian? (I Jn 2:1-2; Ps. 32:3-5; Ps. 66:18; I Cor. 11:30; I Peter 3:7)
- What is the purpose of a Christian confessing his sins, since he cannot lose his salvation?

11.6 People were saved the same way in the Old Testament as in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, people looked forward to the coming Savior (Romans 4:1-12; Galatians 3:1-9).

The justification of believers under the old testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the new testament.

Perhaps the most important question in life is the question, “If you were to die and stand before God and he were to ask you, ‘Why should I admit you into heaven?’ how would you answer?”

Chapter 12 – Adoption

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.

John Wesley, looking back on the period before he encountered the book of Galatians, with its emphasis on adoption, wrote, "I had even then the faith of a servant, though not of a son." Is your faith that of a servant or a son?

- Do you think you must shoulder all your problems on your own?
- Do you view the Christian life as a rule-keeping effort to please a demanding taskmaster?
- Do you think you have to achieve a certain standard of perfection to please God?
- As you serve God at work, church, and in relationships, do you feel **called** or **driven**?

Adoption Defined

The act of God's grace by which he (1) accepts us into his family, (2) grants us the status of children, and (3) bestows upon us all the blessings of family membership.

“*Vouchsafeth*” is an old word that conveys the idea of a superior, under no obligation, freely giving or guaranteeing something. In adopting us, God, out of his unmerited love, guarantees that we are his children.

How is adoption different from justification?

The Privileges of Adoption

1. A New Status: children of God (Jn. 1:12; I Jn. 3:1)

Are you a worrier? If so, how should your adoption affect you in this area? (Mt. 6:25-34)

The confession says that Christians “receive the Spirit of adoption”, which is to say, the Holy Spirit persuades you that you are a child of God (Romans 8:15).

2. A New Acceptance: You are received into God's family unconditionally

You are no longer a slave, but a son. Since you are a son, don't turn back to slavery (Gal. 4:7-9).

The Galatian Christians were turning away from God's accomplishment of free salvation in Christ and turning back to a religion of human achievement. In their case, they were saying that FAITH + CIRCUMCISION = ACCEPTANCE BY GOD

Are there standards that you think you must attain to make yourself acceptable? If so, how would you fill in the blank?

FAITH + _____ = ACCEPTANCE BY GOD

For example:

- excel at job or as a homemaker
- excel as a parent
- have kids who excel
- conquer particular besetting sins
- be well liked
- other:

3. A New Access to God (Eph. 3:12; Rom. 5:2)

Through Christ “we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him” (Eph. 3:12; cf. Rom. 5:2).

Thus, Jesus taught us, “This, then, is how you should pray: ‘Our *Father* in heaven’” (Mt. 6:9).

4. A New Advocate

“We are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him as by a father”

Psalm 103:13 – “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.”

Proverbs 14:26 – “In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge.”

Matthew 6:30,32 – “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?...your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.”

Hebrews 12:6 – “The Lord disciplines the one he loves.”

5. A New Family

We are “taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God.”

The Bible pictures the church as the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19). What are some tangible ways the family identity of the church should play out?

6. A New Inheritance

Romans 8:17 - “if [we] are children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

Cf. I Peter 1:3,4; Eph. 1:14; I Jn 3:2

Do you have the faith of a servant or of a son?

Chapter 13 – Sanctification

Sanctification has been called the “Christianizing of the Christian.” The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it as “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness” (question 35).

- What is the difference between justification and sanctification? Which is once-for-all and which is progressive? Why is it important that justification and sanctification not be confused?

This chapter describes sanctification in three stages:

- (1) The implantation of a new heart by Christ’s power and its increasing ability to destroy the power of sin.
- (2) The resulting war between the two principles.
- (3) The certain victory that the Christian will have in that war

13:1 Christ gives Christians new hearts that increasingly overcome the power of sin

They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.

- Jesus’ death and resurrection leads not only to our justification, but also to our sanctification.

I Cor. 6:11 – “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

- Sin no longer has dominion over the Christian and remaining evil desires are increasingly weakened.

Romans 6:6 – “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”

- Paul personifies sin as a king who reigns. Sin’s *dominion* has *already* ended, though its *presence* has *not yet* been banished.
- The English Puritan, Thomas Manton defined “the body of sin” as “the whole mass and stock of corruption,” not the physical body.

How should the awareness the end of sin’s dominion encourage you in your struggle toward holiness?

- God transforms us by his Word and Spirit. What implications does this have for the Christian life and the ministry of the church?

John 17:17 – “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

I Thes. 2:13 – “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, *which is at work in you believer.*” (also I Cor. 6:11).

- Explain how the second part of this section of the Confession describes sanctification in both negative and positive terms.

13:2 God is transforming every aspect of us, yet the remnants of sin continue to corrupt our whole being.

This sanctification is throughout, in the whole man; yet imperfect in this life, there abiding still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.

Do any parts of this paragraph that resonate with your experience?

I Thes. 5:23 – “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Those in the “victorious life” movement (Wesleyans and others) claim that it is possible to completely overcome sin in this life. Do you agree or disagree? I John 1:10; Phil. 3:12. To what dangers could this teaching, known as “perfectionism”, lead?

This section pictures sanctification as a “war” (Eph. 6:12 and all of I Peter).

Gal. 5:17 – “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

The Christian may be likened to a house in which Christ is the landlord and sin is an illegal squatter. It is not a tension between two equals. It is our responsibility to evict the squatter.

- How can Christians more effectively wage war against the flesh, the devil and the world? Consider the weapons at our disposal listed in Ephesians 6:10-20.

13:3 In spite of temporary setbacks, victory is certain, because the Holy Spirit continues to transform us.

In which war, although the remaining corruption, for a time, may much prevail; yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome; and so, the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

I John 5:4 – “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith.”

Conclusion

How would you counsel a Christian who lives as if personal holiness is unimportant since we are saved by grace? (Hebrews 12:14)

How would you counsel a Christian who is discouraged about his or her lack of progress in holiness?

Chapter 14 – Saving Faith

The term “saving faith” is used because there are varieties of faith that do not save. Indeed James 2:19 says that the demons themselves have a sort of faith -- “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” – but their faith is unable to save them.

Was there a time in your life when you had *some* kind of faith but now realize that it was not saving faith?

This chapter defines the type of faith leads to salvation. But first it states that saving faith is not something we can conjure up by an act of the will. It is a gift of God.

14.1 The Holy Spirit works saving faith in the elect, ordinarily by means of the Bible, and it is strengthened by the Bible, the sacraments and prayer.

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word, by which also, and by the administration of the sacraments, and prayer, it is increased and strengthened.

God grants us faith to believe in Christ.

- Ephesians 2:8 – “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”
 - I Corinthians 12:3 – “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.”
 - Philippians 1:29 – “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ that you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake...”
 - John 6:44 – “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...” (cf. 6:65)
 - John 3:3 – “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”
 - Acts 16:14 – “The Lord opened her [Lydia’s] heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”
- If an unbeliever desires saving faith, what should he or she do?

The ordinary means God uses to **bring about faith** is His Word.

- Romans 10:17 – “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”
 - I Peter 1:23,25 - “since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God...And this is the good news that was preached to you.”
 - Hence, preachers should focus on teaching the Bible (Acts 6:4).
- What are some other means in which some churches place their confidence in to bring about saving faith?

The ordinary means God uses to **strengthen a Christian’s faith** is the Word, sacraments and prayer.

- I Thessalonians 2:13 - “When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”
- I Peter 2:2 – “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up in your salvation....”

14.2 Those to whom God grants faith believe what the Bible teaches and trust in Christ for salvation.

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace.

Those who are saved believe the Bible.

- I Thessalonians 2:13 - "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it really is, the word of God."
- It is not a matter of us believing the Bible against our logic, but having our eyes opened to see the logic of the Bible and thus our faith strengthened.
- I Corinthians 2:14 - "The natural person does not accept the things of God, for they are folly to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (cf. Matthew 13:22).
- John 10:27 - Jesus said, "my sheep hear my voice."

Saving faith is defined as accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone for salvation.

- "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).
- "For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith'" (Romans 1:17).

What are some things that people tend to rest in for their salvation besides Christ? Are you resting on Christ alone for your salvation? If you were to stand before God today and he were to ask you, "why should I let you into heaven," what would you answer?

Saving Faith involves 3 elements: Knowledge, Assent, Trust

- (1) **Knowledge:** Who is Christ? What has he done? Is head knowledge about Christ alone able to save? (James 2:19)
- (2) **Assent:** We must not only know about Christ but must also acknowledge that it is true.
- (3) **Trust:** Resting upon Christ alone for salvation. What is the difference between believing "about" Jesus and believing "in" Jesus.

14.3 – Our faith is often shaky, but Jesus grow it.

This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory: growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ, who is both the author and finisher of our faith.

How do you strengthen your faith?

"How can weak faith be made strong, and little faith become great? ... you cannot strengthen faith by introspection You strengthen your faith, rather, by looking hard at its objects -- the promises of God in Scripture; the unseen realities of God and your life with him and your hope of glory; the living Christ himself, once on the cross, now on the throne." (J.I. Packer, God's Words, pp. 136-7)

Chapter 15 - Repentance

“What must a do to be saved?” Two things: “repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15).

What is the gospel? Chapter 14 of the Confession discussed what it means to believe. Chapter 15 explains the character of biblical repentance, a subject largely overlooked in popular Christianity.

15.1 We must preach not only faith in Christ but also repentance from sin.

Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

In Luke 24:47 Jesus said, “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations...”

Repentance, like faith, is a gift from God: “God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18).

15.2 Repentance is turning from sin, which the sinner recognizes as filthy and offensive to God; it grows out of recognizing God’s mercy in Christ.

By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.

Shorter Catechism (Q. 87): "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with full grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience."

Repentance is not:

- Regret for the personal consequences of sin.
- Penance -- trying to pay for your own sins
- “New Years resolutions” -- resolving to try harder.

Repentance involves the *emotion* of recognizing your sins to be odious.

- II Cor. 7:11 – “See what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you....”
- Ps. 51:4 – “Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight.”

Repentance is *turning* to God and evidences itself in a new obedience.

- I Thes. 1:9 - “you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”
- I John 2:3 – “by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.”

15.3 Though repentance does not pay for our sin or earn us salvation, it is necessary to repent to be saved.

Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

Luke 13:3 – “unless you repent, you all will likewise perish.”

Wayne Spear comments, “The finished work of Christ is the only basis of our forgiveness; salvation is by grace alone. Repentance and faith are like the signature on a check, having no value of their own, but only serving as the means or instrument by which the treasure of salvation comes to us” (*Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 83).

15.4 Though the smallest sin can send the unrepentant to hell, God forgives the greatest of sins committed by those now repentant.

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

See the scripture proofs in the Confession.

This statement goes against the Roman Catholic distinction between venial and mortal sins. Every sin of the unrepentant is mortal; every sin of the repentant is venial (non-mortal).

Are there certain “Technicolor” sins that you’ve committed that you have a hard time believing God has forgiven? How should you respond when, as the Puritan Samuel Rutherford put it, “the old ashes of your sin become a new fire of sorrow” to you?

15.5 We should not merely repent of our sin in general, but our sins in particular.

Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

See the scripture proofs in the Confession.

It is one thing to acknowledge that you are a sinner in a general way. It is another thing to repent of specific sins. Calvin said, “Now what do we account more hateful...to God than the fiction of someone asking pardon for all sins, all the while either thinking he is not a sinner, or at least is not thinking he is a sinner?” (*Institutes*, III 20:6)

Reflecting on the Ten Commandments and the Larger Catechism’s exposition of the Ten Commandments are helpful aids to self-examination.

15.6 In instances where our sin is not only against God, but against others, we should go to them and ask for forgiveness.

As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so, he that scandalizeth his brother, or the church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession, and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended, who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

➤ Is there someone of whom you need to ask for forgiveness?

We need not confess every fault. If we did, we would have no time for anything else (I Peter 4:8).

Generally, confession of private sins should be done in private and not be made public. Matthew 18:15 – “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.”

➤ What if the person to whom you repent refuses to forgive you? (Romans 12:18)

"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (Jas 4:6).

Robert Murray McCheyne: "For every one look at sin, take ten looks at Christ"

What is the difference between asking for forgiveness and apologizing?

Homework: Be conscious of specific sins you commit against family members. When you become aware of a specific offense you've committed, go to that person and say something like, "I was wrong to do that. It was a sin. Will you forgive me?"

Chapter 16 – Good Works

Martin Luther said, "We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone." Good works are not a means to salvation, but they are a byproduct of genuine faith.

16.1 Only what is commanded by God in the Bible is a good work.

Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretense of good intention.

Jesus condemned the religious leaders in his day because "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Mt. 15:9). Religious "zeal" that is "not according to knowledge" (Rom. 10:2) is useless.

Give some examples of good works prescribed by religious leaders that are not commanded by God in Scripture.

16.2 Good works are the fruit of genuine faith and have numerous benefits

These good works, done in obedience to God's commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.

Some evangelical Christians teach that a person is saved merely by acknowledging that Jesus died for his sin, apart from repentance and without the fruit of obedience. How do the verses below address this error?

- James 2:26 – "...faith apart from works is dead."
- I John 2:3 – "by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments."
- Galatians 5:6 – "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."

What benefits of good works does the confession list? Can you think of an example of good works that served to "stop the mouths of the adversaries"?

How do good works strengthen our assurance according to II Peter 1:5-10?

16.3 Though the Spirit enables Christians to do good works, Christians are responsible for "stirring up" that grace.

Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they may be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will, and to do, of his good pleasure: yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.

What do you make of the "let go and let God" approach to spiritual growth?

John 15:4-5 – “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Philippians 2:12b-13 – “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Colossians 1:29 – “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works in me.”

16.4 Far from going beyond what is required of Christians, such works fall short of much of our duty.

They who, in their obedience, attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, as that they fall short of much which in duty they are bound to do.

This section refutes a Roman Catholic teaching called “works of supererogation” – the view that the saints performed a surplus of good works, and that surplus is available to others through the sacraments.

Luke 17:10 – “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’”

When, after performing a good deed, you discover in yourself a self-congratulating or self-promoting spirit, what does Jesus suggest in Matthew 6:3?

16.5 Far from deserving a reward, men’s best works merit the judgment of God.

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants: and because, as they are good, they proceed from his Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment.

Titus 3:5 – “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy....”

16.6 Nevertheless, because Christians are in Christ, these imperfect “good works” will actually receive a reward.

Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprovable in God’s sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.

Through Christ, God is pleased to accept and reward what is sincerely done, even though it is done imperfectly.

I Peter 2:5 – “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Hebrews 13:20-21 – “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

16.7 Unbelievers can only do bad works – bad because of the evil hearts from which they spring, and good, only in the “matter of them.”

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.

If a good deed is done without the motive of seeking God’s glory, it falls short.

Chapter 17 – The Perseverance of the Saints

Can you lose your salvation? Can a genuine Christian fall away from the faith?

Some Bible-believing Christians believe it is possible to lose your salvation.

17.1 Believers cannot completely fall away. They will persevere to the end and be eternally saved.

They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

A better title for this chapter of the Confession may be “God’s Preservation of the Saints.” We persevere because God preserves us.

I Peter 1:5,9 – “you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time....obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of our souls.”

Hebrews 13:5 - "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Jn 6:39 - "this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."

John 10:28-29 – “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Col 3:3 - "your life is hidden with Christ in God."

Phil. 1:6 - "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

17.2 The basis for the Christian’s perseverance:

This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

1. God’s unchangeable love (“the immutability of the decree of election”)
 - Ephesians 1:4 – “He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”
 - II Timothy 2:19 – “God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his....’”
 - Romans 35,38-39
 - I Thes. 5:24 - "He who calls you is faithful."

2. Christ’s work – His perfect obedience and sacrificial death
 - Hebrews 10:10,14; 9:12-15; 7:25

3. The Spirit's eternal presence with the Christian

- John 14:16-17 – “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth...he dwells with you and will be in you.”
- I John 3:9 – “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” A.A. Hodge explains that God's seed is “the new spiritual principles and tendencies implanted in regeneration.”

4. The nature of the covenant of grace.

- Jeremiah 32:40 – “I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.”

17.3 Christians will persevere, but may struggle with temptations and fall into sin, bringing on themselves temporal judgments.

Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

“They can never fully nor finally fall away from the state of grace.” As one Christian put it, “the saint may fall on deck, but he will never fall overboard.” David committed adultery and murder and Peter denied Jesus (Matthew 26:70-74), but they both repented.

“Temporal judgments” refers to God's fatherly discipline of his children.

- Psalm 32:3-4 – “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”
- Hebrews 12:5b-7 – “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

Though God will always forgive the repentant, it is hard to kick against the goads. Rowland Ward comments, “When Satan whispers: ‘If you sin, you can repent,’ one may respond in Samuel Waldron's words: ‘Yes, and you will, but to truly repent is to vomit up the sin. All the enjoyment of eating the dainty morsel is more than made up for by the miserable nausea and vomiting. There will always be more misery than pleasure in sin for a true Christian” (*The Westminster Confession for the Church Today*, p. 121).

In the hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” we sing, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, wander from the God I love” but in “Amazing Grace” we also sing, “Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; ‘tis grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.”

Some object, “If Christians are told that God will preserve them and never forsake them, a key incentive to holy living has been removed.” How would you respond to that objection? See Mt. 7:20-21; John 10:27; Gal. 5:22-23; James 2:26; II Cor. 13:5; II Peter 1:10.

Chapter 18 – Assurance of Grace and Salvation

Have you ever doubted whether you are saved? Can you be sure?

Assurance is the confidence of the believer that he is irrevocably a child of God. In light of our sinfulness, how is it possible to have assurance?

18.1 Assurance is possible for the Christian. It is also possible for an unbeliever to have a false sense of assurance about his salvation.

Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

I John 5:13 – “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Matthew 7:21-23 – “Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'”

- What are some things that may give unbelievers a false sense of assurance about their salvation?
- How can churches give people a false sense of assurance?

18.2 There are three grounds for a Christian having assurance of salvation:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

1. The promises of the Bible

- I Jn. 5:12 – “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.”
- John 5:24 – “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”
- John 6:37 – “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”
- John 10:28 – “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

2. The evidence of a growing obedience to Christ in our lives.

- II Peter 1:5-7, 10 – “For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and

brotherly affection with love...¹⁰ be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”

- I John 2:3 – “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.”
- Though a Christian will fall into sin, he will not carelessly continue in it. “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God” (I Jn. 3:9).
- I Jn. 3:14 – “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.”

3. The testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that we are children of God.

- The Holy Spirit confirms in our experience what the Scripture says.
- Romans 8:15-16; Galatians 4:6
- See Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 204-211.

18.3 Assurance is not required for a Christian to be saved (“assurance does not belong to the essence of faith”), and a true Christian may have difficulty attaining assurance. But a Christian can obtain assurance if he seeks it diligently.

This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

- Hebrews 6:11 – “And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end.”
- II Peter 1:10 – “Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”
- Ephesians 3:17-19

What are some ways you can “examine [yourself], to see whether you are in the faith” (II Cor. 13:5)?

18.4 A Christian’s assurance may be shaken, lessened, or interrupted from 4 specific causes:

- 1. Simple neglect**
- 2. Committing some particular sin** – “Guilt clips the wings of comfort (Thomas Watson).
- 3. Sudden or strong temptation**
- 4. God withdrawing the sense of his presence** - The Puritans termed this “desertions.”

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

Assurance can vary in intensity among people and can vary in intensity at different times in the same person. Some of God's great servants have battled with assurance. Yet, as John Murray said, the believer's consciousness at its lowest ebb differs in a whole diameter from that of an unbeliever at his highest pitch of consciousness of assurance. Why? Because the unbeliever does not instinctively see God as his Father, for in his heart he is alienated from God.

Hindrances to assurance

1. Inconsistent Christian living

- It is impossible to have a high degree of assurance when there is little obedience to Christ.
- In Ps. 51:3 David's sin is ever before him, not assurance of salvation (v. 12).

2. Misunderstanding the function of affliction in Christian growth. Affliction

- is corrective (Pv. 3:11-12)
- produces Christian character (Heb. 12:10-11)
- is the context in which God reveals his grace and glory in us (II Cor. 12:9)

3. Misunderstanding the nature of sin in the believer

When Christ saved you, sin's reign over you ended, but its presence has not been banished

4. Attacks of the devil

- Gen. 3:1, "Did God really say . . .?"
- In Romans 8:31 Paul knows that Satan is the great adversary of our assurance.

5. Lack of Christian fellowship

- Lack of fellowship does not necessarily lead to a lack of assurance, but it can have an effect
- Hebrews 10:22-25

How to grow in assurance: Study the objective elements of the Gospel as they display the grace of God in salvation -- election, justification, adoption, etc. In addition, Thomas Watson advises, "If you would have assurance, be much in exercise of grace. Let us lie at the pool of the ordinances and frequent the word and sacrament" (*A Body of Divinity*, 258).

Chapter 19 – The Law of God

What is the law of God?

Can you get to heaven by keeping the law? Why or why not? (Galatians 2:15-16; James 2:10)

What is the place of God's law in the Christian's life?

19.1 God gave the law to Adam, who had been given the ability to keep it, and required him and his descendants to keep it in order to continue life.

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

19.2 Although after the fall man could not be saved by good works, the law continued as the perfect rule of righteousness and took the form of the Ten Commandments.

This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.

This paragraph states that the first tablet contained commands 1-4 and the second tablet contained commands 5-10. This is speculative, and recent study of ancient covenant documents suggests that the two tablets were duplicate copies, with all 10 commands inscribed on each tablet.

Every duty that God requires of us can be inferred from one of the 10 commandments and the 10 commandments explain what it means to love God and to love our neighbor (Mt. 22:37-40).

19.3, 4 God's law has three dimensions: moral, ceremonial and civil

Beside this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly, holding forth divers instructions of moral duties. All which ceremonial laws are now abrogated, under the new testament.

To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.

Moral Law – Principles on how to relate to God and to others. Summarized in the Ten Commandments. The moral law is still in effect.

Ceremonial Law – Concerns how Israel was to worship God. For example, instructions on making burnt offerings and sacrifices in connection with worship in the temple are ceremonial law. The ceremonial law also contains object lessons, such as the prohibitions on mixing seeds and textiles, which demonstrated to the Israelites how God called them to be an undefiled and holy people.

The purpose of the ceremonial law was to foreshadow Jesus' final sacrifice.

Since Jesus made one sacrifice for sin, which would be eternally valid, no further sacrifices are necessary. Jesus, "the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29) was offered once for all (Hebrews 9:25-26; 10:1, 11-14). When Jesus died on the cross the curtain in the Temple was torn in two to show that the ceremonial law had been fulfilled (this is what Hebrews and Galatians are about). Now we have access to God.

Civil/Judicial Law – Israel was a theocracy (God was her immediate Ruler). The civil laws guided Israel as God's chosen people. For example, Deuteronomy 17:14-20 tells the Israelites how they were to go about choosing a king.

Tremper Longman explains: "Since God chose Israel as a nation to be his elect people, it was intolerable that a blasphemer or idolater or witch be allowed to live. God caused his special presence to rest in the midst of Israel; his holiness would not allow such blatant rebellion to continue. However, God has not chosen America as a nation.It would be wrong to seek legislation authorizing the execution of witches, idolaters, apostates, heretics, and blasphemers in the United States."

The people of God are no longer a nation; the church is the new Israel (Galatians 6:16; II Corinthians 1:20; I Peter 2:9-10).

Since the theocracy has passed away, the civil law no longer applies. That's why we no longer stone to death stubborn children or adulterers.

Just as God called Israel to be holy, so he calls the church to be holy. The church deals with blasphemy, heresy and idolatry not through the death penalty but through excommunication (Matthew 18:15-17; I Corinthians 5).

God's law is not explicitly categorized as moral, ceremonial and judicial, but these categories reflect the dimensions of God's law in the Old Testament. For example, the prophets often distinguished ceremonial and moral law when they said that God desires obedience more than sacrifices and burnt offerings.

A brief defense of the threefold view of the law is found in *The Whole Christ* by Sinclair Ferguson, 142-145

19.5 The moral law is perpetually binding on everyone (Matthew 5:17-18).

The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that, not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator, who gave it. Neither doth Christ, in the gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.

For the Christian, the moral law is no longer valid as a system of salvation, but as redeemed people, we must seek to frame our lives by it out of respect for the holiness of God.

How has Romans 6:14 often been misinterpreted, "you are not under law, but under grace"?

19.6 The law serves the gospel in a number of ways:

- 1. as a rule of life**
- 2. by exposing our sins**
- 3. by restraining us from our old sins**
- 4. by showing us what our sins deserve**
- 5. by revealing the blessings that obedience brings**

➤ How then, might you use the law in your life? How should it be used in preaching?

Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourages to the one, and deters from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.

19.7 In conclusion, the law and the gospel go hand-in-hand.

Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requires to be done.

Chapter 20 – Christian Liberty

Christians enjoy freedom from sin and death and free access to the new life that Christ offers. Our freedom in Christ does not make us free to sin or rebel against any authorities that God has ordained, such as civil and church government.

A Christian must always follow God’s commands, but is not required to follow man-made commandments that go beyond the commands of Scripture.

20.1 The freedoms Christians enjoy include freedom from...

- the guilt of sin but from not its power
- God’s wrath but not from his fatherly discipline
- the curse of the law but not from its effects
- the present evil world but not from its temptations
- bondage to Satan but not from his ability to hinder and hurt
- the dominion of sin but not from its temptations
- the evil of afflictions but not from the afflictions themselves
- the sting of death but not from death itself
- the victory of the grave but not the grave
- everlasting damnation but not from temporal discipline

The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also, in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love and willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law. But, under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

Christians are also free to lovingly and willingly obey God, without slavish fear.

Our freedoms in the New Covenant include freedom from the ceremonial law; greater boldness of access to God; and deeper intimacy with God the Holy Spirit.

20.2 God alone is Lord of the conscience, and we are not obligated to obey any commands that contradict or add to the commands found in the Bible.

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

“God alone is Lord of the conscience” means that God has the *inherent* right to impose moral obligations upon us. All other legitimate authorities are under God’s authority.

James 4:12 – “There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?”

Romans 14:4 – “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Galatians 5:1 – “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

In each of the areas below, what guidelines does Scripture give? How have well-meaning Christians at times added requirements to the teaching of Scripture?

- The consumption of alcohol
- Deciding whom to marry
- How women should dress
- Attending movies

This section teaches that we are not required to follow any practice in worship that is not taught in the Bible. Scripture does not require you to attend a weeknight Bible study group, though it may be to your benefit to attend. Scripture does not require you to raise your hands in worship, though you are free to do so.

Christians are not required to have an implicit faith, believing something just because their minister or church teaches it (Acts 17:11).

20.3 Christian freedom does not give us a license to sin.

They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is, that being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.

Have you ever met a professing Christian who sinned upon pretense of Christian liberty?

Those who take away our liberty and impose commands that go beyond the teaching of Scripture are legalists. Those who use their liberty in Christ as an excuse to commit sin are antinomian (anti-law) in their submission to God’s commands.

True Christian freedom avoids both of these extremes. Have you witnessed either or both of these extremes in your church experience?

20.4 God intends the church and state to mutually support each other. Opposition to the lawful exercise of power by the church or state amounts to resisting God. Such opposition should be dealt with by the church (note the verses listed in the Confession).

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such

opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the church.

Obey your civil rulers

Romans 13:1-8

I Peter 2:13, 14, 16 – “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good....Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

Obey your ecclesiastical rulers

Hebrews 13:17 – “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Chapter 21 – Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day

21.1 Although our natural understanding informs us that God exists and that he is to be worshipped, only the Bible tells us the acceptable way of worshipping Him.

The light of nature shows that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

Everybody knows there is a God: “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

If the worship prescribed by Scripture is the only acceptable way to worship God, then all other ways of worshipping God are offensive: “he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.”

The view that only those things explicitly commanded in Scripture may be an element of worship is known as the regulative principle of worship.

- Deuteronomy 12:32 – “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.”
 - Leviticus 10:1-3 – God destroyed Nadab and Abihu for offering “unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them.”
 - Matthew 15:9 – “in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”
 - Exodus 20:4-6 – “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”
- What are some examples of practices that take place in public worship services that are not prescribed in Scripture?

21.2 God alone is to be worshipped and through the mediation of Jesus Christ.

Religious worship is to be given to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; and to him alone; not to angels, saints, or any other creature: and, since the fall, not without a Mediator; nor in the mediation of any other but of Christ alone.

- I Timothy 2:5 – “there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”
- Ephesians 2:18 – “through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

Thus, non-Christians cannot acceptably worship God, because they do not look to Christ as divine Mediator in their worship.

21.3 God requires everyone to pray, but the only acceptable prayer is that which is made through Christ by the help of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer, with thanksgiving, being one special part of religious worship, is by God required of all men: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made in the name of the Son, by the help of his Spirit, according to his will, with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance; and, if vocal, in a known tongue.

21.4 We should pray for anything and everything lawful and for living persons, except those who have committed the unpardonable sin.

Prayer is to be made for things lawful; and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter: but not for the dead, nor for those of whom it may be known that they have sinned the sin unto death.

I John 5:16 – “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life-- to those who commit sins that do not lead to death.”

John Stott describes blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: “This sin, committed by the Pharisees, was a deliberate, open-eyed rejection of known truth. They ascribed the mighty works of Jesus, evidently done ‘by the Spirit of God’ (Mt. 12:28), to the agency of Beelzebub. Such sin, Jesus said, would never be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come. He who commits it ‘is guilty of an eternal sin’ (Mk. 3:29; cf. Mt. 12:22-32). It leads him inexorably into a state of incorrigible moral and spiritual obtuseness, because he has willfully sinned against his own conscience. In John’s own language he has ‘loved darkness instead of light’ (Jn. 3:18-21), and in consequence he will ‘die in his sins’ (Jn. 8:24). His sin in fact, leads to death” (The Letters of John, p. 191).

21.5 Worship should consist of the elements listed in this section.

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.

“Conscionable” = conscientious

The Confession teaches psalm singing and says nothing of hymns. This is based on Colossians 3:16. Most Presbyterians also sing hymns. Why? One reason is that in Colossians 3:16 the Greek words *psalms*, *humnos* & *hode* (psalms, hymns & spiritual songs) are indeed used in the book of psalms, but these words also have a more general usage. Benjamin Shaw, an Old Testament professor at Greenville Theological Seminary in South Carolina points out that the Greek word *psalms* is used to translate seven different Hebrew words, ranging from a psalm as found in the Book of Psalms to a song of almost any sort (*The Worship of God*, p. 214).

The Greek word translated “hymn” is used to translate five different Hebrew words, ranging from “praises” to “prayer” and “song.” In other words the word *hymnos* “did not function as a technical term” for a type of Psalm, “but as a general term for any religious song.”

Hode, the Greek word for “spiritual song,” is likewise used to refer not merely to the inspired songs found in the book of Psalms, but to various types of songs.

While honest Christians differ over this issue, the understanding of this author is that the three terms in Colossians 3:16 refer to many kinds of songs that are in praise to God. Nonetheless, the church should give great emphasis to the singing of the Psalms, for the Psalter was the hymnal of Israel, and the church is the new Israel (Gal. 6:16).

21.6 Although worship is not now restricted to a particular place, we should worship in three settings: in public, in private, and in families.

Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshiped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so, more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or willfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by his Word or providence, calleth thereunto.

After David and before Christ, Jerusalem was the appointed center of worship. Today worship need not be tied to a particular location (John 4:21-24)

Church attendance is not optional; it is a sacred duty: “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:25).

- What are some simple things you might do to start having family worship?

21.7 One day out of every seven should be set apart for the worship of God.

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

Initially, the Sabbath was on the seventh day, celebrating the creation of the world. After the resurrection the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8) was changed to the first day to celebrate that event.

Jesus was raised on the first day (Jn. 20:1; Mt. 28:1-6), he appeared to his disciples on the first day (John 20:19, 26), and appeared to John for the final revelation on the first day (Rev. 1:9). The early church met for worship on the first day (I Cor. 16:1-2; Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10).

The first century Roman, Pliny the Younger, in a letter to the emperor Trajan, a first century treatise called the *Didache*, and Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* all testify to the early Christians gathering for worship on the first day of the week (Terry L. Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin*, p. 64).

21.8 The Sabbath day is to be set apart as a day of rest and worship and duties of necessity and mercy.

This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.

The Sabbath is a day, not an hour. The word *Sabbath* comes from the Hebrew word *Sabbath*, which, means “rest.” To “keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8) is to set it aside from ordinary use and devote it to the Lord. In the Old Testament, when tables and bowls were called “holy,” it meant that they were not longer used in common ways, but were devoted exclusively to activities related to the worship and service of God. Similarly, we keep the Sabbath holy by devoting it exclusively to the worship and service of God.

Works of necessity (Mk. 2:23-26), *mercy* (Mk. 3:1-6) and *worship* (Mt. 12:5-7) are expected. What are some examples of each?

- What implications do Exodus 20:10 -- "On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates" -- have for us today?
- God promises to bless us if we will observe his Sabbath (Isaiah 58:13-14). If you have sought to keep the Sabbath according to God's pattern, in what ways have you been blessed?
- What are some practical ways to prepare your heart and order your affairs beforehand?
- Can you think of a couple ways you might be more diligent about setting apart the Sabbath unto the Lord?

Chapter 22 – Lawful Oaths and Vows

The Westminster Assembly addressed the issue of oaths and vows not only because Scripture addresses it, but because in their day one group of Christians, the Anabaptists, refused to take oaths and the Roman Catholic Church was multiplying vows, such as the vows of chastity and poverty taken by the clergy.

The difference between an oath and a vow is that an oath confirms an assertion or promise made between men. A vow is a promise to God.

What benefits are there to taking oaths and vows? On what occasions are they beneficial? Why do we need oaths and vows in the first place?

22.1 An oath is an act of worship in which God is called to witness the truth of what is asserted or promised -- and to judge the one making the promise accordingly.

A lawful oath is a part of religious worship, wherein, upon just occasion, the person swearing solemnly calleth God to witness what he asserts, or promises, and to judge him according to the truth or falsehood of what he swears.

Deut. 10:20 – “You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear.”

Lev. 19:12 – “You shall swear not by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God.”

It is appropriate to take an oath in a court of law or when taking public office or becoming an officer in the church. In taking an oath you are calling God to witness your truthfulness and the sincerity of your intentions.

22.2 We are only to swear in God’s name. Oaths are legitimate in serious situations (e.g. in court, when being sworn into office).

The name of God only is that by which men ought to swear, and therein it is to be used with all holy fear and reverence. Therefore, to swear vainly, or rashly, by that glorious and dreadful Name; or, to swear at all by any other thing, is sinful, and to be abhorred. Yet, as in matters of weight and moment, an oath is warranted by the Word of God, under the new testament as well as under the old; so a lawful oath, being imposed by lawful authority, in such matters, ought to be taken.

Jer. 5:7 – “Your children have forsaken me and have sworn by those who are no gods.”

Mt. 5:34-35 – “Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.”

Ezra 10:5 – “Then Ezra arose and made the leading priests and Levites and all Israel take oath that they would do as had been said. So they took the oath.”

Quakers say that Christians should refuse to take an oath in court, based on Jesus words in Matthew 5:34-37, “Do not take an oath at all...Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

How are we to reconcile that passage with texts in which...

- God himself takes an oath (e.g. Gn. 22:16,17; Heb. 6:13-18)
- Jesus himself did not refuse to answer when the high priest put him under oath (Mt. 26:63-64)
- Paul appeals to God in the form of oaths (Rom. 1:9; 9:1; II Cor. 1:23).

22.3 Oaths should not be taken lightly, and then should be made only after one is convinced something is true. Of course, it is never right to sin, even if one has solemnly sworn to do so. It is a sin to refuse to take an oath about a just matter when a lawful authority requires one (Num. 5:19, 21; Neh. 5:12).

Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth: neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform.

22.4 & 5 Vows and oaths are to be taken honestly, according to the plain understanding of the terms used, and are to be fulfilled at any cost, short of sin.

An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt. Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels.

A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness.

An example of taking a vow with mental reservation would be: "I promise to be faithful to you, (unless you become a cold, mean spouse)." Saul made a foolish vow in I Samuel 14.

In light of what Scripture says about vows, informal promises likewise should be fulfilled, even when keeping the promise works to one's disadvantage.

- If you take a job promising you will start Monday morning, and then another employer offers you a more lucrative job, you should take the job you promised to take, unless the original employer agrees to release you from your promise.
- If Susie accepts Johnny's invitation to go to the prom, and later Bill, whom Susie is fond of, asks her to be his date, Susie should keep her promise to Johnny.

On what grounds may marriage vows be broken? How about church membership vows?

Psalm 15:4 speaks of the blessedness of the one "who swears to his own hurt and does not change."

22.6 A vow is to be made to God alone and may be aimed at thanks for the past or at requests for the future.

It is not to be made to any creature, but to God alone: and, that it may be accepted, it is to be made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want, whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties; or, to other things, so far and so long as they may fitly conduce thereunto.

Also, while oaths may be imposed by lawful authority, vows are voluntary.

Ecclesiastes 5:4-5: “Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.”

We should remember this in relation to our wedding vows and church membership vows.

22.7 Vows may not be made to do anything that the Bible forbids or to do anything that we are unable to do.

No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God, or what would hinder any duty therein commanded, or which is not in his own power, and for the performance whereof he hath no promise of ability from God. In which respects, popish monastical vows of perpetual single life, professed poverty, and regular obedience, are so far from being degrees of higher perfection, that they are superstitious and sinful snares, in which no Christian may entangle himself.

Vows to remain single should not be taken since a man or woman does not know whether he or she will have that gift for the entire course of his or her life. One should not take a monastic vow not to marry, which has as one of its purposes to avoid fornication (I Cor. 7:2).

A single mother took an oath, when she was married, to raise her children in the Catholic Church. Then she came to see that Catholicism is not biblical. But she feels compelled to keep her oath. How would you advise her?

Conclusion

Are you keeping your vows?

Do you keep your word? If you tell someone you will meet them at a certain time, do you keep your appointments? If you promise someone you will do something for them, do you do it?

Chapter 23 – Civil Authorities

This chapter recognizes God as the supreme head who has appointed civil authorities as His subordinates whom citizens are to obey. Civil authorities are responsible to protect the church without intervening in church matters.

23.1 God has established civil authorities to encourage good and punish evil.

“GOD, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, has ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory, and the public good; and, to this end, has armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evildoers. “

Romans 13:1-4 – “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

I Peter 2:13-14 – “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”

What does Romans 13 say about...

- the role government should play in society?
- the legitimacy of capital punishment? (cf. Gen. 9:6)

What should be a Christian’s response when the government coerces him to act in a way that would violate God’s commands (Acts 5:29)? What are some examples of such situations?

23.2 Christians may hold office and participate in government.

“It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto;^b in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth;^c so, for that end, they may lawfully now under the New Testament, wage war upon just and necessary occasions.^d “

b Prov. 8:15-16; Rom. 13:1-2, 4 / c Ps. 2:10-12; I Tim. 2:2; Ps. 82:3-4; II Sam. 23:3; I Pet. 2:13 / d Luke 3:14; Rom. 13:4; Matt. 8:9-10; Acts 10:1-2; Rev. 17:14, 16.

This paragraph is a response, at least in part, to the position of 17th century Anabaptists, who said that Christians should not participate in government, for those who hold public office or serve in the military were serving in the devil’s uniform.

23.3 Civil authorities must not interfere with the church. In a Christian country the state should govern according to Christian principles and promote the Christian religion -- while protecting freedom of religion for all people.

[The ARP version of this section of the Confession differs from other versions]

“The civil magistrate may not assume to himself administration of the word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven;^e yet, as the gospel revelation lays indispensable obligations upon all classes of people who are favored with it, magistrates as such, are bound to execute their respective offices in a subserviency thereunto, administering government on Christian principles, and ruling in the fear of God, according to the directions of his word; as those who shall give an account to the Lord Jesus, whom God hath appointed to be the judge of the world.^f Hence, magistrates, as such, in a Christian country, are bound to promote the Christian religion, as the most valuable interest of their subjects, by all such means as are not inconsistent with civil rights; and do not imply an interference with the policy of the church, which is the free and independent kingdom of the Redeemer; nor an assumption of dominion over conscience.^g “

e II Chron. 26:18; with Matt. 18:17; and Matt. 16:19; Eph. 4:11-12; I Cor. 4:1-2; Rom. 10:15; Heb. 5:4 / f Isa. 49:7, 23; Rev. 21:24; Col. 3:17; II Sam. 23:3; II Cor. 5:10; Ps. 122:9; Ezra 7:23, 27-28; Rom. 13:3-4, 6 / g Ps. 2:10-12; John 18:36-37; James 4:12; Rom. 14:4; [See also letters "e" and "f"].

“The keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 16:19; 18:18)- refers not to the administration of the Word and sacraments, but to the authority to govern the church and administer church discipline. To “bind and loose” is the church’s authority to permit and to forbid.

This raises the question, ‘Are we a Christian nation?’ I suggest we are a nation built on Christian principles, but not a Christian nation. Thus, we should look at America in the same way we look at India: as a mission field to be evangelized, not a battlefield in which we fight for Christian principles to be preserved when the majority do not support those principles.

23.4 We should pray for our civil leaders, pay taxes, and obey the law, regardless of whether our governing officials are Christian or not.

“It is the duty of people to pray for magistrates,^h to honor their persons,ⁱ to pay them tribute and other dues,^k to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority for conscience' sake.^l Infidelity, or difference in religion, does not make void the magistrate's just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to him:^m from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted;ⁿ much less has the Pope any power or jurisdiction over them in their dominions, or over any of their people and least of all to deprive them of their dominions or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretense whatsoever.^o “

h I Tim. 2:1-2; i I Pet. 2:17 / k Rom. 13:6-7; l Rom. 13:5; Tit. 3:1 / m I Pet. 2:13-14, 16 / n Rom. 13:1; I Kings 2:35; Acts 25:9-11; II Pet. 2:1, 10-11; Jude 8-11 / o II Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:15-17.

In private and corporate worship we should pray for our civil leaders.

A number of statements in the second part of this paragraph were written in response the 17th century Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church (1) said that its clergy and property were exempt from the jurisdiction of civil courts; (2) executed heretics (as did some Protestants); and (3) did not officially recognize authority not approved by the church. Romans 13:1 teaches, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

Chapter 24 – Marriage and Divorce

24.1 Marriage is between one man and one woman. Polygamy is forbidden.

“Marriage is to be between one man and one woman: neither is it lawful for any man to have more than one wife, nor for any woman to have more than one husband at the same time.^a “

a Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5-6; Prov. 2:17.

24.2 Four reasons are given for marriage: mutual help, offspring, a holy seed for the church, and preventing fornication.

“Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife;^b for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the church with an holy seed;^c and for preventing of uncleanness.^d “

b Gen. 2:18 – “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.’”

c Mal. 2:15 – “Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring.”

d I Cor. 7:2, 9 – “But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband....But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

It has been said that the most effective tool for expanding the kingdom of God is the marriage bed. Reflecting on the often large size of Dutch families, some have called this “Dutch evangelism.”

Christian counselors often tell young people to wait until they are at least 24-years-old to marry. Is this counsel necessarily biblical, particularly in light of I Corinthians 7:2,9?

24.3 Marriage is for both believers and unbelievers, but Christians should only marry Christians.

“It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry who are able with judgment to give their consent;^e yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord.^f And therefore such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels or other idolaters; neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.^g”

e Heb. 13:4; I Tim. 4:3; I Cor. 7:36-38; Gen. 24:57-58.

f I Cor. 7:39.

g Gen. 34:14; Exod. 34:16; Deut. 7:3-4; I Kings 11:4; Neh. 13:25-27; Mal. 2:11-12; II Cor. 6:14.

That marriage is for unbelievers is an instance of God’s common grace toward all people.

The wedding policy of Good News Presbyterian Church states that the pastor will not officiate a wedding of a Christian to an unbeliever.

24.4 You may not marry your blood relatives.

“Marriage ought not to be within the degrees of consanguinity [blood relationships] or affinity [relationships created by marriage] forbidden in the word;^h nor can such incestuous marriages ever be made lawful by any law of man, or consent of parties, so as those persons may live

together as man and wife.ⁱ The man may not marry any of his wife's kindred nearer in blood than he may be of his own, nor the woman of her husband's kindred nearer in blood than of her own.^k"

h Lev. 18:1-30; I Cor. 5:1; Amos 2:7. i Mark 6:18; Lev. 18:24-28. k Lev. 20:19-21.

Charles Hodge writes, "The only commands on this in the Scriptures is Leviticus 18:6-23 and 20:10-21. If this law is still binding, it carries with it the principle that it is incest for a man to cohabit with any one of his deceased wife's relations nearer in blood than it is lawful for him to do of his own" (*Commentary on the Westminster Confession*, 306).

The prohibition against intermarriage was not established at the time of creation; it was instituted later in history.

24.5 Fornication is grounds for divorce and remarriage (though Scripture does not require divorce for fornication).

"Adultery or fornication committed after a contract, being detected before marriage, giveth just occasion to the innocent party to dissolve that contract.^l In the case of adultery after marriage, it is lawful for the innocent party to sue out a divorce,^m and, after the divorce, to marry another, as if the offending party were dead.ⁿ "

l Matt. 1:18-20. m Matt. 5:31-32. n Matt. 19:9; Rom. 7:2-3.

When an adulterous spouse truly repents, John Gerstner writes, "the innocent party must forgive and may be reconciled to the continuance of the marriage. It is a duty to pardon but not to resume the marriage."

24.6 Though our corrupt nature is inclined to loosen the strict marriage-divorce laws of Scripture, only adultery and irremediable desertion are grounds for divorce.

"Although the corruption of man be such as is apt to study arguments, unduly to put asunder those whom God hath joined together in marriage; yet nothing but adultery, or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the church or civil magistrate, is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage;^o wherein a public and orderly course of proceeding is to be observed, and the persons concerned in it not left to their own wills and discretion in their own case.^p "

o Matt. 19:8-9; I Cor. 7:15; Matt. 19:6.

p Deut. 24:1-4.

Consider some other common but sticky questions regarding Christians and divorce:

- How would you counsel a Christian who divorced before his or her conversion but did not have biblical grounds for the divorce? (Hebrews 10:17; Romans 5:20; II Corinthians 5:17)
- Can a divorced man serve as a church officer?
- What should the church do if one of its members seeks to divorce his or her spouse without biblical grounds? (Mt. 18:15-17; I Cor. 7:10-16).

Chapter 25 – The Church

A prominent Bible teaching congregation once advertised on billboards saying, “Jesus didn’t like church either.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible refers to the church as the “bride” of Christ (Rev. 19:7), the “body” of Christ (Eph. 1:23), and “the household of God...a pillar and buttress of truth” (I Timothy 3:15).

The purpose of this study is to elevate our view of Christ’s church.

25.1 The true church, of whom Christ is the head, is invisible to man. It consists of all true believers (past, present and future).

The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fills all in all.^a

a Eph. 1:10; 5:23, 27, 32; Col. 1:18.

Ephesians 1:22-23 - “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

The true church is invisible to us because we cannot know the hearts of people, but it is visible to God.

25.2 The visible church consists of those who profess faith in Christ and their children.

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion,^b together with their children;^c and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ,^d the house and family of God,^e out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.^f

b I Cor. 1:2; I Cor. 12:12-13; Ps. 2:8; Rev. 7:9; Rom. 15:9-12.

c I Cor. 7:14; Acts 2:39; Ezek. 16:20-21; Rom. 11:16; Gen. 3:15; Gen. 17:7.

d Matt. 13:47; Isa. 9:7.

e Eph. 2:19; Eph. 3:15.

f Acts 2:47 – “...praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Are all members of the *visible* church in the *invisible* church? Are all members of the invisible church in the visible church?

In the Old Testament the church was “confined to one nation,” Israel. What is God's promise to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6? How does the New Testament church fit into the picture? (I Peter 2:9; Galatians 6:16; Philippians 3:3)

The Confession states that outside of the visible church there is “no ordinary possibility of salvation.” Although God is ordinarily pleased to work through the visible church (e.g. professing Christians doing

evangelism; the church preaching God's Word, administering the sacraments and exercising discipline) to bring people to salvation, he does not always or necessarily do so.

Another distinction that is sometimes made is that between the church *triumphant* and the church *militant*. The church triumphant is composed of those Christians who have already finished their course and are now perfected spirits in heaven; the church militant consists of those believers still living on earth and engaged in spiritual warfare.

25.3 God has given the visible church the ministry, the Scripture, and the sacraments for building up Christians. It is his Spirit that makes these “means of grace” effective for edifying believers.

Unto this catholic visible church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and does by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.⁹

g I Cor. 12:28 – “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.”

Eph. 4:11-13 – “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...”

Matt. 28:19-20; Isa. 59:21.

Christ, the head, rules his church through his Word and Spirit by the ministry of men (e.g. I Peter 5:1-5; I Timothy 3:5; Ephesians 4:11-12; Matthew 18:18).

25.4 In some periods more than others it is easier to recognize who the true Christians are. And some congregations are more pure than others, according to their faithfulness to God's Word, their properly administering the sacraments, and their rightly performing public worship.

This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible.^h And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.ⁱ

h Rom. 11:3-4; Rev. 12:6, 14.

i Rev. 2:1-29; Rev. 3:1-22; I Cor. 5:6-7.

A church should not be judged by its size, money, or the success of its programs, but by whether it proclaims the gospel, rightly administers the sacraments and seeks to rightly worship God.

25.5 No church is perfect. Some churches are so impure as not to be churches. But there will always be a true church on earth.

The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error;^k and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan.^l Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to his will.^m

k I Cor. 13:12; Rev. 2:1-29; Rev. 3:1-22; Matt. 13:24-30, 47. l Rev. 18:2; Rom. 11:18-22.

m Matt. 16:18 – “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Ps. 72:17; Ps. 102:28; Matt. 28:19-20.

What do you believe the Bible regards as important qualities to look for in a church?

The Reformers identified 3 marks of the true visible church:

- (1) The pure preaching of the Word of God
- (2) The proper administration of the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper)
- (3) The exercise of church discipline

25.6 Jesus is the only King of the church.

There is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ;ⁿ nor can mere man in any sense be the head thereof (n)

n Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22.

What would you say to a church member who prefaces an objection to something with the words, “They can’t do that in my church...”

Conclusion

“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25). Those who love Christ love his bride.

Is your love for Christ’s church evident?

In what ways are being used or might you be used to build up Christ’s church?

Chapter 26 – The Communion of the Saints

In the Apostles' Creed we say, "I believe in the communion of the saints." Do you? Or do you look to the church mainly as a place for Bible teaching and worship?

What role does the church play in your life? What role do you play in the life of the church?

26.1 All Christians are united to Christ and to one another and are therefore obligated to help one another in spiritual and physical ways.

ALL saints that are united to Jesus Christ their head by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory.^a And being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces;^b and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.^c

a I John 1:3 – "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

Eph. 3:16-19; John 1:16; Eph. 2:5-6; Phil. 3:10; Rom. 6:5-6; II Tim. 2:12.

b Eph. 4:15-16; I Cor. 12:7; I Cor. 3:21-23; Col. 2:19.

c I Thes. 5:11, 14 – "encourage one another and build one another up....admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all."

Rom. 1:11-12, 14

I John 3:16-18 – "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

Gal. 6:10 – "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

How connected are you to others in our church? What steps could you take to deepen your connectedness to others? Consider the following areas:

- Welcoming newcomers on Sunday mornings.
- Building friendships between adults and children.
- Building friendships with church folks outside of Sunday mornings.
- Visiting the sick, elderly, and lonely.

Ephesians 4:11-13 speaks of the important role that each of us, exercising our spiritual gifts, plays in building up this body of believers. Do you have an idea of what your spiritual gifts may be? Do you exercise them? How does one determine his spiritual gifts?

26.2 Our fellowship includes spiritual and material things and extends to Christians inside and outside the local congregation.

Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification;^d as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.^e

d Heb. 10:24-25 – “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near..”

Acts 2:42-47 – “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Isa. 2:3; I Cor. 11:20.

e Acts 2:44-45; I John 3:17; II Cor. 8:1-24; II Cor. 9:1-15;

Acts 11:29-30 – “So the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”

We must view church not merely as a Sunday gathering but as a working-together fellowship in which each member seeks to minister to others. We should reach out to fellow believers with struggling with sinful habits, financial needs, and marital conflicts, but we will not discover their struggles until we take time to build friendships with them.

What are concrete ways we can express our unity with the Christ’s church worldwide?

26.3 This communion does not include the deity of Christ, nor all the possessions of Christians.

This communion which the saints have with Christ, does not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead, or to be equal with Christ in any respect; either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous.^f Nor does their communion one with another, as saints, take away or infringe the title or property which each man has in his goods and possessions.^g

f Col. 1:18-19; I Cor 8:6; Isa. 42:8; I Tim. 6:15-16; Ps. 45:7; with Heb. 1:8-9.

g Exod. 20:15; Eph. 4:28; Acts 5:4.

The 8th commandment, “You shall not steal” (Ex. 20:15), implies private property rights. Thus the Bible rejects communism. Christian charity is always voluntary.

Conclusion

Some people are givers. Others are takers. In your relation to the body of Christ, how can you be more of a giver?

Chapter 27 – The Sacraments

Terms

Means of Grace – “those institutions [the Word, sacraments and prayer] which God has ordained to be the ordinary channels of grace, that is, of the supernatural influences of the Holy Spirit on the souls of men” (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, III, 466).

This is not mechanical, but when the sacraments are rightly applied and received, they are means by which God gives his grace to the recipient.

Sacrament – “A holy ordinance instituted by Christ, in which by sensible signs the grace of God in Christ, and the benefits of the covenant of grace, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, and these, in turn, give expression to their faith and allegiance to God” (Berkhof, 617).

The word *sacrament* is not found in the Bible, but like the words *theology* and *Trinity*, it represents a biblical concept. It is derived from a Latin word (*sacramentum*) as the equivalent to the biblical term *mystery*. The biblical term *mystery* refers to a something previously hidden that has now been revealed. Thus, baptism and the Lord’s Supper are external signs that reveal spiritual realities.

The administration of the sacraments is among the primary elements of Scriptural worship, yet in modern churches they often assume a peripheral role. Our goal is to better appreciate the meaning of the sacraments and their place in the Christian life.

27.1 The confession’s definition of sacraments

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace,^a immediately [directly] instituted by God,^b to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him;^c as also to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church and the rest of the world;^d and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his word.^e

(1) Sacraments are signs and seals that you are a recipient of God’s covenant of grace.

a Rom. 4:11 – “He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” (cf. Gen. 17:7, 10)

Sacraments are *signs* in that they symbolically declare the gospel of grace. How do the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper visually declare the gospel?

A *seal* is a stamp of ownership or authenticity. Sacraments *seal* or certify to the Christian that he has received grace and belongs to God.

(2) Sacraments are personally instituted by Christ

b Matt. 28:19; I Cor. 11:23 - Jesus directed us to baptize and to celebrate his Supper.

(3) Sacraments represent Christ and his benefits.

- *Baptism* is an initiation rite marking a person as a member of Christ’s church.
- *The Lord’s Supper* is a covenantal meal by which Christians are spiritually nourished.

(4) Sacraments confirm our position with and in Christ: they are tangible signs of God’s uniting us to Himself in Christ.

c I Cor. 10:16 – “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”

I Cor. 11:25-26; Gal. 3:27; Gal. 3:17

Baptism signifies our once-for-all union with Christ (Romans 6).

The Lord’s Supper signifies our continuous union with Christ and our renewal more and more into his image.

This is why...

- believers are examined by the elders as to their faith in Christ before they receive the Lord’s Supper and baptism
- solemn warnings are issued about receiving the Lord’s Supper casually.
- unbelievers who take the sacraments incur God’s wrath (I Cor. 11:28-30).

(5) Sacraments put a visible distinction upon members of Christ's church. They are badges of church membership.

d Rom. 15:8; Exod. 12:48; Gen. 34:14

(6) Sacraments remind us that we have been set apart to serve Christ.

e Rom. 6:3-4; I Cor. 10:16, 21

27.2 Since there is a spiritual connection between the sign and that which the sign represents, the terms are used interchangeably.

There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other.^f

f Gen. 17:10

Mt. 26:27-28 – “And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”

Tit. 3:5b – “...the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.”

I Peter 3:21 – “Baptism...now saves you...”

Calvin said, “in the sacraments the reality is given along with the sign.” In receiving the sacraments, the believer is “given the thing itself.”

Roman Catholicism teaches that the sacraments in themselves give grace. At the other extreme, many evangelicals hold a “memorial” view of the sacraments, viewing the sacraments as mere object lessons. Reformed churches say that there is *a spiritual relationship between the sign and the thing signified*.

The sacraments convey a spiritual effect, not in themselves, but from God. Baptism does not save; merely taking the bread and wine does not spiritually nourish. Christ saves and spiritually nourishes us, and the sacraments signify and certify just that.

27.3 The effectiveness of the sacraments does not come from the sacraments themselves or from those who administer them, but only by the Holy Spirit.

The grace which is exhibited [conferred] in or by the sacraments, rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither doth the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that doth administer it,^g but upon the work of the Spirit,^h and the word of institution; which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.ⁱ

g Rom. 2:28-29; I Pet. 3:21.

h Matt. 3:11; I Cor. 12:13.

i Matt. 26:7-8; Matt. 28:19-20.

27.4 There are only two sacraments and they are to be administered by ordained ministers.

There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the gospel, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord; neither of which may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the word, lawfully ordained.^k

k Matt. 28:19; I Cor. 11:29-30; I Cor. 4:1; Heb. 5:4.

Roman Catholicism adds five more sacraments: Confirmation, Penance, Ordination, Matrimony and Extreme Unction. Protestants refute this, pointing out that Christ instituted only baptism and the Lord's Supper. Marriage was instituted by God, but it not as a sign of anything.

While the biblical basis for asserting that only ordained ministers should administer the sacraments is scant, and thus debatable, part of what lies behind this principle is the recognition that those who administer the sacraments must be able to discern their meaning in order to protect people from the negative consequences that come from their being mishandled (I Cor. 11:29-30).

27.5 Old Testament circumcision is the New Testament baptism (Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11) and the Old Testament Passover is the New Testament Lord's Supper (I Cor. 5:7).

The sacraments of the Old Testament, in regard of the spiritual things thereby signified and exhibited, were, for substance, the same with those of the New.^l

l Corinthians 10:1-4

Conclusion

1. The sacraments have been called "the gospel addressed to the eye." How so?
2. What steps might you take to get more out of taking the Lord's Supper? ...of observing a baptism?

Chapter 28 – Baptism

28.1 Five benefits of baptism

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ,^a not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church;^b but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace,^c of his ingrafting into Christ,^d of regeneration,^e of remission of sins,^f and of his giving up unto God through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life:^g which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in this church until the end of the world.^h

a Matt. 28:19; b I Cor. 12:13; h Matt. 28:19-20

Baptism is a sign that seals (confirms) ...

(1) the covenant of grace (God's solemn promise to redeem all who trust in Christ; this is by grace)

c Rom. 4:11 – “He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.”

Col. 2:11-12 – “In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism....”

Baptism is a sign that certifies (seals) -- for the baptized believer, as well as for the baptized child and his parents -- God's promise that he makes sinners righteous when they believe. Regarding infant baptism, Calvin wrote, “God's sign, communicated to a child as by an impressed seal, confirms the promise given to the pious parent, and declares it to be ratified that the Lord will be God not only to him but to his seed; and that he wills to manifest his goodness and grace not only to him but to his descendants even to the thousandth generation (Ex. 20:6). (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.16.9).

What advantage do baptized children enjoy over non-baptized children? Imagine two young women with boyfriends, both whom assure them of their undying love and of their intent to one day marry. But there is one difference. One woman receives from her boyfriend an engagement ring as a confirmation of his promise. The other does not. Does an engagement ring make a difference? Ask the woman who did not receive a ring.

(2) the believer's ingrafting into Christ

d Gal. 3:27 – “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

Rom. 6:5 – “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

(3) spiritual birth (“regeneration”)

e Tit. 3:5-6 – “he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...”

(4) remission (removal) of sins

f Mark 1:4 – “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

(5) yielding to walk in newness of life

g Rom. 6:3-4 – “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

28.2 Proper baptism involves water, in the name of the triune God, administered by an ordained minister.

The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, by a minister of the gospel, lawfully called thereunto.ⁱ

i Matt. 3:11; John 1:33;

Matt. 28:19-20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

I Cor. 4:1 – Paul speaks of “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The statement that baptism must be administered by an ordained minister is rooted in the understanding that the one administering the sacrament must be someone who has been called by the church and ordained to preach God’s Word, for the word of institution is necessary for the sacrament to be a sacrament. “Baptism by non-ordained persons, if in the triune name, is irregular but not thereby invalid” (Robert Letham, *Baptism*, 70).

28.3 The proper mode of baptism is sprinkling, immersion is unnecessary but not forbidden.

Dipping of the person into the water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.^k

Sprinkling pictures the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

Our Baptist friends claim that the Greek word *baptizo* always means “immerse” and thus immersion is the required mode of baptism. But *baptize* does not always mean immerse. Examples are found in the Classics, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, 250 B.C.), the New Testament, and other early writings where the word *baptizo* and its forms are used with a great latitude of meaning.

John Murray in his book *Christian Baptism* (pp. 10-29) cites numerous examples of New Testament passages where the Greek word *baptizo* cannot mean “immerse” and thus concludes that immersion is not the required mode of baptism. One example follows:

k Heb. 9:10, 19-22 – [Old Testament sacrifices and gifts] “deal only with food and drink and various washings [*baptismois*]....For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.’ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”

In 9:10 we see that a Old Testament ceremonial washing performed by sprinkling can be called a baptism.

Acts 2:41; Acts 16:33; Mark 7:4

28.4 The children of believers are to be baptized.

Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ,^l but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.^m

^l Mark 16:15-16; Acts 8:37-38.

^m Gen. 17:7, 9; with Gal. 3:9, 14; and Col. 2:11-12; and Acts 2:38-39; and Rom. 4:11-12; I Cor. 7:14; Matt. 28:19; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15.

The case for infant baptism is built on the following line of reasoning:

I. SALVATION IS BY FAITH ALONE IN BOTH THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

A. Salvation was by faith alone in the Old Covenant

Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was declared righteous on the basis of his faith in God's promise, not his works (Rom. 4:1-3 and Gal. 3:6, which both allude to Gen. 15:6).

B. Salvation is by faith alone in the New Covenant (Ephesians 2:8-9)

II. A SIGN OF SALVATION WAS APPLIED TO BELIEVERS IN BOTH THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

A. In the Old Covenant, the sign of salvation was circumcision

1. Romans 4:9-10 teaches that Abraham was circumcised *after* he was justified by faith and that circumcision was merely a "sign" that God saved him and a "seal" of the righteousness that God imputed to him (4:11a).
2. Circumcision did not merely signify that one belonged to the nation of Israel. It signified that one was cleansed from sin. To have a circumcised heart meant that your heart was cleansed (Ex. 6:12; Dt. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; Rm. 2:28,29).

B. In the New Covenant, baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of salvation.

Colossians 2:11-12: “In him [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism...”

III. THE SIGN OF SALVATION WAS APPLIED TO THE CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS IN BOTH THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

A. In the Old Testament, the sign of circumcision was applied not only to the believer, but also to the male babies in his home (Genesis 17:12).

B. Should we not expect that since the covenant sign was applied to the children of believers in the Old Testament, it also would be applied to believer's children in the New Testament? Where and when were children thrown out of the covenant?

1. The two Old Testament ordinances, Passover and Circumcision, have been replaced respectively by the Lord's Supper (note I Cor. 5:7,8, as well as the fact that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at the time of the Passover meal) and baptism (Col. 2:11-12).
2. In Acts 2:38-39 Peter declares that the promise of salvation is for the children of believers. If the promise of salvation is for believers' children, should not the children receive the sign of the promise? Remember, Peter spoke these words to Jews -- people who were used to having the outward sign of salvation applied to their children.
3. We see in both the Old and New Testaments that God deals with families and not merely individuals (Acts 16:31; I Corinthians 7:14).

28.5 Christ commands baptism of believers and their children, but it is not required for salvation. Baptism in itself does not guarantee someone is a Christian.

Although it be a great sin to condemn or neglect this ordinance,ⁿ yet grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto it, as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it,^o or that all are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated.^p

n Luke 7:30; with Exod. 4:24-26. o Rom. 4:11; Acts 10:2, 4, 22, 31, 45, 47. p Acts 8:13, 23.

Can you think of a New Testament example of a believer who was not baptized?

Men and women “are not made the members of Christ by baptism which the church gives, but by faith, the gift of God; and baptism is the Church’s recognition of this inner fact” (B.B. Warfield, The Works of Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield: 9:389)

Some object to infant baptism by pointing out that there are many who were baptized as infants who did not grow up to be Christians. What response might you offer to this observation?

28.6 The power of baptism is not tied to the moment of baptism, but is conferred to the elect at the appointed time.

The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered;^q yet notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, *to such* (whether of age or infants) *as that grace belongs unto* [the elect], according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time.^r

q John 3:5, 8. r Gal. 3:27; Tit. 3:5; Eph. 5:25-26; Acts 2:38, 41

28.7 Baptism is to be administered only once.

The sacrament of baptism is but once to be administered to any person.^s s Tit. 3:5.

Some Christians who had been baptized as infants want to be rebaptized after their conversion. These people typically view baptism as a *sign of their faith* rather than a *sign of God’s promise* (which sometimes is actualized long after the baptism). R.C. Sproul comments that since baptism *is* a sign of God’s promise, to be rebaptized is to go before God and say, “Would you run that by me again?”

“If baptism were repeatable, it would signify the incompleteness of the work of Christ, contradicting the gospel. If a person were to submit a second time to the baptismal rite only one thing could happen – he would get wet” (Robert Letham, *Baptism*, 72).

Chapter 29 – The Lord’s Supper

Baptism signifies initiation, the beginning of life. The Lord’s Supper involves nourishment of our new lives in Christ. Key passages on the Lord’s Supper include Mark 14:1,12-26 and I Corinthians 10:14-17; 11:17-34.

29.1 The five benefits of the Lord’s Supper

Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord’s Supper, to be observed in this church unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death, the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him, and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.^a

a I Cor. 11:23-26; I Cor. 10:16-17, 21; I Cor. 12:13.

The Lord’s Supper...

(1) remembers Jesus’ sacrificial death.

(2) certifies or confirms his benefits to Christians.

At the Last Supper Jesus said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk. 22:20). Charles Hodge explains that Jesus was saying, “My blood is the seal of the covenant of grace, and this cup is the symbol of my blood, and as such is offered to you. In its use Christ ratifies his promise to save us on the condition of faith, and to endow us with all the benefits of his redemption” (*Commentary on the Westminster Confession*, p. 356).

(3) nourishes us spiritually.

(4) is occasion to renew our engagement to be the Lord’s and to live for his glory.

(5) is a pledge of our communion with Christ and fellow Christians.

SECTIONS 2-6 CONDEMN PRACTICES OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

29.2 The Lord’s Supper does not re-sacrifice Christ (as Roman Catholicism teaches), but rather commemorates Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice. It is a spiritual, not a physical, offering.

In this sacrament Christ is not offered up to his Father, nor any real sacrifice made at all for remission of sins of the quick or dead;^b but only a commemoration of that one offering up of himself, by himself, upon the cross, once for all, and a spiritual oblation [offering] of all possible praise unto God for the same;^c so that the Popish sacrifice of the mass, as they call it, is most abominably injurious to Christ’s one only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect.^d

b Heb. 9:22, 25-26, 28 c I Cor. 11:24-26; Matt. 26:26-27 d Heb. 7:23-24, 27; 10:11-12, 14, 18

The Roman Catholic “sacrifice of the mass,” in repeating Jesus’ sacrifice, devalues the sufficiency of Jesus’ once-for-all act.

29.3 Instructions on how ministers should administer the Lord’s Supper

The Lord Jesus has, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to declare his word of institution to the people, to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart

from a common to a holy use; and to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (they communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants;^e but to none who are not then present in the congregation.^f

e Mt. 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; with I Cor. 11:23-26. f Acts 20:7; I Cor. 11:20

When a minister sets apart the bread and cup, his words do not change the bread and cup; they are spoken so that the communicants will understand that God is setting them apart from their common use for a spiritual use.

The minister partaking of the Supper demonstrates that he is a dependent recipient as well as the one who serves the Supper (in contrast, Jesus did not receive the supper; he only served it).

The Westminster divines, in reaction to the Catholic practice of private masses, said that the sacrament should only be administered to those who are present in the congregation.

29.4 This section forbids the Roman Catholic abuses of private masses, withholding the cup from the congregation, and worshipping the elements.

Private masses, or receiving this sacrament by a priest, or any other, alone;^g as likewise the denial of the cup to the people;^h worshipping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use; are all contrary to the nature of this sacrament, and to the institution of Christ.ⁱ

g I Cor. 10:6. h Mark 14:23; I Cor. 11:25-29. i Matt. 15:9.

In the Middle Ages the Roman church began withholding the cup from the laity (for fear that they would spill Christ's blood, which they believed to have become the actual blood of Christ). But Jesus gave both the bread and the cup to his disciples.

Roman Catholics elevated the cup, symbolizing their worship of wine, which they believe has assumed the bodily nature of Christ.

29.5 Since there is a spiritual connection between the bread/wine and that which they represent (Christ's body and blood) the terms are used interchangeably (cf. 27.2)

The outward elements in this sacrament, duly set apart to the uses ordained by Christ, have such relation to him crucified, as that truly, yet sacramentally only, they are sometimes called by the name of the things they represent, to wit, the body and blood of Christ;^k albeit, in substance and nature, they still remain truly and only bread and wine, as they were before.^l

k Matt. 26:26-28. l I Cor. 11:26-28; Matt. 26:29.

29.6 Transubstantiation is rejected

That doctrine which maintains a change of the substance of bread and wine into the substance of Christ's body and blood (commonly called Transubstantiation) by consecration of a priest, or by any other way, is repugnant not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense and reason; overthrows the nature of the sacrament; and has been and is the cause of manifold superstitions, yea, of gross idolatries.^m

m Acts 3:21; with I Cor. 11:24-26; Luke 24:6, 39.

In what sense do we have communion with Christ? In what sense is the bread the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ? Historically, there have been four views regarding the presence of Christ's body in the elements:

Transubstantiation – Roman Catholic view. They take literally Jesus' words, "This is my body" (Mark 14:22; cf. John 10:9). The essence (=substance) of the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ while the outward appearance remains the same.

Consubstantiation - Lutheran view. Similar to the Roman Catholic view. Christ is physically present, but the presence is only in, under, and alongside the elements (which remain the same). Although the bread and wine are not changed into the body and blood of Christ, communicants receive Christ's real body and blood along with ("con") the elements.

Symbolic/memorial view- Many evangelicals. The Lord's Supper is merely a memorial service; there is no special presence of Christ.

Spiritual Presence – Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Christ is spiritually present in a unique way to believers who come to him by faith (I Cor. 10:16). While Christ is not physically present, neither are the elements merely symbols.

- I Corinthians 10:16 speaks not merely of remembrance, but of communion. Jesus did not merely display the elements for his disciples to look at. He invited his disciples to eat the bread and to drink the wine. These actions indicate that the Lord's Supper is more than a memorial; they point to Christ who spiritually nourishes us, as bread and wine physically nourishes us.
- Jesus is really present – there is something special about the fellowship we enjoy with Christ in the taking of the Supper.

29.7 In distinction to the Roman Catholic (transubstantiation) and Lutheran views (consubstantiation), during the Lord's Supper sincere Christians are spiritually nourished in Christ

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament,ⁿ do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death; the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses.^o

n I Cor. 11:28. o I Cor. 10:16 – "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?"

This view denies the bodily presence of Christ taught by Catholicism and Lutheranism as well as the mere representative presence taught by many evangelicals.

29.8 The ignorant and wicked who partake of the Lord's Supper drink judgment unto themselves

Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament, yet they receive not the thing signified thereby; but by their unworthy coming thereunto are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, to their own damnation. Wherefore all ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with him, so are they unworthy of the Lord's table, and cannot, without great sin against Christ, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries,^p or be admitted thereunto.^q

p I Cor. 11:27-29; II Cor. 6:14-16. q I Cor. 5:6-7, 13; II Thess. 3:6, 14-15; Matt. 7:6.

Calvin nearly was killed over barring certain wicked residents of Geneva from taking the Lord's Supper and eating and drinking damnation on themselves.

Look at I Corinthians 11:27-32. What warnings are given in vv. 27, 29-30? We "fence" the Table not to be exclusive, but to protect the impenitent from the dangers of improperly participating in the Supper.

In 11:28 we're exhorted to examine ourselves before taking the Supper:

- *Examine your life and conduct:* A Christian who is indulging in some sin in an ongoing and unrepentant manner should not come to the Lord's Table until he repents.
- *Examine your attitude toward the Supper (11:29ff):* You should not have a casual, ritualistic attitude toward the Supper. There must be appropriate regard for the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament.

Conclusion

1. Who should take the Lord's Supper? Does God look for perfection in those who partake?
2. What are worthy things to reflect on when you take the bread and wine?
 - *Past:* "do this in remembrance of me" (I Cor. 11:24,25)
 - *Present:* Communion with Christ and with other Christians
 - *Future:* Jesus' return (I Cor. 11:26).

Chapter 30 – Church Censures

A censure is a judgment condemning a person for misconduct.

Have you ever seen church discipline practiced in a church? What impression did it leave on you?

30.1 Jesus, the head of the church, has appointed officers to govern his church.

The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, has therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.^a

a Isa. 9:6-7; I Cor. 12:28; Matt. 28:18-20.

Acts 20:17, 28 – “Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

I Thessalonians 5:12 – “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you...”

I Timothy 5:17 – “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

Heb. 13:7, 17 – “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Church government is not infallible; nonetheless, it is to be respected. Nor is it a democracy; it is representative rule.

30.2 Church officers have the authority (keys of the kingdom) to declare people pardoned or not pardoned from the guilt of sin, thus opening or closing heaven to them.

To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.^b

The keys of the kingdom of heaven = the power and authority of exercising government and discipline in the church.

“To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed”

If in Mt. 16:19 Jesus grants the keys of the kingdom of heaven to his apostles, why does the Confession speak of the keys being given to church officers? Because they were also entrusted to the elders: (1) In Mt. 18:18 Jesus speaks of the church having authority to bind and loose. (2) In I Peter 5:1 Peter refers to himself as a “fellow elder,” reminding us that Peter was an elder as well as an apostle. (3) In Acts 15:12 we find that the apostles and elders together led the early church. When the apostles died, that authority would transition completely to the elders.

“*Bind*” and “*loose*” = authority to permit and to forbid. When such judgments are agreeable to Scripture, they are ratified in heaven.

The modern English version of the above paragraph reads, “To these officers are committed the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which empower them to free people from the guilt of sin or to bind them to it; to close the kingdom of heaven to the unrepentant by the word and condemnation; and to open the kingdom to repentant sinners by the ministry of the gospel and by withdrawing condemnation as the occasion demands.”

b Matthew 16:19 – “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” [Church officers are seen as heirs of the keys that were given to Jesus’ disciples.]

Matthew 18:17-18 – “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

John 20:23 – “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

II Cor. 2:6-8 – “For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.”

This authority that church officers have is not unqualified. It must be exercised according to God’s commands; otherwise church members should reject it.

The Westminster divines who wrote the Confession in 1647 probably relied heavily on the Heidelberg Catechism, written in 1563. Thus, it may be helpful in places like this to cross reference the Heidelberg Catechism. In the Heidelberg that we find three questions and answers that relate directly to the keys of the kingdom.

Question 83: What are the keys of the kingdom?

Answer: The preaching of the holy gospel and Christian discipline toward repentance. Both preaching and discipline open the kingdom of heaven to believers and close it to unbelievers.

Question 84: How does preaching the gospel open and close the kingdom of heaven?

Answer: According to the command of Christ: The kingdom of heaven is opened by proclaiming and publicly declaring to all believers, each and every one, that, as often as they accept the gospel promise in true faith, God, because of what Christ has done, truly forgives all their sins. The kingdom of heaven is closed, however, by proclaiming and publicly declaring to unbelievers and hypocrites that, as long as they do not repent, the anger of God and eternal condemnation rest on them. God’s judgment, both in this life and in the life to come, is based on this gospel testimony.

Question 85: How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by Christian discipline?

Answer: According to the command of Christ: Those who, though called Christians, profess unchristian

teachings or live unchristian lives, and after repeated and loving counsel refuse to abandon their errors and wickedness, and after being reported to the church, that is, to its officers, fail to respond also to their admonition -- such persons the officers exclude from the Christian fellowship by withholding the sacraments from them, and God himself excludes them from the kingdom of Christ. Such persons, when promising and demonstrating genuine reform, are received again as members of Christ and of his church.

30.3 The five purposes of church discipline are listed.

Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for detering of others from the like offenses; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.^c

c I Cor. 5:1-13; Matt. 7:6; I Tim. 1:20; with Jude 23.

Turn to I Corinthians 5. The goal of church discipline is to:

- (1) **reclaim offenders** – I Cor. 5:4-5

- (2) **deter others** – “As for those [officers] who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” (I Tim. 5:20).

- (3) **purge those who are contaminating the body of Christ** – I Cor. 5:6-7

What effect can a church member who is engaging in deliberate, ongoing sin have on a church?

What does I John 2:19 say about one who rejects legitimate church discipline and never returns in repentance?

- (4) **vindicate the honor of Christ and the gospel** - I Cor. 5:1; I Peter 2:12

- (5) **prevent the wrath of God** – I Cor. 11:27-34

It's been said that a person only believes in church discipline if he or she is willing to have a son or daughter disciplined. What is the point of that statement?

30.4 The steps to be taken in administering church discipline

For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.^d

^d II Thess. 3:6, 14-15; I Cor. 5:4-5, 13; Matt. 18:17;

“In the censures of the church,” the Puritan Richard Sibbes advised, “it is more suitable to the spirit of Christ to incline to the milder part, and not to kill a fly on the forehead with a mallet, nor shut men out of heaven for a trifle” (*The Bruised Reed*, 30).

Admonition

The warning is private, if possible. It only becomes public if absolutely necessary. As a general guideline, private sins should be dealt with privately and public sins should be dealt with publicly.

I Thes. 5:12 – “respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”

Titus 3:10 – “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.....”

Suspension from the Lord’s Supper

This becomes necessary if there is no repentance.

Excommunication

I Cor. 5:4-5, 13 – “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the in the day of the Lord....’Purge the evil person from among you.”

This is reserved only for the incorrigible or most serious offenders.

Since the Lord’s Supper is for Christians, excommunication alerts the unrepentant about the ultimate implications of his rebellion. From all appearances, he doesn't seem to be a Christian, and should he continue in his rebellion, he will perish in hell.

Only God knows the heart; the church can only judge by words and actions. The church, while making no final judgment about the offender's actual spiritual state, is to treat him as if he is an unbeliever since he gives no evidence of being one (Mt 18:17).

Nineteenth century Baptist manuals of church discipline stated that when they had gone through the various steps of church discipline and had been unable to win a brother back, the charges would be read before the congregation. The offender was then put out of the fellowship and this was said at the end of the ceremony: "We will cease to call him brother, and now call him friend." He was no longer considered a brother in Christ. But this was not an act of spite. He was to be regarded as a friend who might be won back into the brotherhood.

Repentance and its fruits allow excommunication to be reversed.

We should celebrate when the offender repents (Mt. 18:12-14) and to forgive and forget, following God's example: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more" (Heb. 10:17).

Further reading: ARP Standards: The Book of Discipline; Jay Adams, Handbook of Church Discipline.

Chapter 31 – Synods and Councils

Independent and Congregational churches (which include Baptists and “Bible churches”) may allow for congregations to seek advice from councils of ministers, but they deny that such councils have any authority over local congregations.

By contrast, Presbyterian Church government is *connectional*. The Presbyterian form of government consists of a series of graded courts, the lowest court being the board of elders (Greek, *presbyters*) of the local church (session), then the regional church (presbytery), then the highest court (the Synod or General Assembly).

The Synod of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church convenes every June at Bonclarken Assembly Grounds in Flat Rock, North Carolina. Pastors and elder representatives from each congregation are to be in attendance. The Northeast Presbytery meets three times a year at various locations between Maryland and New York State.

31.1 Assemblies or synods help provide individual churches advice and solve problems.

For the better government, and further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called Synods or Councils.^a

The practice of calling synods is based on:

- (1) The example of Acts 15:1-6, 22; 16:4-5 where the council of Jerusalem was called to settle a dispute amongst the churches. This assembly did not merely give counsel or advice, but rendered an authoritative decision.
- (2) The fact that the spiritual unity of the church should be manifested in tangible ways.

What benefits are there for local congregation to be part of a Bible-based denomination rather than being independent? What benefits does a connectional church provide ministers?

31.2 Only church officers may call synods, though civil rulers may call such meetings if they seek advise in matters of religion.

The ministers of Christ, of themselves, and by virtue of their office; or they with other fit persons, upon delegation from their churches, have the exclusive right to appoint, adjourn, or dissolve such Synods or Councils; though, in extraordinary cases, it may be proper for magistrates to desire the calling of a Synod of ministers and other fit persons, to consult and advise with about matters of religion; and in such cases, it is the duty of churches to comply with their desire.^{b, c}

b Isa. 49:23; I Tim. 2:1-2; II Chron. 19:8-11; II Chron. 29:1-36; II Chron. 30:1-27; Matt. 2:4-5; Prov. 11:14.
c Acts 15:2, 4, 22-23, 25.

This statement arose because the 17th century Scottish Reformers sought to protect the church from the encroachment of the state. They insisted that the church alone had the power to convene her assemblies, even if the king himself should “withhold or deny his consent.”

31.3 Synods serve the purpose of (1) settling controversies of faith, (2) establishing administrative rules for worship and church government, and (3) judging disputes in local churches. The resulting pronouncements are to be obeyed, if they conform to Scripture and come from biblically ordained authority.

It belongs to synods and councils ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of mal-administration, and authoritatively to determine the same; which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his word.^d

d Acts 15:15, 19, 24, 27-31; Acts. 16:4; Matt. 18:17-20.

Can you think of examples of local churches ignoring biblically grounded pronouncements of their denominations?

31.4 Because synods are made up of fallible men, their pronouncements can never have final authority in matters of faith and living.

All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both.^e

e Eph. 2:20; Acts 17:11; I Cor. 2:5; II Cor. 1:24.

31.5 Synods should focus on ecclesiastical rather than civil questions, except in extraordinary cases to advise civil authorities, upon their request, or when prompted by conscience.

Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs, which concern the common wealth, unless by way of humble petition, in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.^f

f Luke 12:13-14

John 18:36 – “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews.’”

John Gerstner comments, “This position seems reasonable, since a body of experts in one area would not normally be equally competent or authoritative in other areas outside their expertise. We would not normally expect ecclesiastical specialists to deliver authoritative judgments on economics, politics, military techniques, foreign policy, etc. Many modern clergymen, of course, not only feel competent but well positioned to advise experts in these fields.”

There are, however, extraordinary cases when church councils should address issues outside their ecclesiastical expertise. These opinions should take the form of modest petitions.

Conclusion

What questions do you have about our denomination, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church?
What are some ways that you can become more informed about the workings of our denomination?

Chapter 32

The State of Man After Death and the Resurrection of the Dead

What happens to us between death and the resurrection of our bodies? This period is called the “intermediate state.” What Scripture tells us about the intermediate state, in the words of Dutch theologian G.C. Berkouwer, is nothing more than a whisper.

But Scripture is clear that at death man is not *annihilated*, nor does he enter a *soul sleep* (an unconscious existence between death and the resurrection), nor does he go to *purgatory*.

32.1 When we die, our souls are separated from our bodies and go into the “intermediate state” of blessedness with God in heaven or an intermediate state of torment in hell.

The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption;^a but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.^b The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies;^c and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.^d Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledges none.

a Gen. 3:19 – “for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (cf. Acts. 13:36).

b Luke 23:43 – Jesus said to the thief on the cross, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Ecclesiastes 12:7 – “...the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

When we die, we will be “made perfect in holiness.” Our sanctification will be complete. In time we will be given new bodies.

c Hebrews 12:23 – “...to the assembly of the firstborn, who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect...”

II Cor. 5:1, 6, 8 – “For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord....Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

Philippians 1:23 – “My desire is to be with Christ, for that is far better....” (with Acts 3:21; and Ephesians 4:10).

d Luke 16:23-24 – “...in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham for off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’” (also Acts 1:25).

Jude 6-7 – “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day— just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”

I Peter 3:19 – “in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison....”

Scripture says little about the condition of unbelievers between death and the resurrection. Probably the clearest New Testament passage is II Peter 2:9, “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.”

Are you certain that you will go to heaven when you die? If so, what is the ground for your confidence?

32.2 Those who are still living when Jesus returns will be changed immediately after the bodies of the dead have been resurrected and reunited with their souls.

At the last day, such as are found alive shall not die, but be changed;^e and all the dead shall be raised up with the self-same bodies, and none other, although with different qualities, which shall be united again to their souls for ever.^f

e I Thessalonians 4:17 – “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.”

I Corinthians 15:51-52 – “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.”

f Job 19:26-27 – “And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

I Cor. 15:42-44 – “So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.”

The “rapture” will occur when Jesus returns to judge the world. This will be the immediate prelude to the last judgment.

There is both a sameness and a difference about the bodies of the resurrected, whether saved or damned. We will have the same bodies as those we had on earth, but these new bodies will have different characteristics, fitting them for their new home in heaven or hell.

32.3 At the resurrection Christ will fashion the bodies of unbelievers to dishonor and the bodies of believers to honor.

The bodies of the unjust shall, by the power of Christ, be raised to dishonor; the bodies of the just, by his Spirit, unto honor, and be made conformable to his own glorious body.⁹

John Gerstner remarks, “We all recognize the appropriateness of bodies to match souls. Beautiful spirits should be in beautiful bodies, as is often not the case in this world. Ugly spirits should be in ugly bodies, as is also often not the case in this world.

g Acts 24:15 – Paul speaks of “...having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust.”

John 5:28-29 – “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

I Corinthians 15:43 – “It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.”

Philippians 3:21 – Christ, “who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body.”

Final Reflections

1. Christians will never be away from Christ.

“Neither death nor life, ...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

2. Will we know our loved ones in heaven?

We will know them better than we've ever known them because our relationship will no longer be tainted by the sin that causes us to hide our true selves from others (Genesis 3:7).

There is a continuity between this life and heaven. In heaven we will still be individuals with all our God-given uniqueness'. The difference is that we will not be polluted by sin; we will be fully human.

The following passages imply our ability to recognize fellow believers in heaven:

- In Luke 16:19-31 the rich man recognized Lazarus, who is in heaven.
- In I Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul exhorts those believers who grieve for departed loved ones not "grieve as others do who have no hope." He reminds them that departed Christians will rise again. The point behind Paul's words is to remind the Thessalonians that there will be a restoration of the fellowship that has been temporarily broken by death.
- In I Thessalonians 2:19-20 Paul implies that those who have led others to a saving knowledge of Jesus will have the joy of seeing those friends in Jesus' presence: "what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."

3. If you were speaking to a loved one on his or her deathbed, how might you express the above truths to them in a way that would be consoling?

Further reading: Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, chapter 9.

Chapter 33 – The Last Judgment

On the dome of the U.S. Capital are inscribed the words, “One God, one law, one element; And one far off, divine event to which the whole creation moves.” History is not an endless succession of meaningless cycles. It is moving toward a goal: the return of Christ and final judgment. There is little discussion about the last judgment among most Christians and in most churches. Why do you think this is so? What do you see as the value of this topic?

33.1 – Who will be the judge? Who will be judged? On what basis will we be judged?

God has appointed a day wherein he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ,^a to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father.^b In which day, not only the apostate angels shall be judged,^c but likewise all persons that have lived upon earth shall appear before the tribunal of Christ, to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds, and to receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.^d

a Acts 17:31 – “he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

b John 5:22,27 – “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,...²⁷And he has given him authority to execute judgment because he is the Son of Man.”

c Jude 6 – “And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day....” (cf. I Corinthians 6:3; II Peter 2:4)

d II Corinthians 5:10 – “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” (cf. Matthew 12:36-37; Ecclesiastes 12:14; Romans 2:16; 14:10,12).

Immediately after the general resurrection all men and apostate angels will stand before Christ and give an account.

The good works of Christians will be not be the grounds of their acquittal, but rather evidence of their having trusted in Christ and been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Anthony Hoekema writes, “The judgment according to works...will really be a judgment about faith—that is, faith as revealed in its evidence” (James 2:18, 26; Gal. 5:6; Mt. 7:21).

33.2 What is the purpose of the Day of Judgment? What will take place on that Day?

The end of God's appointing this day is for the manifestation of the glory of his mercy in the eternal salvation of the elect, and of his justice in the damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient. For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.^e

The purpose of the Day of Judgment is not to inform Christ (he is all-knowing). Nor is it so that Jesus may determine man's future destiny (that is already decided when we accept or reject Christ; John 3:36; 5:24). It is rather that Christ may reveal his glory in judgment.

There is nothing hidden that will not be revealed (Luke 12:2). Fortunately, for believers, their sins will be revealed as forgiven sins, whose guilt has been covered by the blood of Jesus Christ.

e Matthew 25:31-46

Romans 9:22-23 – “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory....”

II Thessalonians 1:7-10 – “...and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.” (cf. Romans 2:5-6; 9:22-23; Matthew 25:21; Acts 3:19).

33.3 Why does God want all men to know with certainty that there will be a Judgment Day? Why has he not told us its exact time?

As Christ would have us to be certainly persuaded that there shall be a day of judgment, both to deter all men from sin, and for the greater consolation of the godly in their adversity;^f so will he have that day unknown to men, that they may shake off all carnal security, and be always watchful, because they know not at what hour the Lord will come; and may be ever prepared to say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.’ Amen.^g

How should our awareness that there will be a Day of Judgment affect us, according to the following verses: **f**

- II Peter 3:11,14 – “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness....Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.”
- II Corinthians 5:10-11 – “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.”
- II Thessalonians 1:5-7 – “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering – since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels....”
cf. Luke 21:27-28; Romans 8:23-25

g Matthew 24:36,42-44 - “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only....Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” (cf. Mark 13:35-37; Luke 12:35-36; Revelation 22:22)

Are you prepared for Jesus to return today? Or are you like Augustine who said, “Lord, change me, but not yet”?

Further reading: Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, chapter 18.

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