

Protestant *Reformed* Theological Journal

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PROTESTANT REFORMED
THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL

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Editor's Notes

You have in hand the April 2009 issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. This is the second and last issue of volume 42—the number of years PRTJ has been published without interruption by the faculty of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary. We trust that you will find the articles that are included in this issue informative, edifying, and God-glorifying.

Prof. David J. Engelsma, emeritus professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament at PRTS, contributes a timely article on the issue of assurance, “The Gift of Assurance: The Spirit of Christ and Assurance of Salvation.” The article contains an explanation and defense of the biblical, Reformed doctrine of assurance. It is also polemical, taking aim particularly at the perverted doctrine of assurance taught by many of the Puritans and the leaders of the *Nadere Reformatie*, as well as promoted by certain contemporary theologians and churches. We thank our colleague for his very worthwhile piece.

This issue also contains the second installment of the first speech presented by the Rev. Eugene Case to the faculty and student body of PRTS in April 2008 on the history and distinctives of Southern Presbyterianism. In this article Rev. Case continues to trace the history, including the sad decline, of the Southern Presbyterian Church from the beginning of the nineteenth century, through the Civil War, down to the present. But the article is far more than a factual recounting. It is an insightful and critical evaluation of the history, with powerful application to the contemporary church scene.

Included in this issue as well is a translation of Guido de Brès’ dedicatory letter to King Philip II of Spain. Mr. Marvin Kamps is the translator. This is a moving piece that has not been widely available in English in the past. The translation is from the original Dutch, with comparison to the French. The translation is preceded by a historical introduction, written by Prof. Russell Dykstra, that sets the dedicatory letter in the context of de Brès’ life and the struggles of the Reformed churches in the Lowlands at the time that the Belgic Confession of Faith was written.

Since its beginning, PRTJ has published from time to time papers produced by the seminary students of PRTS. In this issue our readers will find a paper written by third-year seminarian Daniel Holstege. The paper introduces and analyzes critically the powerful movement known as Process Theology. The roots, development, influential proponents, and main tenets of the movement are identified. And the movement is evaluated in the light of Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

As always, a number of book reviews make up the last section of this issue of the *Journal*. The books are significant recent releases, the contents of which are carefully evaluated by our reviewers. A number of our readers have expressed appreciation for the book reviews contained in recent issues, and we trust that these reviews will also prove worthwhile. Ministers, seminary students, and laymen alike will undoubtedly want to purchase a number of these books for their own libraries.

Once again, I want to call the attention of our readers to the Calvin Conference that PRTS is planning for the first week in September of this year. The conference theme is: “After 500 Years: John Calvin for Reformed Churches Today.” Take note of the advertisement at the end of this issue, which details the several speeches that are planned. We are excited for the conference and look forward to seeing many of you at the conference. If you have any questions concerning the conference, you can call the seminary or consult the website that has been set up at: 500yearsofcalvin.com.

Read and enjoy!

Soli Deo Gloria!

—RLC.

The Gift of Assurance: The Spirit of Christ and Assurance of Salvation

David J. Engelsma

Introduction

The Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Jesus Christ causes the believing child of God to know his own salvation with certainty. The Spirit gives assurance of salvation. This is an especially vital and precious work of the Spirit.

Assurance is an especially vital and important work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. When in John 14-17 He promised the Holy Spirit to His church, Jesus called this Spirit the “Comforter”: “The Father... shall give you another Comforter” (John 14:16). As the other Comforter of the church and of the individual member of the church, the Spirit comforts us with the assurance that our sins are forgiven; with the assurance that we have been given by the Father to Jesus Christ as His people; with the assurance that we are united to Christ in the covenant of grace; and with the assurance that one day we will be with Christ where He is in heaven. In short, the Spirit comforts us that we were saved from eternity past, are saved now, and will be saved everlastingly.

Lacking this assurance, we are not comforted, but are terribly uncomfortable, indeed, terrified. Failing to give this assurance, the Spirit is no Comforter at all.

Indicating how important the assurance of His people by the other Comforter was to Jesus, when He said farewell Jesus declared, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you.... Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). Peace is the experience of being reconciled to God, of being in a relation of friendship with God on the basis of the forgiveness of sins. And this peace for each of us is *assurance* that God is my friend and Father for Jesus’ sake. There is no peace for anyone, if he lacks assurance of his own

salvation, but only terror. Of course, this peace is due to the work of the Comforter within us assuring us of God's love for us, Christ's death for us, and our own personal salvation.

Assurance is especially vital and precious to us ourselves. Without assurance, our heart is very much troubled and afraid. Doubt of salvation is the worst fear of all the fears to which humans are liable.

Assurance of salvation is an aspect of salvation itself. God wills, not only that we be saved, but also that we *know* that we are saved. Then, and only then, do we enjoy salvation. Then, and only then, can we praise and thank Him, so that He is glorified by us, which is the ultimate purpose of salvation. One who lacks assurance cannot thank, praise, and glorify God.

Salvation itself is experiential, involving our conscious certainty of salvation, for example, justification, the chief benefit of salvation. Justification is not simply the forgiveness of sins. Justification is the forgiveness *in the forum of the believer's consciousness*, as the Protestant Reformation has taught us.

What good is salvation to me, if I do not *know* it, if I live in *doubt* of it?

What good is the Comforter to me, if I cannot confess, truthfully, concerning myself personally, what the Heidelberg Catechism puts on the lips of every man, woman, and child who believes the gospel of Jesus Christ from the heart in its first question and answer:

[My only comfort in life and death is] that I...belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation.¹

1 Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 1, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1966), 307, 308. The explanation of this personal assurance of every believer is given by the Catechism when it adds, "Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he [Jesus Christ] also assures me of eternal life." Assurance is an aspect of Jesus' saving work, with redemption and preservation. The reason for the Catechism's confidence that every believer has assurance, so that he can honestly confess the first question and

Controversy over Assurance

It is deplorable that the Spirit's work of assuring believers and the true, spiritual children of believers is controversial. I do not now refer to the open denial of the possibility of the assurance of salvation by the Roman Catholic Church, by all churches that proclaim the false gospel of Arminianism, and by the proponents of the covenant theology of the Federal [Covenant] Vision in reputedly Reformed and Presbyterian churches. By virtue of their common teaching that salvation is conditional, that is, dependent upon the will and works of the saved sinner, Rome, churches embracing the lie of free will, and the Federal [Covenant] Vision all openly proclaim that saints can fall away into eternal perdition. This is the denial of assurance of salvation with a vengeance.²

But I refer to the controversy over assurance raised by the false

answer, is that Jesus assures of eternal life every one whom He has redeemed. For the Catechism, one might as well deprive some whom Christ redeemed of the work of preservation, or of the work of making them willing and ready to live to Christ, as to deprive them of the Spirit's work of assurance.

2 For Rome's denial of assurance, see the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Sixth Session ("Decree of Justification"), chapters 12, 13, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 103, 104; for the Arminian denial of assurance, see the "Opinions of the Remonstrants [Arminians]," D. ("The Opinion of the Remonstrants with respect to the fifth article, which concerns Perseverance"), in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 227-229; for the denial of assurance by the men of the Federal [Covenant] Vision, see my *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), 135-232. A representative statement by a leading spokesman for the Federal [Covenant] Vision is in order: "Those who ultimately prove to be reprobate may be in covenant with God. They may enjoy for a season the blessings of the covenant, including the forgiveness of sins, adoption, possession of the kingdom, sanctification, etc., and yet apostatize and fall short of the grace of God.... *The apostate doesn't forfeit 'apparent blessings' that were never his in reality, but real blessings that were his in covenant with God*" (Steve Wilkins, quoted in *The Covenant of God*, 193).

teaching about the Holy Spirit and assurance of many, perhaps the majority, of the Puritans in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. These Puritans taught that the Spirit saves many whom He does not assure of salvation. From many of those whom He does finally assure of salvation He withholds assurance for a long time—*years, many years*—after their conversion and coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Some regenerated believers never receive the gift of assurance. These miserable souls must live all their troubled life and then die without assurance, without ever being able to confess the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, even though God elected them, Christ died for them, and the Spirit regenerated them and united them to Christ. Expressions by leading Puritans and the actual condition of churches held in bondage by this teaching leave the distinct impression that those believers who never receive assurance, but die in doubt, are the majority.

These Puritans taught that assurance is not so much the gift of the Holy Spirit as it is the work of the church member himself. Having convinced believers that they (the believers) had not received assurance with their faith, these Puritans then exhorted the believers to pray fervently, to work arduously, and to struggle heroically, often for many years, in order at last, by dint of all this spiritual work, to obtain assurance.

These Puritans taught that assurance is, and should be, a real problem for many, if not most, believers and children of believers. It is normal to lack assurance; normal to wonder whether one is really saved; normal to struggle with the question of assurance; normal that one's relation to assurance is that of a "quest," a long, even *lifelong*, "quest," with no assurance of a favorable outcome of the quest, namely, finding assurance in this life; and, therefore, also, normal to abstain from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Leading Puritans, men who are highly regarded by contemporary disciples of the Puritans, taught that the Spirit gives assurance only to a very few of God's children, leaving the rest of us, the vast majority of His children, to live and die in doubt.

Now though this full assurance is earnestly desired, and highly prized,

and the want of it much lamented, and the enjoyment of it much endeavored after by all saints, yet it is only obtained by a few. Assurance is a mercy too good for most men's hearts, it is a crown too weighty for most men's heads. Assurance is *optimum maximum*, the best and greatest mercy; and therefore God will only give it to his best and dearest friends. Augustus in his solemn feasts, gave trifles to some, but gold to others. Honor and riches, etc., are trifles that God gives to the worst of men; but assurance is that 'tried gold,' Rev. 3:18, that God only gives to tried friends. Among those few that have a share or portion in the special love and favor of God, there are but a very few that have an assurance of his love. It is one mercy for God to love the soul, and another mercy for God to assure the soul of his love.³

A Reformed student of Scripture and the Reformed creeds struggles for words with which to express opposition to, and indignation at, the Puritan doctrine of assurance. It is no doctrine of assurance at all, but a cruel doctrine of doubt, at least, for the great majority of those who "have a share or portion in the special love and favor of God." Not only does it rob the great majority of God's believing children of the precious, priceless assurance of the love of God for them and their salvation, shutting them up to the unspeakable misery of the fear, whether God hates them and will damn them at death, but it also casts the gravest aspersions on the Fatherhood of God in Jesus Christ.

3 Thomas Brooks, "Heaven on Earth: A Serious Discourse, Touching a Well-Grounded Assurance," in *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1980), 335. The quotation is given in part in J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 181. Of Thomas Brooks, Puritan scholar J. I. Packer says that he was "one of the greatest of the later Puritans" and one of the "finest Puritan minds." Packer states that Brooks' teaching on assurance "represent[s] the main current of Puritan thinking" and is the "particular" aspect of "the Puritans' most valuable contributions to the church's theological heritage" (see Packer, 179, 180). In the name of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church, confessional Reformed doctrine, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the comfort of believers and their children, I say no to the Puritan doctrine of assurance. Saying no to the Puritan doctrine of assurance, I am saying no to a teaching that is not incidental, but fundamental, to Puritanism.

What godly, earthly father, loving all his children, gives assurance of his love to a “very few” of his children, but withholds this assurance from the majority of them? Such a father would make himself subject to the discipline of the church on the ground of the grossest dereliction of parental duty. Indeed, what earthly father would demand of his children that they “endeavor,” that is, work, for years in order to obtain after many years, or even at the end of life, the assurance that he in fact loves them? What Christian would swallow the assertion that it is one parental mercy for the believing father to love his children, but another parental mercy for the father to assure the children of his love? What strange mercy is it to love one’s children, but have them live in the terror that their father hates them?

That God’s Fatherhood does not suffer in comparison with the fatherhood of the godly man is evident from the fact that Jesus taught everyone who believes the gospel, and thus believes on Jesus Christ, from the heart, whether aged saint or new convert, grandparent or little covenant child, to call upon God in prayer and to call upon Him as “Our Father” (Matt. 6:9). To say “Our Father” to God is to express that the one who prays has assurance that God loves him, has redeemed him, saves him, and will preserve him unto eternal glory.

Here, according to Puritan theology, is a grace of salvation about which it is not true, that the one who seeks shall find. All believers seek assurance as a grace “earnestly desired and highly prized,” but only a “few,” indeed, a “very few,” ever find it. And the reason is that this grace of salvation, which rightly is “highly prized” as the “best and greatest mercy,” is obtained, not by the free gift of the Spirit of Christ, but by the working and works of the believer. “He that will have it [assurance] must work, and sweat, and weep, and wait to obtain it... none can obtain it [assurance] but such as labor for it...a man must win it [assurance] before he can wear it.”⁴

The Puritan doctrine of assurance is a form of salvation by works.

A doctrine of works is necessarily also a doctrine of doubt.

Despite the clear, powerful testimony of the “Three Forms of Unity” against it, the Puritan doctrine of assurance has infected cer-

4 Brooks, 324, 325.

tain churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition. This occurred largely through the influence of Puritanism upon some Reformed theologians and ministers in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The movement influenced by Puritanism, particularly the Puritan doctrine of assurance, called itself the “*nadere reformatie*.” This name should be translated, and understood, as ‘further reformation,’ expressing the movement’s conviction that the sixteenth century Reformation did not do justice to piety and experience and that it was the high calling of the “further reformation” to complete the sixteenth century Reformation. This, the men of the “further reformation” set out to accomplish by a theology and ministry that emphasized personal piety and introspective experience.⁵

5 See the brief introduction to the “further reformation” in English in Arie de Reuver, tr. James A. De Jong, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 15-24. de Reuver notes that the very name of the movement in the Netherlands was the importation of a distinctively English, Puritan term: “Teellinck...the father of the Further Reformation introduced the Puritan term ‘further reformation’ from England to the Netherlands” (16). de Reuver indicates that the characteristic Puritan doctrine of assurance was central to the purpose and theology of the men of the “*nadere reformatie*”: “The Further Reformation developed a comprehensive pastoral psychology by which it intended to provide guidance on the manner in which the applied work of the Holy Spirit brought people to certainty of faith [that is, assurance of salvation—DJE]” (17). The significance of de Reuver’s work is his frank acknowledgment that the experientialism and spirituality of the further reformation were (and *are*!) derived from the medieval (Roman Catholic) mystics. Almost all reliable analysis of the “*nadere reformatie*” is found in the Dutch language. de Reuver gives the sources. Completely unreliable, indeed misleading, is Joel R. Beeke’s account of assurance in Calvin and the Reformed tradition. His book is ominously titled *The Quest for* (not: “Gift of”) *Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Banner of Truth, 1999). As the subtitle indicates, Beeke contends that the Puritan and “*nadere reformatie*” doctrine of assurance was a faithful development of the doctrine of Calvin, when, in fact, it was a radical departure from the Reformer’s and, indeed, the entire Reformation’s doctrine, as the Puritans themselves acknowledged. Playing on the ambiguity of the adjective, “full” (“*full assurance*”), Beeke assures his Reformed readers that the Puritan and

Puritanism's erroneous doctrine of assurance is being spread throughout Great Britain, North America, and the world by influential organizations and theologians who promote Puritan and "further reformation" theology.

The effects of this false doctrine of assurance are dreadful. Entire Reformed and Presbyterian congregations languish in doubt of their salvation and, therefore, persist in open disobedience to Christ's command to His church and to all who believe on Him, that they partake of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29). It is reliably reported that in the Netherlands today (2008) is a Reformed congregation of more than one thousand members of which only five or ten old members regularly partake of the Lord's Supper. The rest of the members, in

"*nadere reformatie*" doctrine of assurance can be harmonized with the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism, that "true faith...*is*... a hearty trust which the Holy Ghost works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, *but to me also*, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God," etc. (Heid. Cat., Q&A 21, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 313; emphasis added). In fact, the Puritan and "*nadere reformatie*" doctrine flatly contradicts the Catechism. Regarding the fundamental issue, whether assurance is an aspect of the essence of faith (what faith *is*) or merely a possible "fruit" of faith (for a few favored saints after years of agonizing, laborious "quest" for assurance), Dr. Beeke hunts with the hounds and runs with the hares. Treating Calvin (and the Reformation), Beeke acknowledges that "it [faith] possesses assurance in its very nature. Assurance, certainty, trust—such is the essence of faith" (*Quest*, 38). Summing up, however, and expressing the Puritan and "*nadere reformatie*" thinking on assurance (which is his own thinking), Beeke tells us that "full assurance of personal salvation constitutes the well-being or fruit of faith rather than the essence of faith" (*Quest*, 276). Assurance now is a "goal, duty, and desire" (*Quest*, 275). The injurious thrust of *The Quest for Full Assurance* is a wholehearted defense and promotion of the Puritan and "*nadere reformatie*" doctrine of assurance (which robs many of the comfort of the gospel and drives them to doubt and despair) as though it were the teaching of Calvin, the Reformation, and the confessions (which emphatically it is not). Stoeffler affirms, and demonstrates, the influence of Puritanism on the "*nadere reformatie*": "Reformed Pietism on the Continent was heavily indebted to the Puritans" (F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965, 118).

the bondage of the Puritan doctrine of assurance, abstain, lacking assurance of salvation. All too believable is the rest of the report: The minister of the congregation recently issued a warning against too great liberty in the congregation in coming to the Lord's Table.⁶

Presbyterian churches in Scotland suffer from the same dread malady.

Many persons, publicly professing faith in Christ and living regular lives of obedience to the law in love for God, live all their life doubting whether they are loved by God and saved, and die in the terror of the real possibility of being damned.

The Puritan doctrine of assurance was not that of the Reformers. This is freely admitted by Reformed theologians who defend the Puritan doctrine of assurance. The Presbyterian theologian William Cunningham condemns the teaching of Calvin and all the other Reformers on assurance as "exaggerated and erroneous."⁷ Calvin's doctrine of assurance and its radical difference from that of the Puritans are expressed in his definition of faith:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.⁸

6 Ironically, it was a Puritan theologian who exposed the gross wickedness of the Reformed preachers who are responsible for keeping adult members of their congregation from the Lord's Supper: "[Satan] discourages them [church members] from duty by suggesting to them their unworthiness.... By this temptation, the devil takes many off from coming to the Lord's table. Oh, says he [through ministers devoted to the discouraging of the saints—DJE], this is a solemn ordinance, and requires much holiness: how darest thou so unworthily come? you will eat and drink unworthily. Thus, as Saul kept the people from eating honey, so the devil by this temptation, scares many from this ordinance, which is sweeter than honey and the honey-comb" (Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1979), 592.

7 William Cunningham, "The Reformers and the Doctrine of Assurance," in *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (London: The Banner of Truth, 1967), 118.

8 John Calvin, *Institutes*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill

For Calvin, all the Reformers, and the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century, faith *is* assurance of salvation, faith *essentially* is assurance: “Faith [is] a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.” Assurance, therefore, is the gift of God by the Holy Spirit to everyone to whom God gives faith. The Spirit works assurance in everyone in whom He works faith, and He works assurance in and with the working of faith. Of vital importance in Calvin’s definition, in view of the separation of faith and assurance by the Puritans and the promoters of the “further reformation,” past and present, is Calvin’s deliberate identification of the sealing by the Spirit, which refers to the Spirit’s assuring the child of God of his salvation, as the giving of faith itself. The Holy Spirit seals the believer, not years after giving him faith, if at all in this life, as was the doctrine of the Puritans, but *when He gives him faith*.

With the entire Reformation, Calvin taught that the fatherly love of God for all His children dear expresses itself by giving all of them, young and old, hoary-headed saints and new converts, the assurance of His love for them.

Not only did Calvin and the entire Reformation affirm that the gospel of grace assures all believers of God’s love and their salvation, this assurance of God’s people was one of the main purposes of the

(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7. Contrary to the foolish dodge of Puritanism, the “further reformation,” Cunningham, and others, that Calvin (and the entire Reformation) defined faith only as faith existed in Europe at the extraordinary time of the Reformation, this, namely, knowledgeable (full) assurance of one’s own personal salvation, is what faith is *always and everywhere*—at the time of the Reformation in Europe, in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, in seventeenth century England and the Netherlands, and in twenty-first century Scotland and North America. Of Calvin’s definition of faith, Herman Bavinck judges that it is “correct as well as complete.” Indeed, “no more beautiful definition is conceivable than that faith is a firm and certain knowledge of the mercy that God has shown us in Christ. Essentially, what else is Christian faith but the assurance...that ‘the eternal Faith (*sic*; should be “Father”—DJE) of our Lord Jesus Christ...is our God and Father because of Christ His Son’” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008, 128).

Reformation. The necessity of the Reformation was Rome's holding the people in the bondage of doubt concerning their salvation. Calvin stated this in his great treatise, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" (1544).

Lastly, there was another most pestilential error, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt, viz., that believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favor. By this suggestion of the devil, the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ's purchase destroyed, and the salvation of men overthrown. For, as Paul declares, that faith only is Christian faith which inspires our hearts with confidence, and emboldens us to appear in the presence of God (Rom. 5:2). On no other view could his doctrine in another passage be maintained, viz., that "we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15).⁹

Those churches in which the majority of the members, often the large majority of members, *professing faith*, languish year after year in doubt of their salvation, under the influence of the theology of Puritanism and the "further reformation," are not furthering the Reformation. They are not even *continuing* the Reformation. On the contrary, their gospel, which does not work assurance, but doubt, is a radical deviation from the gospel of the Reformation. In the vitally important matter of the experience of salvation, about which the disciples of the Puritans are always boasting, their miserable people do not differ from the doubting hordes of Rome. Those churches *need* the Reformation and its gospel of assurance.

As for the testimony of the Reformed confessions concerning assurance, God's gift of it to all His children, and the enjoyment of it by every believer, the Heidelberg Catechism is representative. Question and Answer 1 has every believer confess that he possesses and enjoys

9 John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church, Presented to the Imperial Diet of Spire, A.D. 1544, in the Name of All Who Wish Christ to Reign," in *Calvin's Tracts Relating to the Reformation*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 136.

the only comfort in life and death, knowing with certainty that he belongs to Jesus Christ, *his* faithful Savior. The believer concludes: “Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life.”¹⁰

Question and Answer 53 make assurance the normal work of the Spirit in His saving of every elect child of God: “What dost thou believe concerning the Holy Ghost?...that he is also given unto me, makes me by a true faith partaker of Christ and all his benefits, comforts me, and shall abide with me forever.”¹¹

In flat contradiction of Brooks, the Puritans, and the “further reformation,” that “it is one thing for me to have faith, and another thing for me to know that I have faith,”¹² the Reformed confession teaches that the gift of true faith includes sure knowledge that one has faith; certainty that one is partaker of Christ and all His benefits; the comfort that one belongs to Christ; the confidence of preservation; and the hope of everlasting life.

This is assurance! This is assurance of one’s own personal salvation, now and everlastingly!

Assurance, an Indispensable Work of the Spirit

It is an important aspect of the gospel that God not only wills to save all His chosen people, but also wills that all of them be assured of their salvation. Contrary to the Puritan Thomas Brooks, it is one and the same mercy for God to love the soul and to assure the beloved soul of His love. To say it differently, the same mercy that loves His children moves God to cause them to know His love for them, and to know it with certainty.

Willing our assurance, God gives us assurance. He gives this precious grace as a free gift. Assurance is not our own work, our own achievement by our own hard efforts. Neither is assurance bestowed in recognition of the superior spirituality by which a few children distinguish themselves from the rest of the congregation.

God gives us assurance of salvation *with the gift of salvation itself*. Assurance of salvation is simply an aspect of salvation, and

10 Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 307, 308.

11 Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 324.

12 Brooks, 316.

not the least aspect. Assurance is the “experience” of salvation, just as certainty that I am physically alive is the experience of physical life, or certainty that I am the son of my parents is the experience of my sonship, or confidence that I am the husband of this woman is the experience of marriage.

Assurance of salvation, therefore, is the expected, normal spiritual condition and state of mind and heart of every regenerated, believing child of God. Assurance is not unusual, extraordinary, or remarkable in the congregation of believers and their children.

To be sure, assurance is wonderful and dear. That I should be assured of eternal life? That I should be able to cry, “Abba, Father,” as Romans 8:15 expresses our assurance? That I should be as certain that I belong to Christ as I am certain that I belong to my wife? This certainty is cause for daily amazement and gratitude.

But this grace is not restricted to a few specially favored Christians, mostly old. In the church of God, where the sound doctrine of the gospel is purely preached and discipline is administered, there is not a small group of elite members, set apart from the rest of the congregation and exalted on the spiritual pedestal of sitting at the Lord’s Table, by virtue of their distinguishing themselves by obtaining assurance through their hard labors.

It is normal that a believer have assurance. Every believer can have, may have, and ought to have assurance. When his spiritual condition is healthy, every believer does have assurance. It is possible that a believer lacks assurance for awhile, but this is the exception. Lack of assurance by a believer is an abnormality, a spiritual disease—a *culpable* disease—for which there is a remedy.

God gives assurance as the peculiar work of the Spirit of Christ. The Father elected; the Son redeemed; the Spirit assures. To assure us sinners, the other Comforter is necessary (John 14:16).

Biblical Doctrine: Sealing

We learn the truth about assurance especially from three passages, or kinds of passages, of Scripture. The first is those texts that teach the sealing work of the Spirit. Several texts teach that the Spirit seals the believer, including II Corinthians 1:21, 22; Ephesians 1:13, 14; and

Ephesians 4:30. Ephesians 1:13, 14 is the most complete teaching, as it is the most important in the controversy over assurance.

In whom [Christ] ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.

The passage teaches that those who believe in Christ, according to God's eternal predestination, are sealed. Sealing is a work of grace within those who trust in Christ that makes them sure and certain.

The question is, in what sense? Are they sealed *objectively*, as though God does something in them that guarantees that they will persevere in faith and holiness unto everlasting life? Or, are they sealed *subjectively*, as though God works in them a conscious certainty that they are saved and shall forever be saved, that is, as though God gives them personal assurance of salvation?

The latter is the meaning: sealing is God's work of assuring those who trust in Christ; sealing is a work of God in their consciousness. That this is the meaning of the sealing is evident from the fact that sealing in the text follows hearing the word and believing in Christ, which are conscious spiritual activities.

Besides, Scripture knows of no special work of God following our believing that uniquely establishes that we will persevere in faith and holiness unto eternal life. Our salvation is objectively sure in God's eternal purpose of election: "The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his" (II Tim. 2:19). With regard to the permanency of the work of grace in us, this is certain already in regeneration, which precedes our hearing the word and believing. If God begins the work of salvation in one, He will finish and perfect it. There simply is no need or place for a work of grace following our believing that guarantees that God will not abandon the work of salvation He has begun. What follows hearing and believing is assurance of salvation in the soul of the one who hears and believes.

Not only is the Spirit the one who accomplishes the sealing, but He Himself is the seal in one who hears and believes. The Authorized Version's translation of Ephesians 1:13 correctly gives the sense of the text: "*with* that holy Spirit of promise." That the Spirit Himself is the seal is indicated by the related statement that immediately follows: "which [the Holy Spirit] is the earnest of our inheritance" (v. 14). This is confirmed by Ephesians 4:30, the literal translation of which text is, 'in whom [the Holy Spirit of God] ye were sealed.' The sphere in which the sealing took place was the Holy Spirit Himself.¹³

The Spirit Himself in the one who hears the word of God and believes in Christ *is* the assurance of salvation to the believer, just as the presence of the loving mother holding her child in her arms *is* the assurance to the child that she is the beloved child of that mother.

How mistaken, how impossible, the doctrine that the Spirit dwells in many, if not most, of the children of God, while they go on, year after year, lacking the sealing, that is, assurance of salvation! As though it is possible, indeed normal, that people have the Comforter, but no comfort!

Sealed, When and How?

When and how the believer is sealed with the Spirit is the question.

Many of the Puritans and certain of their contemporary disciples, agreeing that sealing is the assuring of the sealed of their salvation, contend that the sealing is a work of the Spirit that follows faith in Christ in time, often after many years. Therefore, it is common, if not the norm, they insist, that believers lack assurance of salvation.

With reference to sealing, or witnessing, as the Spirit's work of assuring the believer of his salvation, Thomas Brooks wrote:

Though the Spirit be a witnessing [that is, sealing] Spirit, *yet he doth not always witness* [that is, seal] *to believers their adoption, their interest in Christ, etc.* There is a mighty difference between the work-

13 The Authorized Version translates Ephesians 4:30, "*whereby* ye are sealed," expressing that the Spirit is the divine means of sealing, which is true, but not the precise thought of the text. The original Greek is "*en hoo*."

ing of the Spirit, and the witness of the Spirit. There are oftentimes many glorious and efficacious works of the Spirit, as faith, love, repentance, holiness, etc., where there is not the witness of the Spirit (Isaiah 1:10). . . . Though the Spirit of the Lord be a witnessing and a sealing Spirit, yet he doth not always witness and seal up the love and favor of the Father to believers' souls. . . .¹⁴

Thomas Goodwin, whom J. I. Packer praises highly as the best of the Puritan exegetes of Paul and whose doctrine of assurance, according to Packer, “represent[s] the main current of Puritan thinking,”¹⁵ is clear and emphatic that the sealing with the Spirit taught in Ephesians 1:13, 14 is a work of the Spirit distinct from faith and a work following the gift of faith in time. The necessary implication of Goodwin's doctrine of sealing is that it is reserved only for a very few believers. “*The work of faith is a distinct thing, a different thing, from the work of assurance.*”¹⁶ Basic to Goodwin's insistence on this difference between faith and assurance, or the sealing with the Spirit, is Goodwin's denial that faith in Jesus Christ is assurance of salvation. Faith in Christ is merely a confidence that the promises of the gospel are true. It is not a confidence that the promises of the gospel are true *for oneself*. Faith in Jesus Christ, faith in Jesus Christ from the heart, leaves the believer doubting whether he himself is the beloved object of the promises of the gospel. “It must be granted, that in all faith there is an assurance; but of what? Of the truth of the promise. . . . But the question here [that is, concerning being sealed with the Spirit] is about the assurance of a man's interest; that is not always in faith.”¹⁷

The sealing with the Spirit follows the Spirit's work of giving faith to the elect child of God in time. Goodwin suggests that this is usually a long time, for the believer must wait and work for the sealing that gives assurance:

14 Brooks, 520. The emphasis is Brooks'.

15 Packer, 179, 180.

16 Thomas Goodwin, “An Exposition of the First Chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians,” in *Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861), 235; the emphasis is Goodwin's.

17 Goodwin, *Works*, 235.

You that believe are to wait for this promise [of being sealed].... Serve your God day and night faithfully, walk humbly; there is a promise of the Holy Ghost to come and fill your hearts with joy unspeakable and glorious, to seal you up to the day of redemption. Sue this promise out, wait for it, rest not in believing only, rest not in assurance by graces only; there is a further assurance to be had.¹⁸

The line, “Rest not in believing only,” incredible in one who claimed to be furthering the Reformation, is fatal to the Puritan doctrine of assurance, and damning.

Although Goodwin does not expressly say so, he puts assurance—personal assurance that one (a believer in Jesus Christ!) is saved—forever out of the reach of most believing children of God. For the sealing with the Spirit, which gives assurance, is an immediate, extraordinary, mystical experience:

There is an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost [the sealing with the Spirit], by a heavenly and divine light, of a divine authority, which the Holy Ghost sheddeth in a man’s heart, (not having relation to grace wrought, or anything in a man’s self,) whereby he sealet him up to the day redemption.... One way [of assurance] is *discursive*; a man gathereth that God loveth him from the effects.... But the other [the sealing with the Spirit] is *intuitive*, as the angels are said to know things.... There is light that cometh and overpowereth a man’s soul, and assureth him that God is his, and he is God’s, and that God loveth him from everlasting.¹⁹

18 Goodwin, *Works*, 248. In his book *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith* Goodwin acknowledges that many who finally obtain assurance do so only after many years. To the statement “that though assurance may be vouchsafed to some of lower rank than apostles, yet it is to such as are of long standing Christianity, who after long experience have hope and assurance begotten in them,” Goodwin responds, “I grant it, that many not till then have had it” (Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, Marshallton, Del.: National Foundation for Christian Education, n.d., 357).

19 Goodwin, *Works*, 233. The Puritan Richard Sibbes’ doctrine of sealing is the same as that of Brooks and Goodwin. “Sealing is not the work of faith, but it is a work of the Spirit upon faith, assuring the soul of its estate in grace.” Sealing is an experience of “spiritual ravishings,” “the extraor-

This is the unbiblical, “sickly” mysticism of the Puritan doctrine of assurance. This mysticism is fundamental to the Puritan doctrine. The dependency for assurance upon strange experiences by the people in churches committed to the Puritan doctrine of assurance is not an unfortunate aberration. It is the inevitable, necessary effect and fruit of the Puritan doctrine. The result is twofold. First, assurance, or the sealing with the Spirit, is forever beyond the reach of most of the people. They never experience the “light that cometh and overpowereth a man’s soul.” They live and die in the dreadful misery of doubt—doubt that God loves them, doubt that Christ died for them, doubt that their sins are forgiven, doubt that they will go to heaven. The Puritan divines, past and present, will answer to God for the souls of these people.

The second result is that those elite few who suppose they have received the light that overpowers a man’s soul and therefore are certain that they are saved lean on a broken reed. Their state is worse than that of those who, true to the Puritan doctrine, honestly doubt. For they deliberately “rest not in believing only.” God does not assure His children of His love by immediate, mystical experiences. He assures His children by “believing only.”

With an honesty that shames those who like to leave the impression that the Puritan doctrine of assurance is faithful to Calvin, Goodwin frankly admits that his, and the Puritan’s, doctrine of assurance differs radically from that of Calvin. “Calvin,” says Goodwin correctly, taught that the sealing with the Spirit is “the work of faith itself.... In believing, in the work of faith, the Holy Ghost did seal up the truth of the promise unto their hearts.” That is, Calvin taught that when a man believes the gospel the Spirit seals him in such a way that “there is an assurance of a man’s interest in those promises [of the gospel].” Goodwin rejects this doctrine of assurance. Calvin’s teaching is “what

dinary feeling of the Spirit,” “superadded” to justification by faith and to sanctification. Many of God’s believing children lack assurance, not having been sealed with the Spirit. Therefore, Sibbes exhorts them to “labor...for this seal, to have our souls stamped with the Spirit of God” (Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 3, *An Exposition of 2nd Corinthians Chapter One*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1981, 442-484).

it [the doctrine of assurance] is not.”²⁰

The influential English preacher D. M. Lloyd-Jones promotes the Puritan doctrine of sealing and thus the Puritan doctrine of assurance. Lloyd-Jones rightly understands the sealing with the Spirit in Ephesians 1:13, 14 as a work of the Spirit that “authenticates to us the fact that we are the sons of God, truly His people, and heirs, joint-heirs with Christ, of a glorious inheritance,” that is, the work of the Spirit assuring the believer of his salvation.²¹ But he makes a “sharp distinction between believing (the act of faith) and the sealing of the Spirit.... Sealing with the Spirit does not always happen immediately when a man believes.... There may be a great interval...it is possible for a person to be a believer and...still not know the sealing of the Spirit.”²² “‘Sealing with the Spirit’ is something subsequent to believing, something additional to believing.”²³

This something “is an experience; it is something experimental,” indeed, “the highest, the greatest experience which a Christian can have in this world...an overwhelming experience.”²⁴ According to Lloyd-

20 Goodwin, *Works*, 228. With this candid, and accurate, admission by a leading Puritan of the radical difference between Calvin’s and the Puritans’ doctrines of assurance, compare Joel R. Beeke’s assessment: “The Dutch divines [of the “*nadere reformatie*”]...did not misread Calvin and the Reformers [on assurance of salvation] but simply applied the teaching of the early Reformers to their own day” (*Quest*, 308). Hear Calvin himself: “There are two operations of the Spirit in faith, corresponding to the two parts of which faith consists, as it enlightens, and as it establishes the mind. The commencement of faith is knowledge: the completion of it is a firm and steady conviction, which admits of no opposing doubt.... No wonder, then, if Paul should declare that the Ephesians, who received by faith the truth of the gospel, were confirmed in that faith by the seal of the Holy Spirit” (John Calvin, comment on Ephesians 1:13, particularly the sealing with the Spirit, in his *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 208).

21 D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1 to 23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1979), 266.

22 Lloyd-Jones, 249.

23 Lloyd-Jones, 250.

24 Lloyd-Jones, 267, 270, 275.

Jones, this “experience” is the most desirable feeling that a Christian can have, short of heaven. The truth of sealing in Ephesians 1:13, 14, in Lloyd-Jones’ judgment, is “one of the most vital statements for us as Christian people at the present time.” The failure to understand sealing (as Lloyd-Jones explains it) has been the “chief trouble [with the Christian Church] for a number of years.”²⁵

Since the experience is the Spirit’s assurance of the believer that he is saved, it is extremely precious. But Lloyd-Jones does not tell us what this experience consists of. He admits that he cannot. The best he can do is describe the experience in the words of Goodwin, Wesley, Flavel, Edwards, Moody, Evans, and Whitefield: overpowering light; overwhelming experience; ravishing tastes of heavenly joys; “ecstasy”; an extraordinary view of the glory of Christ; a flood of tears and weeping aloud; such an experience of God’s love as caused Moody to ask God “to stay His hand”²⁶; relief of mind; rejoicing in God.²⁷

Because the all-important sealing follows faith in time, Lloyd-Jones too sets all believers seeking for sealing, that is, assurance of salvation consisting of an indescribable experience: “Are we to seek this sealing? My answer, without any hesitation, is that we should most certainly do so.”²⁸ The people must seek the sealing by working, and working hard: “Prepare the way...mortify...cleanse [yourselves]...put into practice the virtues...labor at it...pray for this blessing...be desperate for it.”²⁹ Alas, however, “many Christian people have only known this just before their death.”³⁰ Thus, like a good Puritan (but a

25 Lloyd-Jones, 255.

26 It is ominous for Lloyd-Jones’ sealing that God gives it to Pelagians such as D. L. Moody. If the Spirit of truth had anything at all to give to a Pelagian like D. L. Moody by direct revelation, it would have been this warning, “Moody, repent of your sin of teaching the false gospel of salvation by the will of man, which false gospel makes assurance of salvation utterly impossible.”

27 Lloyd-Jones, 274-278, 286.

28 Lloyd-Jones, 294.

29 Lloyd-Jones, 294-300.

30 Lloyd-Jones, 299.

very bad pastor and theologian), Lloyd-Jones shuts up many Christians to an entire lifetime of doubt whether they are saved. And since the sealing is an undefined and indescribable “experience,” Lloyd-Jones sends all believers out on an uncertain, perilous quest—the quest for the will-o’-the-wisp of a feeling that they are loved by God.³¹

The translation of Ephesians 1:13 in the Authorized Version might lend credence to the erroneous and injurious doctrine that the sealing of the Spirit and, therefore, assurance of salvation follow the gift of faith in time, often after many years of working for assurance. The Authorized Version unfortunately inserts into the text the word “after”: “in whom *after* that ye believed, ye were sealed.” In the original Greek is neither the word nor the notion, “after.” Literally, the text reads this way: ‘in whom [Christ] ye also, having heard the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation—in whom [Christ] also having believed, ye were sealed,’ etc.

The thought of the text is this: In the past (and for the Ephesian believers the not too distant past³²) the elect saints at Ephesus heard

31 The pathetic spiritual and emotional “desperation” of disciples of Lloyd-Jones and the Puritans to get the “overwhelming experience” that will signify their assurance of salvation, which they “desperately” lack, especially on their deathbed, is the direct result of Lloyd-Jones’ teaching: “Be desperate for it.” Lloyd-Jones will answer for this “desperation.” Desperation is a “loss of hope and surrender to despair,” or “a state of hopelessness leading to rashness.”

32 I mention this in order to call attention to the fact that within a few years of the conversion of the Ephesians the apostle could say to them, that all who believed the gospel had been sealed with the Holy Spirit. Altogether apart from the fact that the sealing was contemporaneous with the hearing and believing, the apostle, writing a very short time after the Ephesians’ hearing and believing the gospel, was confident, indeed affirmed, that all the believers had been sealed, that is, received the assurance of their salvation. He did not labor under the misapprehension that for many of the Ephesian believers many years must pass before they obtained sealing. Had a Puritan written the Ephesian church he would have said, “In whom ye also, having heard the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom, having believed, you should now strive and work for many years to be sealed with the Holy Spirit, and here are the fifteen steps of striving by which perhaps

the word of the truth, believed in Christ, and were sealed. These three things happened in this order, but all at the same time. The doctrine of the text is that when one believes in Christ, having heard the gospel, he is sealed with the Holy Spirit *at this time and under these circumstances*. Sealing, that is, the assurance of salvation, *accompanies* believing in Christ, as an integral element of the believing. Sealing follows believing in the order of the text as the effect of believing, just as believing is the effect of the hearing of the gospel, but as the effect that is simultaneous with the believing.³³

What the apostle adds in Ephesians 1:14 about the “earnest” is related. An “earnest” is both the foretaste of something and the guarantee of the future, complete possession of that thing. An example of an earnest from earthly life might be the down-payment one receives on a certain property. The down-payment is both the first part of the full payment and the guarantee that the full payment will be made. A better example, doing justice both to the notion of foretaste and to the spiritual reality, might be the kiss of a woman who engages to become a man’s wife. The kiss is both the foretaste of the coming delights of marriage and the woman’s guarantee that she will marry the man.

In Ephesians 1:14, the earnest is foretaste and pledge of the in-

you may obtain the sealing before you die. But then again you may not.”

33 “The relation between [‘having believed,’ in Eph. 1:13] and [‘ye were sealed’] is not to be conceived as following in temporal order. There may be a logical order here; but as far as time is concerned, the [‘having believed’] and the [‘ye were sealed’] must undoubtedly be conceived as contemporaneous.... As soon as they believed in Christ, it stands to reason that they also have the Holy Spirit; and as soon as they have the Holy Spirit, they are sealed” (Herman Hoeksema, unpublished exegesis of Ephesians 1 and 2, privately bound by the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan as “Chapel Talks on Ephesians 1 and 2,” 28). Also Herman Bavinck taught that the sealing work of the Spirit mentioned in Ephesians 1:13 occurs at the “moment” of believing: “When those who are preordained by God are called in time...then *at that very moment* they obtain faith and by that faith they receive justification and the adoption as children (Rom. 3:22, 24; 4:5; 5:1; Gal. 3:26; 4:5; etc.), *with the assurance of sonship by the witness of the Holy Spirit* (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:6; 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30)” (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, 50; emphasis added).

heritance of all those who believe in Christ. It is perfect salvation, body and soul, in the new world. As foretaste and pledge, the earnest is assurance of salvation. The earnest is the Spirit Himself. And we have the Spirit as earnest in our consciousness, that is, we have assurance (such is the relation of v. 14 to v. 13), *when we believe in Christ*, not years or even months later. We have the Spirit as earnest *by believing in Christ*, not some other way, for example, by working, striving, laboring, weeping, and what not more spiritual acts.

Witnessing with Our Spirit

The second passage that teaches the truth about assurance is the most profound text on assurance in all of Scripture, Romans 8:15, 16: “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”

The entire eighth chapter of Romans is one glorious confession of, and exultation in, assurance. It is put in the mouth of every believing child of God. Romans 8 utterly demolishes the Puritan notion that many believers, probably most believers, live for years in doubt of their salvation and that this is the will of God for many of His dear children. Written to Roman believers and their children, only recently converted from heathendom, the eighth chapter of Romans teaches the truth that all believers, not only have salvation, but also have the assurance of salvation.

We all groan, not in doubt of our salvation, but in ardent longing for the resurrection of our body (v. 23). This is assurance.

We all know that all things are working together for our good (v. 28). This is assurance.

We all are certain that God is for us and that nothing can be against us (v. 31). This is assurance.

We all are sure that God delivered His Son up for us (v. 32). “Us” includes *me*. This is assurance.

In that marvelous exclamation of assurance consisting of verses 35-39, every believer declares his or her certainty, not only that he or she is loved by Christ and God, but also, and especially, that nothing

can separate him or her from the love of God. Indeed, every believer exclaims that in all the troubles of life, which are many and severe, he or she is “more than conquerors.” This is assurance.

The entire wretched Puritan doctrine of assurance is smashed to pieces on Romans 8:35-39. Would to God the contemporary disciples of the Puritans would demolish this doctrine, forthrightly, clearly, unambiguously, and boldly, in their preaching, teaching, and writing, thus delivering thousands of doubting, despairing members of their churches from their bondage, in the mercy of God!

The sinful doubt of everyone who believes the gospel of grace from the heart must, and will, be destroyed by the sound preaching of Romans 8.

Romans 8:15, 16 is the profound explanation of the assurance of the elect believer. Verse 15 affirms the assurance of the believer: He cries, “Abba, Father.” “Abba” is the Hebrew, or Aramaic, word meaning “father.” “Father,” in the passage, translates the Greek word for father.

“Abba, Father” expresses certainty of salvation. One who knows God as his father is sure of the love of God for him in Jesus Christ. Of course, one who calls God his father is sure of his own sonship by the adoption of the cross.

“Abba, Father” is expressive of universal certainty. All believers, whether Jew or Gentile, know God as their father. Besides, Romans 8 attributes this calling upon God as father, not merely to a few super-saints like the apostle himself (although he would never distinguish himself from the rest of the church as a super-saint), but to all who believe the gospel of grace from the heart: “*We cry.*”

“Abba, Father” is a strong affirmation of certainty. The believer is doubly sure that God is his father: “Father, Father.” The believer exclaims God’s fatherhood of him, and, therefore, also his own sonship, loudly, as one does when he is sure of something: “*We cry.*”

One thing explains this assurance of believers. Rather, one *person*, one person *within them*, explains this assurance. The explanation of the believers’ assurance is that “ye have received the Spirit of adoption.” By Him, we cry, “Abba, Father,” for this Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.

Verse 16 is not teaching that the Spirit's witness is *to* our spirit, as though there is one witness—the witness of the believer's spirit as prompted by the Holy Spirit. Rather, within the believer there are two distinct witnesses, testifying to the believer that he is a son, or she, a daughter, of God. One witness to the believer is his own human spirit. As the believer hears the gospel of God's grace in Christ and believes on Christ as presented by that gospel, his own spirit witnesses powerfully to him that he is a child of God, adopted by God's grace in the cross of God's own eternal Son in human flesh. This witness by his own spirit is worked by the Holy Spirit.

But this witness, powerful as it is, and prompted by the Holy Spirit, is not enough for assurance. One's own spirit may be doubted. It is, after all, a very human spirit. Assurance of salvation on the part of a sinful, weak human does not come easy. Because of the importance of assurance, it may not rest on flimsy or assailable grounds.

There must be two witnesses, and one of them must be God Himself.

“With” the witness of the spirit of the believer is another witness, testifying the same thing. The second witness to the sonship of the believer is the Spirit. Not only does the Spirit move the spirit of the believer to witness to the believer. He Himself also, within the believer, speaks to the believer, in a wonderful, mysterious (though not immediate), and convincing way, “You are a child of God.”

This is the end of doubt. In the mouth of two witnesses, the word of the gospel of sonship is established in the soul of the believer.

This is assurance of salvation. God the Spirit has spoken in the consciousness of the adopted child. The living word of God banishes doubt. The witness of God Himself is conclusive.

Justified by Faith

The third group of passages establishing the truth of assurance is all those texts that teach justification by faith. One's first reaction to this assertion might be that appeal to the biblical teaching of justification by faith has nothing to do with assurance of salvation. But this reaction would be mistaken. Justification implies the assurance of salvation on the part of the one who is justified by his faith. Inas-

much as justification is the certain fruit and benefit of the activity of believing in Jesus Christ, assurance is of the essence of faith.

Justification by faith is the forgiveness of the believing sinner's sins by means of the sinner's trusting in Jesus Christ with the faith worked in him by the Holy Spirit. Justification is the forgiveness of sins *in the sinner's consciousness*, as the Reformation expressed with the phrase, "in the forum of the consciousness." In the act of justification, God the judge declares in the consciousness of the sinner, "I cancel the debt of the guilt of your sins! I reckon to your account the obedience of My Son Jesus Christ!"

In this verdict, God announces the judicial ground: "My Son, your redeemer, obeyed in your stead His lifelong and died as your substitute on the cross." There is no forgiveness except on the basis of the obedience of Christ in the forgiven sinner's stead. The Belgic Confession defines justification as "the remission of our sins *for Jesus Christ's sake*."³⁴ Every believer *seeks* justification on the basis of the death of Christ, as the Heidelberg Catechism teaches in its explanation of the fifth petition of the model prayer, "Forgive us our debts": "Be pleased, *for the sake of Christ's blood*, not to impute to us, miserable sinners, our manifold transgressions, nor the evil which still always cleaves to us."³⁵

The verdict of justification, *in the sinner's consciousness*, therefore, includes, as part of the verdict, indeed, as the very foundation of the verdict, that Christ died for the sinner whose sins are pardoned.

This means that in the verdict of justification itself is the assurance that God loves the sinner whose sins he forgives, the assurance of such love as gave God's only begotten Son for this sinner.

Still more, because all Scripture proclaims that Christ, His cross, and the blessing of forgiveness flow from God's eternal love for certain sinners in the decree of election, the verdict of justification assures the sinner whose sins are forgiven that God has loved him with an eternal love. "But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified

34 Belgic Confession, Art. 23, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 409.

35 Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 126, in Schaaf, 353, 354.

by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him” (Rom. 5:8, 9).

Assurance of the love of God for the justified sinner, on the part of every justified sinner, is the meaning of Romans 5:1: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God.” Having peace with God is assurance, that is, conscious certainty, that the sinner is reconciled to God, because God has redeemed him in love for him.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, Jesus teaches that the publican “went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14). The meaning is that the publican returned home leaping and dancing, with gladness on his face and peace and joy in his soul, conscious and assured that God pardoned his sins in mercy for the sake of the sacrifice of the Lamb on his behalf. This was assurance of salvation. This was assurance of the love of God for him. This was assurance of salvation and the love of God as an essential element of justification by faith.

It is no more possible for a sinner to be justified by faith without assurance of justification, salvation, and the love of God than it would be possible for a condemned criminal to depart the courtroom in which he had just heard a favorably disposed judge acquit him without knowing that he was acquitted and that the judge was gracious.

Since every true believer is justified and since assurance of forgiveness, salvation, and the love of God is an essential aspect of justification by faith, denial that assurance of salvation belongs to justifying faith is, in fact, the denial of justification by faith — the heart of the gospel of grace.

Nevertheless, the Puritans deny that assurance of salvation is an element of justification by faith. They deny this simply by denying, as they do, that assurance, or certainty of one’s own salvation, is of the essence of (justifying) faith. They deny this by denying, as they also do, that the Spirit gives assurance in and with the gift of (justifying) faith. They also deny that assurance is part of justifying faith, *explicitly*.

The first conclusion we will begin with and premise as a foundation to what follows, is, that that act of faith which justifies a sinner, is distinct from knowing he hath eternal life, and may therefore be without

it, because it doth not necessarily contain prevailing assurance in it. By prevailing assurance, I mean such an assurance as overpowereth doubts and sense to the contrary, so as, in the believer's knowledge, he is able to say, Christ is mine, and my sins are forgiven; such an assurance whereby a man is a conqueror, as Paul speaks, Rom. 8:37, when he expresseth such strong assurance.³⁶

According to Goodwin and the Puritans, the justified sinner is not able to know that his sins are forgiven, or to say that Christ is his.

In asserting that justification by faith leaves the justified sinner unable to say, "My sins are forgiven," the Puritans press their determination to deny assurance to believers to the point of absurdity. Justification by faith is God's declaration to the sinner, in his consciousness, "Your sins are forgiven." To acknowledge justification by faith ("that act of faith which justifies a sinner"), but deny that the justified sinner knows he is justified is not only false doctrine. It is absurd.

One thing is sure: This doctrine is no "furthering" of the Reformation. On the contrary, it is, in fact, a denial of justification by faith as much as is the heresy of Rome, and leaves the penitent sinner in exactly the same miserable condition: Doubt!

That the Puritan and "further reformation" doctrine of justification is the same as Rome's in leaving believers in doubt of their forgiveness and salvation and that the Puritan and "further reformation" doctrine is diametrically opposed to Calvin's (and the entire Reformation's) teaching are proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, by Calvin's refutation of the decisions of the Roman Catholic Council of Trent regarding justification.

Trent "inveigh[ed] against what they call The Vain Confidence of Heretics. This consists, according to their definition, in our holding it as certain that our sins are forgiven, and resting in this certainty."³⁷

Trent condemned the certainty of forgiveness, that is, justification, as the vain confidence of heretics. Puritanism and the "further

36 Goodwin, *Object and Acts*, 338.

37 John Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with Antidote," in *Calvin's Tracts*, tr. Henry Beveridge, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1851), 125. Calvin wrote this "Antidote" in 1547.

reformation” do the same. Indeed, their error is worse. Puritanism and the “further reformation” condemn as vain confidence the certainty of forgiveness of *elect believers who are believing the gospel*.

With appeal to Psalm 32, Romans 5:1-5, Ephesians 3:12, Romans 8:37, and James 1:6, Calvin declares that certainty, indeed a *bold* certainty, of forgiveness is the gift of God to all believers and that it is the gift of God with forgiveness, as an element of the forgiveness itself. Charging the Roman Catholic theologians with “rob[bing] all consciences of calm placid confidence” by their “leaving it in suspense to whom and when they are forgiven,” Calvin asks, rhetorically,

Where, then, is that boldness of which Paul elsewhere speaks (Eph. 3:12), that access with confidence to the Father through faith in Christ? Not contented with the term confidence, he furnishes us with boldness, which is certainly something more than certainty.³⁸

He exposes a fundamental error of Rome, as of Puritanism and the “further reformation,” concerning faith when he adds, “faith is destroyed as soon as certainty is taken away.”³⁹

Rome, Puritanism, and the “further reformation” contend that Paul’s claims of assurance of salvation apply only to himself and a few other specially favored saints and that they had their assurance by “special revelation,” or a mystical experience. Calvin denies this contention as a “frivolous quibble”: “[Paul] claims nothing so special for himself as not to share it with all believers, when in their name as much as his own, he boldly exults over death and life, the present and the future [in Romans 8:35-39].”⁴⁰

At Trent, Rome declared: “Neither is it to be asserted that it becomes those who are truly justified to determine with themselves, without any kind of doubt, that they are truly justified.”⁴¹ Puritanism agrees, as the quotation of Thomas Goodwin above indicates. Calvin

38 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 125.

39 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 125.

40 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 137.

41 Quoted in Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 97.

responds: “Paul makes it [full assurance] the perpetual attendant of faith.”⁴²

Calvin recognizes Rome’s “ingenious” ploy of seeming to do justice to the Bible’s teaching of faith’s certainty, all the while maintaining its false doctrine that individual believers are in doubt of their own forgiveness and salvation. “They think...that they ingeniously obviate all objections when they recommend a general persuasion of the grace of Christ...[while] they allow none to apply grace to themselves with the firm assurance of faith.”⁴³ Puritanism and the “further reformation” employ the same subterfuge when they maintain that believers are certain that Christ forgives sins, but uncertain whether Christ forgives *their* sins.

Calvin scoffs at this worthless certainty. Those who teach it put both certainty and the efficacy of the death of Christ “in the air, so as to be only in confused imagination.” Calvin continues: “Christ is not set before me and others, merely that we may believe him to have been the Redeemer of Abraham, but that every one may appropriate the salvation which he procured.”⁴⁴

The gravity of the false doctrine concerning assurance of salvation is indicated by Calvin’s blunt statement, “Paul and John recognize none as the children of God but those who know it.”⁴⁵

One may say that Calvin was wrong about faith, justification, and certainty of forgiveness and eternal life. He may not say that Puritanism and the “further reformation” are faithful to Calvin (and the entire Reformation) on these great issues.

And if he says that Calvin was wrong, and that Puritanism and the “further reformation” are right, he aligns himself with Rome on some of the most fundamental issues of the sixteenth century Reformation of the church.

The Assurer

The three outstanding passages on assurance—the sealing pas-

42 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 126.

43 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 127.

44 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 127.

45 Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts*, 127.

sages, Romans 8:15, 16, and the passages teaching justification by faith alone—all reveal that it is the Holy Spirit who performs the indispensable work of assurance. Only the Spirit can assure the elect sinner that he is forgiven, saved, and a child of God. The Spirit is God, and only God can and may assure anyone of salvation. Only God knows who are His. Only God's testimony is conclusive for the elect sinner. Mere human testimony can, and will, be doubted. It is the same with personal assurance of salvation as it is with the church's assurance that the Bible is the word of God: assurance is due to, and rests upon, the witness of God the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit itself beareth witness... that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

The Spirit is the one who assures of salvation as the Spirit of Christ. Assurance of salvation is possible only in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 1:13 teaches that the believer is sealed *in Christ* with the Spirit: '*In whom [Christ], also having believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.*' There is no assurance for the sinner apart from Christ. Working on behalf of Christ and in union with Christ, the Spirit assures as the Spirit of Christ.

But He is the Spirit of Christ *in* the elect sinner. Only one who is *in* us, in our inmost being, can remove our deeply seated doubt, assure us in the depths of our being, and comfort us from within our selves. No man can reach us where we must hear and be convinced that our sins are forgiven, that Christ died for us, even for us, and that we have God as our Father. But even Jesus Christ Himself outside of ourselves, alongside us, on the pulpit before us or on the couch next to us, cannot assure us. Therefore, He comes to us in the other Comforter, the Breath of God, who penetrates our inmost being, speaking convincingly to our spirit and to us ourselves with our spirit that our sins are forgiven and that we are the children of God. It is the Spirit, within us, by whom "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts" by the word of justification, that is, the assurance that God loves us (Rom. 5:5). It is the Spirit, within us, who, by means of the declaration that our sins are forgiven, moves us to cry, "Abba, Father."

How does the Spirit assure the believing child of God?

By the Gospel of Grace

The Spirit does not give assurance after the manner of mysticism. He does not assure by special revelations, visions, extraordinary happenings, emotional experience, or direct whisperings in the soul, that is, whisperings apart from the preaching, reading, and meditating on the word of God and the use of the sacraments.

The sealing with the Spirit is not an extraordinary, emotional, mystical experience.

The witness of the Spirit with the spirit of the believer is not an immediate whispering, that is, a voice of the Spirit alongside and apart from the word of the gospel.

The Spirit does not cry, “Abba, Father,” in a believer apart from the proclamation of the biblical gospel of justification by faith.

The Spirit’s work of assurance is not after, in addition to, and far above His work of justifying faith in Jesus Christ.

Thus is exposed and condemned the grievous error that is fundamental to the Puritan doctrine of assurance. The Spirit does not assure by Goodwin’s overpowering light; Sibbes’ “spiritual ravishings” and “extraordinary feeling of the Spirit,” “superadded” to justification by faith; or Lloyd-Jones’ undefined, but suggestive, “greatest experience.”

The “mystical syllogism” of the leading Puritan theologians Brooks, Goodwin, and Sibbes, who, according to J. I. Packer “represent the main current of Puritan thinking,”⁴⁶ must be rejected, root and branch, as heretical mysticism and spiritual rubbish.

The “mystical syllogism” is an argument for assurance. For “the main current” of Puritanism it is the decisive argument for assurance. It is the subjective argument of the believer himself who ardently desires assurance of forgiveness and salvation, but, under the influence of his Puritan teachers, lacks assurance. The argument goes like this.

Major premise: Assurance of salvation consists of a special, extraordinary spiritual experience, a highly charged, mystical feeling.

Minor premise: I have had such an extraordinary (and rare) experience (by the Spirit).

46 Packer, 179, 180.

Conclusion: Therefore, I am assured of salvation.

The argument is false in its entirety. The major premise is false: assurance of salvation consists of faith in Jesus Christ, which every believer has.

The minor premise is false: the only experience worked by the Spirit in all of God's children is the "ordinary" experience of peace and joy through believing in Jesus Christ.

The conclusion is false: assurance of salvation is solidly based only on the promise of the gospel embraced by a true faith and thus bound by the Spirit upon the believing heart and consciousness.

As false as the premises and conclusion is the whole syllogistic enterprise: The sinner is looking mainly, if not exclusively, within himself for assurance of salvation, rather than away from his sinful, uncertain self, with its fickle feelings, to Jesus Christ "out there" in the promise of the gospel.

Mysticism's way to assurance is illusory, deceiving, and perilous. Those who desperately seek and work for assurance along the way of mysticism either doom themselves to a life of doubt (because they never can obtain the "overpowering light" or achieve the "greatest experience"), or, if they do finally find the feeling they think they are seeking, consign themselves to perpetual questioning, whether the feeling was genuine (so much depends on the feeling, after all)⁴⁷, or, if they do firmly base their assurance on an experience, subject themselves to God's condemnation (for He will have assurance of salvation, like salvation itself, come through faith that rests on Jesus Christ as evidently set forth in the Scriptures, and through faith only).

One dreadful effect of the "mystical syllogism" has always been the encouragement of the people who sit under such teaching to seek

47 It is a wonder to me that all mystics and "experientialists" do not go stark, raving mad, always seeking a feeling, always trying to maintain a feeling, always basing salvation or assurance on a feeling, and, if they have such a feeling, always secretly fearing that the feeling might not be all it could be, or even that the feeling is no genuine operation of the Spirit at all. It is a great mercy of God to our physical and emotional life, as well as to the spiritual state of our soul, that salvation is by faith, not by feeling.

bizarre, direct revelations from God as evidence that they are saved, and to suppose that they have received such revelations. Fred van Lieburg relates a number of these incidents in the lives of eighteenth century Dutch pietists. One Egbert de Goede languished in doubt of his salvation for years, even though, according to his own confession, he believed in Christ and “was justified.” Only when he heard a voice, “I remember your sins no more,” and the preacher spoke on this very text the following Sunday did Egbert (by this coincidence) have “confirmation of his reconciliation to God.”⁴⁸ Hermanus Hermesen “received a vision in which I clearly saw our dear Lord Jesus.... It was as if heaven opened,” etc.⁴⁹

Salvation is not by mysticism. Assurance is not a matter of feelings. The Spirit does not work assurance by extraordinary experience.

Rather, the Spirit assures elect believers of their salvation in the same way in which the Spirit saves them, namely, by faith in Jesus Christ, as He is preached in the gospel of the Scriptures.

Assurance is a gift of God in Christ to the elect child of God. It is a purely gracious gift. It is as much a gracious gift as is faith, or regeneration, or the future resurrection of the body. Assurance is not earned, or obtained, by works. It is not something that believers must strive after for years by heroic spiritual efforts and that only a few make themselves worthy of.

In that grand passage on assurance, Romans 8:15, 16, the apostle declares, about all the believers in the congregation in Rome and about their true children, the children of the promise, that “Ye have *received*

48 Fred van Lieburg, *Living for God: Eighteenth-Century Dutch Pietist Autobiography*, tr. Annemie Godbehere (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 65.

49 van Lieburg, 87. The autobiographies of the people influenced by the Puritan doctrine of the “mystical syllogism” are full of such visions, voices, dreams, indescribable experiences of God, and providential occurrences supposedly signifying salvation or the certainty of salvation. They are also replete with horrifying visions and dreams of Satan, death, and hell, which were thought to have spiritual significance. The people are mostly to be pitied. Their teachers are altogether to be blamed.

the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” The Spirit is the seal and earnest, that is, the assurer and assurance of salvation, by His witness with the spirits of the believers. Believers do not get, or obtain, or make themselves worthy of the Spirit by their hard working. Rather, they *receive* Him. They receive Him as God’s free, gracious gift to them for Christ’s sake.

“You do not have assurance of salvation,” Puritanism tells the believer, “at least not by virtue of possessing true, justifying faith. You must work hard and long to obtain it, and you cannot be sure you will ever get it.”

“You *have* the Spirit of adoption bearing witness with your spirit that you are the child of God, and, therefore, you have assurance of your own salvation,” the gospel of grace assures every believer. “You have *received* it. Therefore, be grateful for it, and live in the comfort of it.”

Puritan theologians and their followers speak anxiously of the “*quest*” for assurance. Reformed orthodoxy thankfully rejoices in the “*gift*” of assurance.

The *Spirit* works assurance, not the believer himself.

The Spirit works assurance by means of faith, as faith hears the gospel, believes on Christ presented in the gospel, and is the instrument of justification. As Ephesians 1:13 teaches, having *heard* the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and having *believed* the gospel, and in Jesus Christ presented in the gospel, we were sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit binds the word of God on the regenerated heart of the elect child of God, so that he believes the word of God concerning Jesus Christ and believes on Christ for forgiveness and eternal life. Precisely in this way—the way of hearing and believing—and at this moment—the moment of hearing and believing—the Spirit witnesses *to* the spirit of the believer that the believer is forgiven and saved, as Romans 8:16 teaches.

Precisely in this same way and at the same moment—the way and moment of hearing and believing the gospel—the Spirit Himself witnesses *with* the believer’s spirit to the believer himself that he is a child of God.

This witness of the Spirit to the believer with the witness of the

believer's own spirit is mysterious. But it is not *mystical*. It is not "immediate" and "direct," that is, a witness, a voice, a "whisper," different from, apart from, and alongside the word that the believer hears from the mouth of the preacher, or reads on the pages of Scripture. Rather, the believer hears the witness of the Spirit to him that he is a child of God, as an overwhelming, convincing, not-to-be-doubted, assuring personal certainty of forgiveness and salvation, in and by the gospel that is read and preached.

The Spirit witnesses through the word of truth, not otherwise (Rom. 1:15-17). Thus, and thus only, does Jehovah God "say unto my soul, I am thy salvation" (Ps. 35:3).

Believers receive the Spirit, also with regard to His sealing work, by the hearing of faith, not otherwise (Gal. 3:2).⁵⁰

To seek the witness of the Spirit for assurance elsewhere than in the reading and preaching of the Scriptures is foolish, wicked unbelief.

To suppose that one has heard the Spirit's "whisper" assuring of salvation in dreams, visions, strange happenings, or a voice in the night is delusion, or the experience of other spirits.⁵¹

50 What the Canons of Dordt confess as Reformed orthodoxy concerning the assurance of preservation to final salvation holds as well for assurance of present salvation: "This assurance, however, [which, according to the Canons of Dordt, V/9, all "true believers may and do obtain"], is not produced by any peculiar revelation contrary to, *or independent of the Word of God*, but springs from faith in God's promises, which he has most abundantly revealed in his Word for our comfort; from the testimony of the Holy Spirit, witnessing with our spirit, that we are children and heirs of God (Rom. 8:16); and, lastly, from a serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience, and to perform good works" (Canons of Dordt, V/10, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 594; emphasis added).

51 The evil of Puritanism's "mystical syllogism" with regard to assurance of present salvation is that condemned by the Canons of Dordt regarding assurance of future perseverance in salvation: "The Synod rejects the errors of those...who teach that without a special revelation we can have no certainty of future perseverance in this life. For by this doctrine the sure comfort of the true believers is taken away in this life, *and the doubts of the papist are again introduced into the church*, while the Holy Scriptures constantly deduce this assurance, *not from a special and extraordinary revelation*, but from

Beyond “Mere Faith”

It was basic to the Puritan error concerning assurance that the leading Puritan theologians taught the Spirit gives assurance by a “direct” and “immediate” work and witness. In his explanation of the sealing with the Spirit, which gives assurance, Thomas Goodwin maintained that this is “an immediate assurance of the Holy Ghost, by a heavenly and divine light.” Goodwin contrasted this work of the Spirit with the Spirit’s work “by...[the] promises” [of the gospel].⁵² Goodwin went on to describe sealing as “the impress of the immediate seal of the Spirit” and “an immediate witness of the Spirit.”⁵³

Richard Sibbes wrote that the Spirit gives assurance “immediately.” It is a work of the Spirit “by way of [the Spirit’s] presence... without discourse.”⁵⁴ In sealing some believers, “the Spirit speaks to us by a kind of secret whispering and intimation.”⁵⁵

It is true that Goodwin thought to safeguard his “immediate witness of the Spirit” against “enthusiasms” by insisting that the “immediate witness” of the Spirit “is not that it is without the Word.” When the Spirit witnesses to some believers that they are the children of God, “it is the Spirit applying the Word to the heart that we speak of.”⁵⁶ Sibbes likewise had the Spirit immediately whispering Bible texts to some believers.⁵⁷

But these provisos and caveats did not, in fact, rescue the Puritan doctrine of assurance from mysticism’s teaching of salvation as the soul’s experience of immediate contact with God. For, first,

the marks proper to the children of God and from the constant promises of God” (Canons of Dordt, V, Rejection of Errors/5, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005, 177; emphasis added [Schaff does not give the Rejection of Errors sections of the Canons in English]).

52 Goodwin, *Works*, 233.

53 Goodwin, *Works*, 237, 241.

54 Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 5, *Expositions and Treatises from Portions of Several of the Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, repr. 1977), 440.

55 Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 3, 456.

56 Goodwin, *Works*, 250.

57 Sibbes, *Works*, vol. 3, 456.

the repeated, emphatic affirmation of assurance as “immediate” and “direct” in the context of an experience of “overpowering light” and of “secret whisperings of the Spirit” inevitably opened the way both in the teaching of ministers and in the thinking and practice of the people to views and experiences of assurance that quite ignored the preaching of the word, the promises of the gospel, and Bible texts.

More importantly, once Goodwin had distinguished the “immediate testimony” of the Spirit that gives assurance from the testimony of the gospel of the blood of Jesus Christ and the corroborating testimony of the believer’s life of sanctification as a testimony “beyond all these”⁵⁸ and once he had described “immediate assurance” as a “light beyond the light of ordinary faith,”⁵⁹ he had committed himself and his followers to mysticism’s way of salvation, namely, sheer experience, apart from and “beyond” faith in Jesus Christ as presented in the preaching of the promise of the gospel.

In his enthusiasm for the extraordinary work of the Spirit of assuring some believers by an “overpowering light” and an “immediate witness,” Goodwin dared to disparage the faith that believes on the crucified Jesus Christ and trusts His atoning blood as “mere faith.”

When a man that is a believer looks upon Christ, there is a fresh flowing of the blood, and that strengtheneth faith; no man looks upon Christ but cometh off more cheerly; but this is a weak witness. Then cometh in water, that witnesseth too; but yet, I say, if you mark it, here is the Spirit, that differeth from both these, therefore there is a further testimony than either from a man’s sanctification or from *mere faith*.⁶⁰

“Mere faith”!

This phrase, all by itself, exposes the Puritan doctrine of assurance. It betrays as well the fundamental error of the Puritan doctrine: denial that true, justifying, saving faith is assurance of salvation. True, justifying, saving faith is “mere” faith, in Puritan thinking, because

58 Goodwin, *Works*, 233, 234.

59 Goodwin, *Works*, 236.

60 Goodwin, *Works*, 233; emphasis added.

the best and greatest aspect of salvation—assurance—comes to a few in some other way.

The actual application and practical fruit of the Puritan doctrine of assurance are indicated, not only in the autobiographical account of the lives of simple Dutch farmers in the eighteenth century, but also in D. M. Lloyd-Jones' glowing description of the supposed obtaining of assurance by a number of illustrious persons whose experiences are proposed as examples for all believers. Flavel had "ravishing tastes of heavenly joys" as he was out walking. Edwards had a "view...of the glory of the Son of God" as he was riding his horse in the woods. Moody was filled with the Spirit "one day in the city of New York." Christmas Evans had the "experience" as he was "traveling over a mountain-pass." Where Whitefield was when the "Spirit of God took possession" of his soul, Lloyd-Jones does not inform the reader, but evidently Whitefield was not in church hearing the preaching of the gospel and using the sacraments with the congregation. Wesley's heart was "strangely warmed" as he was strolling up Aldersgate Street.⁶¹

Not one of these proposed examples for all Christians was assured of his salvation at church on the Lord's Day under the preaching of the gospel and while using the sacraments. Not one was sealed by the Spirit by means of faith that heard the promise of the gospel and trusted in Christ for forgiveness. Not one was even reading the Bible. Of none of these notable examples of assurance does Lloyd-Jones record that the content of their "experience" was the truth—the doctrinal truth—of Holy Scripture. Rather, their assurance consisted of a vague feeling.⁶²

61 Lloyd-Jones, 275-278.

62 The Puritan doctrine of assurance is classic mysticism. "The hallmark of mysticism is *subjectivism*, since the center of gravity is shifted from the objective work of God outside us, the acquiring of salvation, to the subjective; not the sure Christ but the sure Christian is the ground upon which one depends. Along this line, the Word of God is made to play second fiddle to the inner witness of the Spirit; experience is cut loose from Scripture; many are enthusiasts for the 'inner light'; and in the end it is not the revelation of God that is decisive, but what we experience (Dutch: *bevinden*) in our hearts. From this results also the mistaken conception of faith and of the assurance

By the Truth

The Spirit *assures* of salvation in the same way that He *saves*: by means of faith that hears and believes the word of God. For the believer's assurance of salvation, this word is, and must be, the truth, that is, the gospel of sovereign grace, at the heart of which is the gracious, unconditional promise. According to Ephesians 1:13, the sealing accompanies one's hearing "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." II Corinthians 1:22 affirms that God has sealed us, in the context of the declaration that the promises of God in Christ are "yea, and in him [Jesus Christ] Amen" (v. 20).

Romans 8:16 intends to teach that the Spirit bears witness with the spirit of the believer, not by means of any religious teaching whatever, not by means of a false gospel of a universal love of God dependent for its saving efficacy upon the will or good works of sinners, but *by the gospel taught in the book of Romans*. This is the gospel of sovereign grace: grace rooted in eternal election; grace merited for elect sinners by a limited, efficacious cross; grace directed to the elect sinner by the unconditional promise; grace irresistibly worked in the elect sinner by the Holy Spirit; and grace that infallibly brings every elect saint to glory. This is the one true gospel of salvation by "God who shows mercy" (Rom. 9:16).

In the false gospel of salvation by the willing or running of sinners (Rom. 9:16), there is not, and cannot be, assurance. Every form of the false gospel of conditional salvation, that is, salvation dependent upon the sinner himself, leaves men fearful, doubting, terrified. The Spirit does not seal or witness by such a message.

The Spirit assures by the word of God, because He is the Spirit proceeding eternally from the second person of the Trinity, the personal Word of God.

The Spirit assures by the gospel of Jesus Christ, because on Pentecost the Spirit became the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

of faith. With regard to faith, it is dissolved in the activity of trusting, and little remains of the certainty of faith, because everything regarding assurance must take place along a prescribed, long way of many 'spiritual conditions' and many 'experiences'" (*"Mysticisme,"* in *Christelijke Encyclopaedie*, vol. 4, ed. F. W. Grosheide, H. H. Landwehr, C. Lindeboom, and J. C. Rullmann, Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1925, 290, 291; the translation of the Dutch is mine).

The Spirit assures by the truth, because, as the Spirit of Christ, He is the Spirit of truth, that is, the Spirit of Scripture, of creeds and catechisms, of sound doctrine, of preaching, of faith that hears and trusts the word of God.

He is not the Spirit of immediate contact with God, of extraordinary experiences, of saving acts above and beyond “mere faith.”

Because He is the *Holy Spirit*, His assurance of the believer by means of faith is always a work that is accompanied and confirmed by His sanctifying of the believer. “As many as are led by the Spirit, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14). Only in the way of a holy life can, and do, believers enjoy the assurance that they are the children of God. The Spirit witnesses with the spirit of the believer as the believer obeys God’s commandments, and *only* as he obeys God’s commandments. The believer has assurance as he walks in holiness of life, and *only* as he walks in holiness of life. This is the truth of the “practical syllogism.” Holiness is a confirming evidence of salvation to the believer, as good works are an evidence of justification.⁶³

Whom the Spirit Assures

So much is assurance an aspect of salvation itself, that the question really is, “Whom does the Spirit *save*?”

The Spirit assures all of God’s elect, believing, sanctified people. He is the seal and earnest to all. He bears witness with their spirit to all the saints. *All* in Ephesus who heard and believed were sealed (Eph. 1:13). *All* in the congregation at Rome who received the Spirit of adoption by believing the gospel of grace were led by the Spirit and had the Spirit’s witness with their spirit that they were the children of God (Rom. 8:14-16). *Every* publican who cried out in repentance and faith, “God, be merciful to me the sinner,” went home justified in his (assured) consciousness (Luke 18:14). Christ taught, indeed, commanded, *all* who pray in faith to address God as “Our Father” (Matt. 6:9).

63 “The elect in due time...attain the assurance of this their eternal and unchangeable election...by observing in themselves...the infallible fruits of election...such as a true faith in Christ, filial fear, a godly sorrow for sin, a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, etc.” (Canons of Dordt, I/12, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 583, 584).

There may be times of doubt. Some believers struggle with doubt more than do other believers. Some may doubt for some time. One who doubts must not conclude that he or she is an unbeliever, unforgiven, unsaved, or even a reprobate, so long as he is troubled by his doubt, struggles with it, and seeks deliverance from it in the gospel.

There are spiritual causes of doubt in a believer. He may, for a time, not be hearing the word and believing, because of indifference, or minding earthly things, or bitterness toward God. He may, for a time, not be living a holy life, because of worldliness, or yielding to some temptation to sin, or entrapment by the devil. He may be grieving the Holy Spirit, by hating a brother or sister, or discontentment with God's ways with him, or fighting the Spirit's assuring work by a determined doubting of his salvation. He may, for a time, be the especial target of the fieriest dart that Satan throws at the soul of one who believes and confesses the truth.

But this spiritual condition of the believer is unusual, abnormal, a weakness, a disease, and a severe temptation. From the disease, he must seek to be healed; against the temptation, he must fight. Where the gospel of grace is purely, soundly, and rightly preached and where Reformed pastors carry out their pastoral work diligently and wisely, using the gospel of grace as the balm in Gilead, there will not be many who doubt their salvation, nor will the doubt of a few last for many years.⁶⁴

64 Regarding the possibility of a lack of the experience of "an assured confidence of soul" concerning their own election and salvation in some believers, see the Canons of Dordt, I/16, in Schaff, *Creeds*, vol. 3, 584, 585. The Canons do not regard this doubt as common among believers, much less as the norm. The usual and normal experience of the saints is certainty of their own election and salvation: "[Certainty of their own election to glory is] the experience of the saints, who by virtue of the consciousness of their election rejoice with the apostle and praise this favor of God (Eph. 1); who according to Christ's admonition rejoice with His disciples that their names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20); who also place the consciousness of their election over against the fiery darts of the devil, asking: 'Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?' (Rom. 8:33)" (Canons of Dordt, I, Rejection of Errors/7, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, 161, 162). Certainty of their own election and salvation

It is false and pernicious teaching, that assurance is intended by God only for a favored few of His believing children and that the many ought to accept doubt as their portion for many years, perhaps their lifelong, in the will of God.

O believer, gratefully receive, and enjoy, assurance as the free gift of the Holy Spirit to you with and by His gift to you of faith in Jesus Christ as preached in the gospel.

Do not doubt that you have a right to assurance. God wills it. Christ earned it for you.

Do not quench the Spirit of assurance in you, by giving yourself over to doubt, as though doubt is the expected, even required, and therefore normal condition of believers.

Do not quench the Spirit of assurance either by listening to Puritan preaching that is forever questioning your assurance, forever challenging your right to assurance, forever sending you on a quest for assurance, and forever instilling doubt. The Spirit does not work assurance by means of a gospel of doubt.

is the usual and normal experience of *all* saints, of saints *as saints*, not of a specially favored, or especially industrious, severely limited caste of saints. Certainty of their own salvation is the usual and normal experience of young saints as well as old saints; of new converts as well as church members of long standing; of those who are the least holy as well as the holiest in the congregation. The Canons affirm this “consciousness” and “certainty” of the saints of their own personal election and salvation as the “fruit” of election itself, against the “error” that denies certainty of one’s own election and salvation “in this life,” except for a certainty “which depends on a changeable and uncertain condition.” To deny the certainty of their own election and salvation, “*in this life*,” of many, if not most, believers as long as they live and to teach that those few believers who do obtain certainty do so only after many years of doubt, and then only on the basis of an ineffable “experience” (a highly “changeable and uncertain condition”), are not only to strip faith of half its essence (“a hearty trust”), despoil Jesus Christ of part of His saving work—the *experiential* part (“he also assures me of eternal life”), denigrate the work of the Holy Spirit (He is the Comforter, who “comforts me”), and rob believers of peace (“peace I leave with you”), but also to make election itself ineffective and fruitless: the certainty of election and salvation is the “fruit” of election.

Listen to the Spirit's witness in you by the gospel of grace, and to the witness of your own spirit as the Spirit testifies to your spirit, and be certain—*absolutely* certain (which is the only certainty there is).

And cry out, with all believers, young and old, aged saints who have been members of the church all their lives and recent converts, godly parents and covenant children, “Abba, Father.” ●

Survey of Southern Presbyterian History(2)¹

Eugene Case

Expansion and Division

At the end of the colonial era, the Presbyterian Church was among the largest, if not the largest, and most influential church in the new nation. By the turn of the century, however, this dominant position was seriously threatened. As people began to move to the west, the Presbyterian Church was unable to keep up with the demands of a population on the move. The strict requirements for a trained ministry resulted in a shortage of men to go into the new areas of settlement and establish new churches. The Methodists and the Baptists, not being encumbered by such educational requirements, were soon overwhelming the Presbyterians.

The Plan of Union

In 1801, in an effort to facilitate the work on the western frontier, the Presbyterian Church entered into an agreement with the Congregationalists, which were located mainly in New England, and whose numbers approximated those of the Presbyterians. This “Plan of Union,” as it was called, had little immediate effect in the South, because there were few Congregationalists in the region. Soon, however, it became evident to sound men throughout the church that the problems of this arrangement far outweighed the benefits.

Under the terms of this plan, the ministers of one denomination could serve in the churches of the other, with the churches conducting

1 This article is reconstructed from notes prepared for a lecture delivered at the Seminary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in April 2008. Inasmuch as that venue did not require the sort of documentation one expects in a written format, no footnotes were attached. In preparation for publication, an attempt has been made, in the case of direct quotations, to give appropriate citation. A bibliography of sources has been included, and history being what it is, there would seem to be little point to the multiplication of citations from books that are themselves, very often, multiplications of citations.

their affairs according to the principles of the denomination to which it belonged, and the ministers under the jurisdiction of the denomination to which they belonged. In cases of dispute, matters might be referred to either a Presbytery or a Congregational association, or to a committee composed of members from both groups. And, in cases where a congregation was made up of members of both denominations, the local church government would be in the hands of a committee chosen by the church, with appeals of decisions by that committee from Presbyterians going to the Presbytery (in which members of the committee of the church would be allowed to sit and act as elders of the Presbyterian Church), and appeals from Congregationalist members referred to the body of the communicants in accord with their polity.

This duckbill-platypus approach to ecclesiology was matched by a polyglot theology arising from the Congregationalist side of this arrangement—especially Hopkinsianism (which denied the imputation of the guilt of Adam’s sin) and similar modifications of the Calvinistic system. The Plan of Union was, from the beginning, a ‘train wreck’ waiting to happen; and it would lead to the most significant disruption of the Presbyterian Church in this country prior to the secession of the Southern Churches in 1861.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Schism

Meanwhile, in the South, the problems with securing ministers for the western frontier led to a different kind of problem—a problem that was manifested most seriously within the bounds of the Synod of Virginia, which, at the time, included all of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

The early nineteenth century saw significant growth in the Synod of Virginia, much of this the result of a revival of religion that began at the Hampton-Sydney College, a Presbyterian-founded school in that state. After the War for Independence, the college had been much affected by the deistic and Unitarian principles that had gained popularity in the late colonial period. The President of the school, John Blair Smith, with the elders of two nearby churches, began to pray about the situation. Then student prayer meetings began to take

place as well; and this awakening of religious interest began to spread. Among those who took note of this revival, as it was called, was the Reverend James McGready, who adopted the methods he had observed and attempted to apply them in connection with his new work in North Carolina. These revivalistic measures did not meet with favor there, however, and McGready moved to Kentucky, where he and other revival preachers found a more receptive audience.

One of the features of the Kentucky revival was the “camp meeting.” These camp meetings, at first, were much like the communion seasons referred to previously, though on a somewhat larger scale. One of these meetings, in fact, attracted about 25,000 people, who were exhorted, day and night, by twenty-five preachers. Some exceedingly strange things began happening: people barking like dogs; jerking of the body, so violent that the long hair braids of some of the women began to snap like whips; others falling into a catatonic state. These unseemly antics reached a point where some of the ministers felt led to preach such texts as “Let all things be done decently and in order.” A reaction to these sorts of excesses set in, and soon Kentucky Presbyterians were divided between the revivalists and the anti-revivalists. By comparison, the Old Side-New Side controversy half a century earlier had been a model of decorum and orthodoxy.

Matters came to a head in the Presbytery of the Cumberland. This Presbytery, under the pressure of finding enough ministers to deal with the explosive growth in church membership, began to cut corners in the selection of ministers. Not only did the Presbytery ordain men to the ministry who had not received the standard theological education, but there were also a good many of these ill-prepared ordinands who rejected the high Calvinism of the Westminster Standards—particularly the doctrines of election and reprobation, limited atonement, and the perseverance of the saints. To show just how ignorant these men were, they included among the doctrines that they rejected that of “infant damnation,” which, of course, is neither taught nor so much as implied by the Confession.

Cumberland Presbytery’s licensing of illiterate exhorters after examination only on “experimental religion” and motive for entering the

ministry, and their demonstration of the ability to deliver a discourse, led the Synod of Kentucky to step in and dissolve the Presbytery of the Cumberland, placing it back under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery of Transylvania. The Presbytery of the Cumberland complained to the General Assembly that the Synod of Kentucky had overstepped its authority by superseding the rights and powers of the Presbytery in the examination of ministers. The Assembly *unanimously* rejected the complaint. And in 1810 the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was organized, spreading across Kentucky and Tennessee in particular, where it remains a significant presence to this day.

Dr. Morton Smith quotes Philip Schaff's description of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church as "half Calvinistic and half Arminian."² The description is too generous, literally, by half.

Southern Seminaries Established

In response to the increasing need for ministers to serve an expanding church, greater attention was given to the establishment of theological seminaries. Princeton, in New Jersey, was opened in 1812; but this was far removed from Southern Churches and Southern needs. Theological training had been given at Liberty Hall Academy (now Washington and Lee University) in Lexington, Virginia in the late 1700s; and in 1806 funds were raised for a theological library and professorship at Hampton-Sydney. Little was accomplished in the direction of better theological education, however, until Hanover Presbytery called John Holt Rice to this work.

Rice was convinced of three things: first, that the majority of Southern students were not likely to venture North for training; second, that men from the North generally were not fitted to ministry in the South; and third, that unless theological training was set up in a Southern venue, the state of religion in the South would deteriorate significantly. Due largely to his efforts, a seminary opened its doors as a separate institution from Hampton-Sydney College in 1824. With the assumption of control and oversight by the Synods of Virginia and North Carolina, the seminary was named "Union Seminary."

Though Rice aspired, as he wrote, to take young men "out of their

2 Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, p. 31.

dark corners and bring them into the Church through the seminary,” he was also very clear as to what sort of men would be tolerated. “Allow me,” he wrote, “to say that in this Southern region, we do not want any body who thinks he has made new discoveries in religion...in a word, the people here know nothing of the *Isms* which have plagued you all to the North; and we do not wish them to know.” What was wanted, he said, was “a man who will just preach the Bible honestly and faithfully.”³

Farther South, though Presbyterians in South Carolina and Georgia had contributed generously to the Assembly’s school at Princeton, there was also feeling among them that circumstances indicated the need for a seminary in their jurisdiction. As early as 1817, the Presbytery of Hopewell in South Carolina had proposed such a school. The Synod of South Carolina and Georgia took up the cause; and in 1828 “The Theological Seminary of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia” opened in Lexington, Georgia, with one professor, five students, and no building. In 1830, the seminary was moved to Columbia, South Carolina. It was there that the man who was to set the tone for theological education at the school, Dr. George Howe, joined the faculty. He would remain for over fifty years, as the teacher and the colleague of such men as James Thornwell, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, and John L. Girardeau, in what would become perhaps the most distinctive of the Southern seminaries, and the one in which fidelity to the old paths was maintained for the longest period of time.

The Old School/New School Division

The problems inherent in the Plan of Union established in 1801 continued to fester for a period of thirty-five years. As time went on, the differences that, at first, had not seemed important, began to work themselves out, and the church became sharply, and almost evenly, divided. Though it is something of an oversimplification to reduce the division to one of national origins, it did reflect, to a considerable degree, the obvious cultural differences of the nation as a whole. On the one side stood those who were largely of Scots and Scots-Irish background, a significant portion of whom were found in the South.

3 Quoted in Street, *The Story of Southern Presbyterians*, p. 39.

On the other side were those of English background, a large portion of which were found in New England. The former became known as the Old School; the latter was known as the New School. Of course, there were numbers of Old School men also in the northern part of the church; and there were some in the South who held to New School views. But the Southern churches were overwhelmingly in the Old School camp, and much of the leadership of the Old School came from the South.

There were a number of issues in the controversy. Ecclesiastically, the Plan of Union, in several different aspects of it, was simply incompatible with Presbyterian polity; and those who were committed to Presbytery as the pattern of church government delivered from the mount chafed under the arrangement that, frankly, conceded much more to Congregationalism than to Presbyterianism. Theologically, there was a difference of opinion as to what was subscribed *vis-a-vis* the Westminster Standards—whether officebearers were required to subscribe the Confession and Catechisms themselves, or whether it was the system of doctrine that was being subscribed. Those of the Old School maintained the former; the New School said it was sufficient to go with the latter. Then there was increasing agitation about what C.N. Willborn has called “the American tar baby”⁴—the issue of Negro slavery.⁵

The differences between the Old School and the New School came to a head at the General Assembly of 1837. At that Assembly,

4 If the imagery is unfamiliar, the reader must by all means secure a copy of the delightful *Uncle Remus* stories of Joel Chandler Harris.

5 The New School, in many areas, was dominated by anti-slavery sentiment, one of the hotbeds of which was the Chillicothe Presbytery in the State of Ohio. In the early 1830s that Presbytery sent a communication to the Presbytery of Mississippi, calling upon the members of the latter to desist from what the Ohio Presbytery called ‘the sin of slavery.’ The Reverend James Smylie, who had come to Mississippi from North Carolina in 1805, and was the founder of several churches in Southwest Mississippi (including one in which this writer presently pastors some of his descendants), prepared a very full reply to the Chillicothe abolitionists, which was one of the earliest pro-slavery arguments, predating R.L. Dabney’s famous *Defense of Virginia and the South*, by over thirty years.

which, for the first time in several years, was controlled by the Old School men, the Plan of Union of 1801 was abrogated as unconstitutional. And, on the principle that an unconstitutional act involves the unconstitutionality of all that is done under it, the Old School party effectively put out of the Presbyterian Church four synods, five hundred and thirty-three churches, and more than one hundred thousand members.

Southerners were in the forefront of the actions taken by the Old School. Dr. George Baxter of Union Seminary presided over the pre-Assembly meeting at which was drawn up the "Testimony and Memorial" condemning the errors of the New School party. Dr. Robert Breckinridge, native of Kentucky, laboring in Baltimore at the time, was the primary author of the "Testimony." William Swan Plumer of Virginia was the first moderator of the Old School Assembly in 1838, having taken a leading part in the work of separation.

At the Assembly the following year, commissioners from the expelled synods and presbyteries were denied seats, and thus departed to form their own separate Assembly. The result, then, was two Presbyterian Churches of roughly the same size, with the same name, each claiming to be the true continuation of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

Dr. Benjamin Morgan Palmer summed up the matter thus: "The disruption was effected. The Old and New Schools were now distinctly apart; and those who stood by the Constitution of the Church, in a strict interpretation of her symbols of doctrine and principles of government, rejoiced in a great deliverance."⁶

In the South, three-quarters or better of the Presbyterian Churches went with the Old School. Among those who sided with the New School, the reason was not so much their doctrinal agreement with the theological and ecclesiastical latitudinarianism of the New School, but their disagreement with the manner in which the separation had been effected.

6 Palmer, Benjamin Morgan, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, Richmond, Virginia, Whittet & Shepperson, 1875, p. 209.

Southern Attempts to Influence the Old School Assembly

More than one-third of the reconstituted Assembly of the Old School Church was located in the South, and there was an incremental increase in the influence of Southern churchmen. Several Southern men, including the notable James Thornwell, were elected as Moderators of the General Assembly; and eight of the Assembly meetings between 1844 and 1861 were held in the South. Princeton Seminary sought to lure Robert L. Dabney and Benjamin M. Palmer to its faculty. The voices of Thornwell and Robert Breckinridge were often heard on the floor of the Assembly debating the great issues before the Church.

The years following the division were spent in missionary work (especially among the Negro slaves), in the establishment of educational institutions, and in the publication of books and periodicals.

One of the most significant of the latter was *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, established in 1847, and a treasure trove of Southern Presbyterian thought. The *Review* was particularly valuable as a platform for the engagement of two significant issues still pending in the Old School Assembly: the role of the ruling elder, and the propriety (or lack thereof) of committing the work of the church to ecclesiastical boards.⁷

The Place of the Ruling Elder

In regard to the place of the ruling elder in the life of the church, there were two great questions that occupied the attention of the Old School Assembly. The first of these questions had to do with whether the presence of ruling elders is necessary to establish a quorum for a meeting of Presbytery. The other question was whether it is proper for a ruling elder to “lay on hands” in the ordination of a minister. To

7 Inasmuch as these two issues will be dealt with at some length in a subsequent article of this series on Southern Presbyterianism, we will touch but lightly upon them at this time. But it is interesting to note that in the debates over these matters, the leading figures were, on the one side, Charles Hodge, unquestionably the most respected theologian of the Old School; and, on the other side, James Henley Thornwell, the man who, more than any other, would shape the ecclesiastical life of Southern Presbyterianism.

these questions, Dr. Hodge answered “No.” James Thornwell, and his colleague Robert Breckinridge, said, “Yes.”

When the matter was debated at the Assembly of 1843, the majority of commissioners sided with Hodge. Gradually, however, Thornwell’s views gained acceptance and became the position of the Southern Presbyterian Church—something about which we will have more to say, D. V., in our considerations of the distinctives of Southern Presbyterianism.

The Argument over Church Boards

One of the issues in the Old School/New School conflict had involved the use of independent boards in the conduct of much of the work of the church. Organizations such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions were the agencies through which the church did its work in the areas indicated. Materials for religious education were similarly produced. The training of ministers, at least at the beginning, was committed to institutions that were, at best, only indirectly controlled by the church.

This method was cordially embraced by the Congregationalists and those of New School sympathies, generally. Those of the Old School, on the other hand, believed that the church should conduct its work through agencies under its control. So, after the division of 1837-38, denominational boards were set up by the Old School Assembly to do the work lately performed by the independent agencies.

There were many in the Old School Assembly, however, who found this arrangement to be little improvement over the previous system. They pointed out that, for all practical purposes, the denominational boards functioned, in large measure, in the same manner as independent boards. And, though these boards had large memberships, often awarded to those who made significant financial contributions, the real work was done by the executive committees of these boards, which reported to the boards themselves, which in turn reported to the Assembly, but without much practical oversight of the work on the part of the Assembly.

A debate over this matter ensued. Once again, the principal antagonists in the debate were Doctors Hodge and Thornwell, with Hodge

supporting the boards and Thornwell opposing them. Thornwell's position was that the work of the church was the work of the church, and that this work could not be assigned to any agency of the church's own creation, but should be undertaken within the structure of the polity provided for in Holy Scripture. He did not oppose a combined or united effort on the part of the Church, but insisted that any centralized agency should be limited to carrying out directives received from the courts of the church. Hodge, on the other hand, argued that there was no substantial difference between what Thornwell proposed and the then current procedure.

Once again, the Assembly sided with Hodge. But Thornwell's views would prevail in the Southern Assembly—at least at the beginning. Moreover, the whole question of the efficiency of the church as such to carry out its mission continues to be a matter of debate down to this very day.

The Assembly of 1861

The period between the division of the Old and New Schools and the division of the Old School Assembly in 1861 was one that saw a number of other denominations split over the sectional issues that divided Americans in general—in particular, the issue of slavery, which had become a major point of contention between North and South in about 1820. By the time of the outbreak of the War to Prevent Southern Independence, the Baptists, the Methodists, and the New School Presbyterian Assembly had all separated into Northern and Southern factions owing mainly to controversies related to slavery. Only the Old School Presbyterian Church had been able to maintain unity in regard to this question.

The Old School Assembly had declared, in 1845, that slaveholding was not forbidden in Scripture and was not, therefore, a bar to communion in the church. The position taken was that slavery was a domestic institution; and like other domestic relations—as, for example, the relationship of husband and wife, or of parents and children—slavery was subject to regulation by Scripture. That there were liable to be abuses in connection with this institution was a fact admitted by all. But it was argued that one might as well agitate for the abolition of

marriage on account of the occasional wifebeater, or for the abolition of the family on account of the occasional unseemliness that occurs in the context of that institution, as to argue for the abolition of slavery on the basis of the admitted problems involved in the institution.⁸ The Old School Assembly, on the basis of this understanding, was able to maintain peace in regard to the slavery issue.

That peaceful co-existence was shattered, however, by the events of 1860 and 1861, beginning with the election of a sectional candidate, Abraham Lincoln, to the presidency of the United States, followed by the secession from the Union of South Carolina and several other Southern States. By the time the Old School Assembly convened in Philadelphia in May of 1861, sectional passions were running high. Fort Sumter had fallen; Lincoln had called for volunteers to subjugate the Southern secessionists; and the Philadelphia newspapers, carrying articles on the Old School Assembly, published demands for a strong expression by that Assembly in support of the Union. The matter was further complicated by the fact that only a few commissioners from the Southern portion of the church were able or willing to be in attendance.

At first it appeared that there was a determination on the part of the commissioners to keep sectional political issues from becoming a pretext for division in the Assembly. Indeed, the opening sermon was on the text, "My kingdom is not of this world." On the third day of the Assembly, however, Dr. Gardiner Spring, pastor of the Brick Church in New York City, proposed that a committee be appointed with a view to the possibility of some expression of devotion to the Union and loyalty to the government. The motion was tabled. Two

8 Significantly, some of the most ardent defenders of slavery—such as Charles Colcock Jones of Georgia, and the aforementioned James Smylie of Mississippi—were also the most insistent that domestic servants be taught the principles of Christianity and treated as Christian brethren. Smylie, in fact, kept himself in considerable trouble with slaveholders whom he regularly excoriated for what he perceived as deficiencies in their dealings with their slaves. And Jones, who wrote a treatise on the religious education of the slaves, was known to have brought charges against anyone whom he personally knew to be guilty of an offense against a Negro servant.

days later Dr. Spring offered a second resolution, which would acknowledge the Assembly's loyalty to the Federal government.

The committee charged with the review of this resolution recommended, by a vote of eight to one, that the resolution be rejected as touching upon matters explicitly prohibited to Synods and Councils by the Confession of Faith. The Assembly, however, by a vote of 154 to 66, adopted the report of the minority of one on the committee, stating that it was the obligation of the Church to promote and perpetuate the integrity of the United States, "and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal government in the exercise of all its functions."⁹ As Dr. Palmer noted, "This paper, from its very terms, was simply a writ of ejectment of all that portion of the church within the bounds of eleven States, which had already withdrawn from the Federal Union, and established a government of their own."¹⁰

A protest against the adoption of the Spring Resolutions was entered, signed by fifty-eight members of the Assembly. The protest concluded with a statement of the conviction of its signatories that "The General Assembly in thus deciding a political question, and in making that decision practically a condition of Church membership, has, in our judgment, violated the Constitution of the Church, and usurped the prerogative of its Divine Master."¹¹ The author of that protest, by the way, was not one of the commissioners from the then-seceded State of Mississippi, nor even one from Kentucky, Maryland, or Missouri, but was none other than Dr. Charles Hodge. The only effect of the protest, however, was to prevent, for the time being, an exodus from the Assembly by members of the border state synods.

The Spring Resolutions were not the cause of the division of the Old School Assembly. As a practical matter, it is unlikely that a united church could have been continued in two separate nations—especially two nations at war with one another. These resolutions did ensure, however, that the division that took place would not be a peaceful one; and the bitterness engendered by it guaranteed that the division would

9 Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. I., p. 564.

10 Palmer, *Thornwell's Life and Letters*, pp. 501-502.

11 Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. I, p. 565.

continue long after the South had been subjugated to the centralized government that resulted from the Union victory in the war.

“Our Southern Zion”

The First General Assembly

In August of 1861, a conference of ministers and elders from Southern Presbyterian churches was held in Atlanta. From this conference, there was sent a call to all the Southern Presbyteries to meet in Assembly at the First Presbyterian Church of Augusta, Georgia, in December of that year. Fifty ministers and thirty-eight elders from forty-seven Presbyteries, representing close to eleven hundred churches and seventy-five thousand members, responded to that call.

When the Assembly convened, Dr. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, and, in the judgment of many, the preeminent preacher, not only of that era, but in the whole history of Southern Presbyterianism, ascended the pulpit. His text was Ephesians, chapter one, verses twenty-two and twenty-three: “And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.” His theme was “The Supreme Dominion to Which Christ is Exalted as Head of the Church, and the Glory of the Church in that Relation, as Being at Once His Body and His Fullness.”

In his sermon, Palmer made only brief reference to what had brought those assembled to this occasion.

“But a little while since,” he reminded them, “it was attempted in the most august court of our Church to place the crown of our Lord upon the head of Caesar—to bind that body, which is Christ’s fulness, to the chariot in which that Caesar rides. The intervening months have sufficiently discovered the character of that State, under whose yoke this Church was summoned to bow her neck in meek obedience.... And now this Parliament of the Lord’s freemen solemnly declares that, by the terms of her great charter, none but Jesus may be the King in Zion.”¹²

12 Johnson, Thomas Cary, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*; Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987, p. 261.

For the rest, his subject was the Church.

Through the unfolding ages she has moved securely on, while disastrous change has ground to powder and scattered to the winds the proudest dynasties of earth. Kings have bound her with fetters of brass; but the fair captive has taken again her harp from the willows, and God has made her walls salvation and her gates praise. Amidst the fires of martyrdom she has risen younger from the ashes of her own funeral pile. Wooing the nations with her accents of love, she lengthens her cords to gather them into her broad pavilion. And when the whole frame of nature shall be dissolved, she will stand serene above the burning earth, to welcome her descending Lord. Caught up by Him into the heavens, she will gather into her communion there all the elder sons of God; still the immortal Church of the Redeemer, out-living all time and henceforth counting her years upon the dial of eternity.¹³

The Assembly adopted “An Address to All the Churches of Jesus Christ”—principally the work of Dr. Thornwell. In this “Address” the reasons for the separate existence of the Southern Church were vindicated, and the positive character that the Church aspired to display before the world was set forth.

Among the latter were a faithful adherence to the Constitution of the Church, a careful conformity to the principle of the spirituality of the Church, and a determination “to rely upon the regular organs of . . . our Presbyterian system of government.” Pursuant to the last of these stated purposes, the system of boards in use in the pre-division Old School Assembly was scrapped, and executive committees, chosen by, dependent upon, and responsible to the Assembly were established. The idea was that the church should be its own missionary society and its own educational society.

13 Johnson, *Palmer's Life and Letters*, pp. 260-261. It is, no doubt, a sign of how far we have fallen that where once men listened to such exalted and majestic phrases, they content themselves now with the pathetic drivel of such imposters as Joel Osteen.

Mission Work

The high aspirations expressed at the first Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America were subject, of course, in some degree at least, to the harsh realities of total war as unleashed by the Lincoln government. Thus, for example, the Assembly of 1862, originally scheduled to meet in Memphis, was moved to Montgomery because of the battle of Shiloh. The single most influential minister in the Assembly, Dr. Thornwell, died in August of that same year. The 1863 Assembly was in session when news was received of the death, on May 10th, of the Confederacy's greatest general—Thomas Jonathan Jackson, who was a Presbyterian of extraordinary faithfulness and piety. The Synod of Nashville was unable to meet for the duration of the war due to the unsettled conditions in Tennessee. And the Presbytery of New Orleans, after the capture of that city by the Federal army, was forced to meet in two sections. Columbia and Union seminaries were barely able to carry on, with prospective students and some faculty serving in the army, funds unavailable, and facilities threatened by the devastation wrought by the invaders. Many church buildings were destroyed or damaged, and congregations decimated and scattered, particularly in Carolina and Georgia in the wake of the regime of rape, murder, and pillage carried out by Mr. Lincoln's favorite General, William Tecumseh Sherman, who followed the British model of total warfare on civilian populations.

The church, nevertheless, attempted, as best could be done, to perform her calling. In 1861, Dr. Charles Colcock Jones urged the Assembly to press on with the work among the Negro slaves; and, in 1863, it was reported that more work was being done among this population than ever before. Similar concern was directed toward the Indian population, especially the Choctaws and Cherokees.

By far the greatest undertaking, however, was in the work done among the soldiers of the Confederate army. Not a few of the Confederate general officers—among them D.H. Hill and T.J. Jackson—were members of the Presbyterian Church. General Lee, though an Episcopalian, in his writings gave evidence of being definitely of the Calvinistic branch of that denomination, and was thoroughly

concerned for the spiritual welfare of the men under his command. Ministers were welcomed, for the most part; and men such as John Waddell, Tucker Lacy, Moses Drury Hoge, and R.L. Dabney—some of the most capable pastors and preachers in the Southern Presbyterian Church—followed the troops and did whatever they could to tend to the spiritual needs of the army. In the years 1863 and 1864, especially, there was a great revival in the Confederate army, with some twelve thousand men making profession of faith in the latter year alone. In the course of the War, over one hundred thousand Confederate Soldiers made profession of faith—a fact that materially affected the spiritual condition of the South after the War; and several of these—James Power Smith (who served on the staff of Stonewall Jackson) and Givens Brown Strickler being two of the most prominent—entered the Presbyterian ministry and became leaders of the post-war church.

Interchurch Relations

The Southern Assembly, even in the midst of the war, was much concerned to establish fellowship with other Reformed churches, and was able even to effect organic union with some of these. Union with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was solicited by the Southern Assembly in 1861, but the ARP declined to join. Some overtures were even made to the Cumberland Presbyterians; but the doctrinal differences were too great to be overcome. In 1863, a group of eleven churches in North and South Carolina that had been organized as the Independent Presbyterian Church were received into the Southern Church. And in 1864 the United Synod of the South—the body of New School churches that had left their Assembly in 1857 because of anti-slavery deliverances by that body—brought about 120 ministers, 190 churches, and some 12,000 communicants into the Southern Assembly.

The latter action was not without some considerable controversy. Dr. Palmer and Dr. John Adger, two of the most prominent churchmen, vigorously opposed this move. R.L. Dabney, on the other hand, chaired the committee that proposed receiving the United Synod. This is especially interesting because Dabney would later prove an intractable opponent of membership in the Pan-Presbyterian Union, and was

stoutly opposed to any sort of relationship with the Northern Church. Dabney was concerned, however, that if the merger with the United Synod did not go through, there would be a New School seminary opened in Virginia. Besides which, the New School churches in the South had left the Old School Assembly after the division in 1837, not because they were theologically attuned to the New School views, but because they objected to what they considered high-handed methods on the part of the Old School. It is doubtful that the receiving of the United Synod brought any problems into the Southern church that were not already present in seed form.

Post-War Desolation and Isolation

The defeat of the Southern Confederacy brought disaster to the South in every area of her life. The economy was in shambles. Many of the major towns and cities, and a not inconsiderable portion of the countryside, were in a state of utter desolation. Over 250,000 Southern soldiers were dead, to say nothing of the thousands more of civilians who died from disease, starvation, and the depredations of an enemy bent on destroying, not just an army, but the culture, and even the population of the South. The former slaves were suddenly placed in a position for which they were utterly unqualified and untrained. And it was all that many could do simply to try to hold body and soul together and deal with the further indignities visited upon them by the Yankee occupation. A horde of Northern criminals descended on the South to steal anything that might have escaped the destruction of war; and a few of the home-grown variety were quick to take advantage, as well.

Churches had been destroyed and their congregations scattered. The work among the Negroes was hijacked by New England school marms and the Freedman's Bureau, who labored to convince the former slaves that they needed to leave the white churches and start their own congregations.

In this 'put-upon' state, there was little disposition among Southern Presbyterians to end their independent organization and rejoin the church of their former connection. They were unable to resist any longer the military regime. But they were of no mind to rejoin those

who had, before, during, and after the War, offered nothing but insults and condemnation.

The only concession made was to rename the denomination, “The Presbyterian Church in the United States.”

Post-War Accessions

Even in the midst of desolation and isolation, however, there were some bright spots, especially in connection with some accessions to the Southern Assembly arising directly out of its stated position on the spirituality of the church, and its contention for the supreme Crown Rights of King Jesus in the midst of the church. In 1866, after negotiations with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church had failed to produce a merger with that body, the Alabama Presbytery of the ARP was received, on their motion, by the Synod of Alabama of the PCUS. In 1867, a group of three churches in Maryland, with six ministers and 576 communicants, which had been organized as the Presbytery of Patapsco, united with the Synod of Virginia. In 1869, the Kentucky Presbytery of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church was received. In that same year, a substantial portion of the Old School Synod of Kentucky, with 75 ministers, 137 churches, and over 13,000 communicants, was received into the Southern Assembly. And in 1874 another 67 ministers, 141 churches, and 8,000 communicants from the Old School Synod of Missouri found their way into the Southern Church.

The accessions of these last mentioned two groups—those from Kentucky and Missouri—was the direct result of the abuses visited upon the churches and ministers of those Synods by the Northern Old School Assembly of which they had remained a part throughout the War. Many of the men from those Synods had opposed the Gardiner Spring resolutions; and they became increasingly disaffected as, year after year, the time of the Northern Assembly was taken up with political deliverances and measures intended to suppress what were regarded as disloyal elements in the Northern Church—particularly in the Synods of Kentucky and Missouri.

In 1865, the Louisville Presbytery, under the leadership of Dr. Stuart Robinson, pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church of that city

and a fierce advocate of the non-secular nature of the Church, drew up a “Declaration and Testimony” in protest of what they regarded as the Northern Assembly’s departure from the faith and practice ordained by Christ and from the true spiritual and divine nature of her calling and work. This “Declaration and Testimony” accused the Northern Church of effecting a virtual alliance with the state—a charge well borne out by the actions of that Assembly during the War.

The 1866 Assembly of the Northern Church condemned this “Declaration and Testimony,” summoned the signers of it to answer to the 1867 Assembly, and denied to them a seat in any church court higher than the Session until the case was decided. The Assembly further ruled that any court receiving any of the signers of the “Declaration and Testimony” was ipso facto dissolved.

When the attempt was made in the Synod of Kentucky to enforce these actions, three-fourths of Kentucky’s Presbyterians followed Dr. Robinson out of the Old School Northern Church. They were later received by the Southern Assembly, which proceeded to elect Dr. Robinson to the moderator’s chair.

Essentially the same scenario was played out in Missouri, with essentially the same results. Many of the churches of that Synod forsook the Old School Northern Church and moved into the Southern Presbyterian Church.

New Problems

Unfortunately, the united front for sound doctrine and practice presented by Southern Presbyterians in the years immediately following the War began to unravel by the late 1870s.

To be sure, there were many positive developments, including the revitalization of the work of the Southern Seminaries. Also, a revision of the Form of Government and Book of Discipline was adopted, which completed the canonization, if you will, of Thornwell’s views on the eldership and the decentralization of organization. The doctrine of the spiritual nature and function of the church was given a good deal of attention, and a committee was appointed to comb the records of the Assembly to find anything inconsistent with the clearly defined position of the church on this matter in order that such actions

might be rescinded or corrected. But there were many in the Southern Church who, possibly because of the success of the church in these other areas, believed that it was time for a more open approach to ecumenical relations and that the Southern Assembly needed to begin concerning herself more with contacts in the larger church world.

There had not been, of course, much in the way of opposition to the establishment of fraternal relations with other Presbyterian bodies in the South, nor even to merger with some of them. There had even been contacts with the Reformed Church in America. In 1874, however, an invitation to join the Presbyterian World Alliance stirred up a hornets' nest of opposition, especially from South Carolina and the New Orleans area. H.M. Smith, Benjamin Palmer, and R.Q. Mallard, all from the Presbytery of New Orleans, were leaders in opposing the Alliance, as were John Adger of South Carolina, and R. L. Dabney of Virginia, who wrote extensively and vehemently against joining the organization. Support for joining the Alliance was also formidable, however, including such as Stuart Robinson and Moses Drury Hoge. The 1875 Assembly authorized a delegate to attend the organizational meeting of the Alliance; and in 1876, despite the strong opposition of some of the venerable fathers of the church, approval was given to membership.

One of the reasons why Dabney and others who opposed membership in the Presbyterian World Alliance were so adamant was the fact that the Northern Assembly would be a part of this group. There was a long list of grievances against the Northern Church, and many of the Southern men were not of a mind to let go of these with a simple 'never mind.'

In 1870, a delegation from the Northern Church—composed of men who were considered likely to receive a favorable hearing—appeared at the Southern Assembly, asking that a special committee be appointed to confer with a like committee of their Assembly to discuss the establishment of fraternal relations. At one point, it even appeared that the Southern Church might be poised to accept this proposal. But then Dr. Dabney arose to remind the brethren of the depredations that had been visited on the South, with the Old School Presbyterian Church in the North acting the part of cheerleader. A committee was

indeed appointed; but there were set out four issues that would have to be confronted for any movement to take place toward the establishment of fraternal relations. These were: 1) Removal of the difficulties with respect to political deliverances by church courts; 2) The union of the Northern New School Assembly with the Northern Old School Assembly; 3) The treatment of the Presbyterians in Kentucky; and, 4) The accusations against the Southern Church that were liberally sprinkled throughout the acts of the Old School Assembly. The men from the Northern Church realized there was little prospect of progress given the conditions imposed.

The matter was brought up again in 1874, with Dr. Palmer chairing a committee to deal with the issue. There were no official instructions, this time, from the Assembly itself. But what the Southern men were looking for—an expression of regret for the injurious imputations heaped upon them by the Northern Assembly—the Northern men were indisposed to grant.

Within a few years, however, attitudes began to soften. By 1882, there were four overtures to the Southern Assembly calling for closer relations between the two denominations. In the South, a generation had arisen that knew not the Gardiner Spring resolutions. Fraternal relations were approved, and, in 1883, there was an exchange of official delegates. It would take exactly one hundred years to accomplish organic union.

The Woodrow Case

Beginning in 1884, and continuing for nearly a decade, the question of evolution produced in the Southern Church what would prove to be one of the most significant controversies of its separate history. The central figure of this controversy was Dr. James Woodrow (the uncle of President Thomas Woodrow Wilson), who in 1861 had been elected the first Perkins Professor of Natural Science at Columbia Seminary. The purpose of the establishment of this professorship was “to evince the harmony of science with the records of our faith, and to refute the objections of Infidel Naturalists.”¹⁴

14 Street, p. 95.

Dr. Woodrow was, by all accounts, a popular teacher, and he had served as Perkins Professor for some twenty years before rumors about his views began to be circulated. In order to set the record straight, the Professor, in 1884, gave a statement of his position in which he admitted that, while formerly he had opposed the hypothesis of the evolution of Adam's body, he now believed it to be probably true. At issue was the meaning of the word "dust"; and, specifically, whether the dust from which Adam's body was formed was organic or inorganic. Since the Bible is not explicit on this point, Woodrow felt free to interpret the word "dust" as meaning organic matter. Based on this, he posited that Adam's body—but not Eve's—probably had evolved, like the body of a horse. And with this, if you will pardon the expression, the race was on. Before it was over, Columbia Seminary had lost three of its four professors (including Dr. Woodrow), had experienced a fifty percent turnover in its board of directors, and was even forced to close for a year. The church papers were filled with articles about the controversy. There was the requisite "Declaration and Testimony" addressing this matter, signed by a number of ministers. Two assemblies of the Southern Church condemned the theory of evolution, and saw their action protested as a violation of the spiritual mission of the church.

Woodrow's chief adversary in the controversy was Dr. John Lafayette Girardeau, also a member of the Columbia faculty. The two met in a great debate during the 1884 meeting of the Synod of South Carolina. Woodrow spoke for five hours over two days in his defense. Girardeau was only marginally briefer.¹⁵ The two met again before the Synod of Georgia.

After two years of controversy in the four Synods supporting Columbia Seminary, the matter came before the General Assembly,

15 One cannot imagine such a debate in any of the courts of the Presbyterian Church in America today. Three minutes into whatever one has to say, there is the ringing of a bell and the flashing of lights signaling the speaker's time has elapsed—which is why there never has been, and never will be, anything of significance to come out of the courts of the PCA. There would be no place for men like Thornwell, Dabney, Girardeau, or, for that matter, even Woodrow.

first in 1886 by overture, and again in 1888 on complaint from Woodrow. On neither occasion did the Assembly leave any doubt as to where it stood. In 1886 the Assembly declared Woodrow's views "repugnant to the word of God and to our Confession of Faith."¹⁶ In 1888, the Assembly refused to uphold Woodrow's complaint against the Synod of Georgia that had annulled the decision of the Presbytery of Augusta, which had found Woodrow not guilty of the charge of "teaching and formulating opinions and doctrines in conflict with the sacred Scriptures, as interpreted in our Standards." In connection with this, the Assembly further stated its judgment "that Adam's body was directly fashioned by Almighty God from the dust of the ground, without any natural animal parentage of any kind."¹⁷ When Woodrow reported this to his Presbytery, however, the Presbytery declared that his ecclesiastical standing was in no respect impaired by this action. Indeed, Woodrow's standing as a minister was never questioned at any level of the church's jurisdiction—an ominous sign that the cult of personality over principle was already beginning to assert itself.

Decline and Disappearance

By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the men who had been present at the founding of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America had passed from the scene. Thornwell, of course, had died only months after the church was formed. Dabney and Girardeau died within a short time of one another in 1898. The last of the giants of that earlier era, B.M. Palmer, died as the result of a street car accident in New Orleans in 1902.

The Southern Presbyterian Church would remain, basically, a conservative, evangelical church of the Reformed Tradition for another forty years or so. But the decline that would eventually lead to the disappearance of that body was already becoming evident in the very year that the old stalwarts Dabney and Girardeau died.

16 *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*; Richmond, Virginia, Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1923, p. 493.

17 *A Digest of the Acts*, p. 687.

Watering Down the Confessional Testimony

The Assembly, in 1898, gave a deliverance concerning what is meant by the phrase “the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture” in the second ordination vow taken by officebearers. The vow reads, in full: “Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture?” The question is so clear as to admit of no misinterpretation. The person taking the vow agrees to “receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of this Church.” He agrees to this because these documents contain the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture. The 1898 Assembly declared, however, that “the use of the words ‘system of doctrine’ in terms of subscription precludes the idea of necessary acceptance of every statement in the Standards by the subscriber but involves the acceptance of so much as is vital to the system as a whole.”¹⁸

In 1934 the Assembly said that “While the candidate for ordination receives and adopts the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms of the Church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scripture, he does not affirm that each doctrine of the confession is an integral part of that system, or an essential doctrine of Scripture.”¹⁹

From that point, it was all downhill.

Changes in the Doctrinal Standards

There were also a number of changes to the Standards themselves, especially in the period beginning in the late 1930s and continuing until the merger with the Northern Church in 1983. In 1939, for example, some changes were made in several paragraphs of the Confession of Faith that some might have taken as being purely cosmetic in nature. A close examination of these alterations, however, might lead one of suspicious tendencies to wonder if there was not more afoot.²⁰

18 *A Digest of the Acts*, p. 213.

19 *A Digest of the Acts*, p. 213.

20 Dr. Morton Smith goes over these changes in some detail in his book *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, published in 1973 by the Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, Faithful to the Scriptures and the

In 1942 two additional chapters were added to the Confession. One of these was entitled “Of the Holy Spirit”; the other, “Of the Gospel.” Dr. J.B. Green, professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics at Columbia Seminary in the period when these changes were enacted, wrote, specifically with reference to the chapter “Of the Gospel” (Chapter X):

The chapter on the Gospel is meant to make explicit what is only implicit in the Westminster Standards. The Westminster Assembly emphasized the love of God for the elect. This chapter was not designed to correct that emphasis but to supplement it. The fact of the love of God for all mankind underlies the whole statement of the Calvinistic creed. The revisers thought that this general love of God and His call to all men should have clear recognition.²¹

Dr. Morton Smith, in his assessment of these two chapters, notes that “The tone of these two chapters is certainly less Calvinistic than is the rest of the Confession of Faith.”²² This is certainly true; but we would go further and say that these sections seriously undermine the Calvinism of the Confession. What these two chapters did – especially the chapter “Of the Gospel”—was to gut the high Calvinism of the Confession and bring it into conformity, albeit confusingly, with the Arminian and modernistic views of those who wrote it and supported its inclusion in the Southern Church’s version of the Confession of Faith.

In 1953 an attempt was made to change the language of chapter twenty-four of the Confession, “Of Marriage and Divorce.” The proposed changes—which would have added to the grounds for divorce and remarriage—though approved by the Assembly, were rejected by the Presbyteries. Another attempt at change was made in 1956. This time the advocates of looser standards for divorce and remarriage tried to garner support for their position by pointing out that there

Reformed Faith. Cf. pp. 49-51.

21 Green, James Benjamin, *A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards*, Richmond, Virginia, John Knox Press, 1951, p. 71.

22 Smith, p. 53.

were those who believe that if one were to base his judgment “on the total Biblical teaching on marriage, as well as on the specific words of Jesus and Paul,” he would have to conclude “that marriage is indissoluble on any ground save death. In the light of this, the church can never bless the remarriage of divorced persons, so long as their first partners live.”²³

Now, of course, this was pointed out, not because the authors of the statement were advocating that the Confession of Faith be changed in the direction of prohibiting remarriage after divorce, but because they were interested in promoting their contention that “the Bible does not offer specific ethical guidance on this point, and that the spirit and total teachings of our Lord, as well as the practical realities of life and the demands of Christian justice brand the above view as literalistic and legalistic.” Their conviction was “that the doctrine of Christian forgiveness implies that repentance for past failure, and the Christian intention to make a new union succeed, are justifiable grounds for the remarriage of divorced persons.”²⁴ On this basis, then, they wanted to open the possibility of divorce and remarriage on the basis of grounds additional to the two set forth in the original chapter of the Confession. In 1959 the advocates of this change got their way when the PCUS basically opened up the possibility of divorce for any reason and the remarriage of divorced persons. The changes were regarded as so radical by some, however, that they declared to their Presbyteries that they were no longer in accord with the Confession as revised.²⁵

In 1961 the Assembly refused to change the language having to do with reprobation (though that term is not used) in chapter three of the Confession. The only reason they did so, however, was that the revision, in their words, would “destroy the unity of the creed without resolving the problem.” In other words, the doctrine of reprobation is so woven into the fabric of the Confession that it cannot be ripped out without destroying the unity of the document. This did not mean, however, that the Assembly was going to let the doctrine stand, or that

23 Quoted from the Minutes of the 1956 General Assembly by Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim*, p. 54.

24 Smith, p. 55.

25 Smith, pp. 56-57.

the majority of the Assembly believed the language of the Confession to be correct. In the report of the committee that recommended that no change be made in the language of the Confession itself, was the following statement:

That the General Assembly declare that in its judgment the doctrine of ordination to everlasting death as formulated in the Confession is not an adequate statement of Christian faith, because it implies, regardless of the intention of the authors, an eternal negative decree; and that the doctrine as stated in the Confession, is not essential to Reformed theology as is indicated by its absence in this vigorous form in such authentic Reformed creeds as the Scot's Confession of 1560, the Second Helvetic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism.²⁶

One of the members of the committee that brought this recommendation, which was adopted by the Assembly, was Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., who was a professor at Columbia Seminary when this writer was a student there and heard Professor Guthrie characterize the Canons of Dordt as “demonic.” This will, perhaps, give some sense of how concerned the committee was with “authentic Reformed creeds.”

In 1969 the previous actions of the Assemblies of 1886, 1888, 1889, and 1924—all of which affirmed that God created man directly and not through evolutionary process—were declared to be in error, and no longer representative of the mind of the church. “Neither Scripture, nor our Confession of Faith, nor our catechisms,” the Assembly declared, “teach the Creation of man by the direct and immediate acts of God so as to exclude the possibility of evolution as a scientific theory.” Not only was James Woodrow vindicated, but the Assembly went much further than even he would have been willing to go in embracing evolution.²⁷

26 *Minutes of the One-Hundred-First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, p. 139. The entire report begins on page 132, and continues through page 139.

27 Smith, pp. 58, 59ff.

Conclusion

In 1964, changes were made in the Book of Church Order to allow women to occupy all offices in the Church. Some would contend, however, that the denomination had already been thoroughly feminized long before this official action had been taken.

In 1971, in a paper entitled "The Person and work of the Holy Spirit, with Special Reference to the 'Baptism of the Holy Spirit,'" the Assembly declared that baptism with the Holy Spirit is not necessarily to be identified with conversion, but may be a later experience of God, "whereby believers are enabled to give expression to the Gospel through extraordinary praise, powerful witness, and boldness of action." They also allowed as how the baptism of the Spirit may be manifested in such things as speaking in tongues and prophecy. Thus, the Church of Thornwell, Dabney, and Palmer was rendered not only an Arminian, but a Pentecostal body, distinct from the Assemblies of God only in that its membership dressed better and drove nicer cars, and in that its preachers, unlike those of the Assemblies of God, denied most of the other cardinal doctrines of the Faith.

The Southern Presbyterian Church started her history as a strong contender for Reformed Truth and Presbyterian Order. Those distinctives were surrendered several years before her final demise. She is now as dead as the men who founded her. There has been, thus far, no worthy successor. ●

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Historical Introduction to Guido de Brès' Letter to King Philip II of Spain

Russell J. Dykstra

Behind the following letter is a story of spiritual courage and faithfulness under the real threat of death for the sake of the Reformed faith. It is the letter written by the Reformed preacher Guido de Brès to the Roman Catholic King Philip II of Spain in 1561. Philip was the sworn enemy of the Reformation in the Lowlands. The writer was a Reformed preacher with much God-given ability and commitment to the faith.

Guido de Brès was born in Mons, a city in the southern French-speaking region of the Lowlands, located in the present-day Belgian province of Hainaut. He was raised Roman Catholic, but before the age of twenty-five he became Protestant. The Lowlands, or Netherland provinces, were ruled by Emperor Charles V, and since the early 1520s he persecuted the Protestants in the Netherlands, putting many of them to death. To escape persecution, de Brès moved to England in 1548 and joined a Huguenot refugee church in London. There de Brès met and studied under continental reformers such as John à Lasco, Martin Bucer, and Peter Dathenus.

By 1552 the persecution became less severe in the Netherlands, allowing de Brès to return to his native land, where he became a pastor. There he wrote his first book, *The Staff of the Christian Faith*, an exposition of the faith over against the errors of Rome.

Meanwhile, Emperor Charles had decided to abdicate his throne in favor of his son, Philip. In 1556, Philip took the throne of Spain, and became ruler also of the Netherlands. A devoted Roman Catholic like his father, Philip was determined to stamp out the Reformation in the Netherlands. He wrote to the pope in 1566, "Rather than suffer the least damage to religion and the service of God, I would lose all my states and a hundred lives, if I had them: for I do not propose to be ruler of heretics."

Philip made good on his word. He impressed upon the pope the need for more bishops in the Netherlands. Fourteen more were added, beginning in 1559. He appointed his half sister, Margaret of Parma, regent in the Netherlands with the duty to exterminate the Protestants. She was aided by Cardinal Granvelle and the dreaded Inquisition. Thousands of Lowlanders were imprisoned, tortured, and killed for their faith.

In response to this increased danger, de Brès led his flock to Frankfurt, Germany. Because he recognized the importance for a preacher to know Greek and Hebrew, he began studying under Theodore Beza in Lausanne. He studied for almost two years in the Reformed Academy in Lausanne, and when Beza went to Geneva, de Brès followed him and studied there for another year.

Returning to the Netherlands in 1559, he became a pastor to a number of Walloon churches (French-speaking people in what is today Belgium) before settling in Doornik. There he married Catherine Ramon, and he began the work of writing a confession of faith for the churches in the region. Due to the continuing persecution, de Brès was forced to work very much undercover, and for a time his congregation maintained a low profile and worshiped undisturbed by the authorities. This changed in 1559, when some of the more radical members decided it was necessary to make known their growing presence in Doornik. This led to direct persecution of the believers in Doornik. As was often the case, the Protestants were accused of many crimes, including insurrection against the government.

Under these circumstances, de Brès finished his confession of faith in 1561. It is quite possible that other ministers assisted him, but the identity of the men and the extent of the help cannot be ascertained. In November of 1561, he wrote a letter to King Philip, who was lodging in a castle in Doornik. Shortly thereafter a bundle containing the confession of faith and this letter was cast over the gates of the castle.

This unsigned, handwritten letter de Brès wrote on behalf of the persecuted Protestants. The letter is a powerful and poignant petition for relief from persecution. It informed the king that they would prefer to speak with him face to face, but the unjust persecution prevented

this. It declared that, on the one hand, they were willing and ready to obey the king in all lawful matters. But it added this heartfelt confession, that rather than to deny the truth of God's Word, they would, as the letter stated, "offer our backs to stripes, our tongues to knives, the mouth to the muzzle, and the whole body to the fire." And they presented to the king their confession of faith, adding, "being ever ready and willing, if it be necessary, to seal it with our own blood."

These were no empty statements. All over the Netherlands believers were being tortured and put to death. In fact, less than six years later, de Brès and fellow minister de la Grange were arrested in Valenciennes, and shortly thereafter publicly hanged. Guido de Brès, only 44 years old, left a beloved wife and several children.

The confession of faith was adopted by the Reformed churches as early as 1566 in the provincial synod of Antwerp. Eventually, the great synod of Dordrecht adopted it in 1619, and it remains one of the three major creeds for Reformed churches in the Netherlands and around the world today.

Our attention is focused on the letter written to introduce the confession of faith to Philip II and the other magistrates. This letter was originally written in French in 1561. Both the confession and the letter were translated into Dutch and printed in 1562.

To date, an English translation of this letter has not been readily available. Marvin Kamps, a member of the Protestant Reformed Churches, took it upon himself to translate this letter from the Dutch. The source of the Dutch edition is J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Nederlandsche Belijdenis Geschriften*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij, Holland, 1940). We are grateful for the time and work that Mr. Kamps put into this translation. This is a significant contribution to the body of Dutch documents translated into English. It is of value to believers interested in the history and doctrines of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands.

In both the French and the Dutch printed editions, de Brès' letter is introduced with a poem. The documents give no indication of the poem's writer. The Reformers who had this letter and poem printed in the 1560s recognized that poetry can stir powerful emotions more effectively than prose. For the same reason, we also desired to retain

the poem. Thus, after Marvin Kamps translated the Dutch poem into English prose, we asked Sue Looyenga, a teacher in Covenant Christian High School in Grand Rapids, MI, to set the prose into poetic verse. This she did, masterfully capturing the feeling that the original poem intended. We thank her also for this contribution.

Guido De Brès' Letter to Philip II of Spain Appended to the Belgic Confession,

translated by Marvin Kamps

Through common agreement composed by believers that are scattered about throughout the Netherlands, who desire to live according to the sovereignty of The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be ready always to give an
an answer to every man
that asketh you a
reason of the hope
that is in you.

I Peter 3

Published in the year of the Lord
Jesus Christ: 1562.

*E'er sentence is pronounced by any man,
Whether in civil or in criminal case,
Certainly Judges wish to understand
That issue's source on which they judgment place.*

*This being true, a judge in this position
Would grant both parties of examination
An equal hearing, and by this audition,
Base his decision—whether right or wrong—upon investigation.
We, then, Your Majesty, as castaways
Forbidden by our enemies e'en public speech,
Call on th'abounding goodness that men praise
In thee, and private audience beseech.
When you, who Judges are, judge only as flesh is inclined—
With prejudice—surely wisdom to you is denied.
Only in one way can we all true justice find:
That you consider our own confession e'er you once decide.
For of a certainty you shall in this way see
That unjust condemnation oft' has fallen on such men as we.*

*From the Believers that dwell in the Netherlands,
Who desire to live according to the Reformation of
The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,
To the invincible King Philip, her ruling Lord:*

If it were granted to us, O most gracious Lord,¹ to present ourselves before your Majesty, in order that we may demonstrate our innocence concerning the crimes with which we are charged, and to demonstrate the righteousness of our cause: we would not seek this secret means in order to make known to you the bitter laments of your people by means of a silent petition or a written confession. We do so in this manner only because our enemies have filled your ears with so many false complaints and reports that we were not only prevented to appear before your face personally, but also chased out of your lands, murdered, and burned in whatever place we were found. At the very least, most gracious Lord, bestow to us in the name of God the privilege that no man may deny even beasts, namely, to permit our cries of complaint to reach your ears as it were from afar; so that, if having heard us, Your Majesty should judge us guilty, let the fires then be

1 In the French copy of the letter King Philip is addressed throughout “Sire,” but the Dutch consistently has, “*genadichste Heere*.”

increased in number and let the pains and torments be multiplied in thy kingdom. On the contrary, if our innocence is revealed to you, let our innocence be recognized as a support and a refuge against the violence of our enemies.

For alas, most gracious Lord, if men need only charge others with evil and thereby every means of protection be denied the accused, who will be found righteous? Whose innocence among all the people will be established? We are, they say, disobedient insurrectionists desiring nothing other than to destroy all political and civil rule and to introduce into the world confusion and disorder. Besides they claim that we desire not only to liberate ourselves from your rule and power but also to rip the scepter from your hands. O the crimes alleged, which are unworthy of our confession, unworthy of a Christian man, unworthy of the common name of humanity; worthy only that the ancient proverb of the tyrants be presented anew: “The Christians to the beasts.”

However, it is not enough merely to accuse; everything lies in the proof. The prophets, the apostles, and even those of the early churches of Jesus Christ were troubled, yea, according to the external viewpoint and carnal judgment of men, they were oppressed with similar slanders. But even as they had openly testified and protested in their time, so also do we protest and testify now before God and His angels that we desire nothing higher than to live according to the purity of our consciences in obedience under the authorities, to serve God and to reform ourselves according to His Word and holy commandments.

Besides these hidden testimonies of our consciences, those who hold office and pass sentence and judgment in legal proceedings would be good witnesses that they never observed anything in us that leaned towards disobedience, nor did they discover in us the resolve in any way to militate against your Majesty, nor did they find anything that would disturb the common peace. Rather, they found that in our communal assemblies we pray for the kings and princes of the earth and in particular for you, O most gracious Lord, and for those whom you have authorized in the regime and ruling offices of the regions and countries of your domain. For we have been taught not only by God’s Word but also through the constant instruction of our preachers that the kings, princes, and authorities are appointed

by the ordinance of God. Besides, we have been taught that he that resists the magistrates resists the ordinance of God and will receive damnation. We acknowledge and maintain that by the eternal wisdom of God the kings rule and the princes determine justice.

Briefly stated, we believe that they have their office not through injustice² or despotism, but by God's own appointment. In order to demonstrate that this is not merely the word of our lips but that it is a conviction most deeply impressed and imprinted upon our hearts, we ask: who has ever been found among us who has refused you, most gracious Lord, the tribute or tax required of him? On the contrary, obedience to pay was as quickly granted as the command was given. What cache of weapons, what conspiracy was ever uncovered, even when we had been subjected to such cruel pains and torment by those who have clothed themselves in your name and power to commit every cruelty against us? These torments were so excruciating that it was enough to vex the patience of the most benevolent and meekest persons and to change their dispositions to wrath and despair. However, we thank our God that the blood of our brothers that was shed for our cause—or rather, for the cause of Jesus Christ and the witness to the truth—cries out on our behalf. For truly all the banishments, imprisonments, racks, tortures, and other innumerable oppressions testify clearly that our desire and conviction is not carnal, since, according to the flesh, we could have had it much more comfortable if we had not taken a stand for these doctrines.

However, since we had the fear of God before our eyes and thus dreading the threat of Jesus Christ, who says that He will deny us before God His Father, should we deny Him before men: we offer our backs to the whip's lash, our tongues to the knives, the mouth to the muzzle, and the whole body to the flames. For we know that whoever will follow Christ must take up his cross and deny himself. Never would a well-disciplined soul, that is, one who is not spiritually blind or robbed of his senses, contemplate the upheaval of forsaking one's land, one's relatives, and one's friends, in order to be able to live in peace and tranquility. Never would a spiritually sound person purpose to suffer for the gospel's sake by seeking to remove the king's crown

2 Or *wrongdoing*. The French has *usurpation*.

or by resolving to oppose him by means of deceit, for in the gospel we read: give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

Rather these believers, while offering and abandoning their bodies and their goods to the King, humbly supplicate his Majesty that it may be granted them to render obedience to God in what He requires. For we have not the right nor may we refuse to obey Him, because He hath made us and purchased us for Himself through the payment of the most dear price of infinite worth.

It is also not necessary that you should feel obligated to listen to the views of our enemies. They grievously abuse your goodness and patience by claiming that we do not openly oppose you as King only because we are so few in number. They allege also that each one of us in his heart is disobedient and rebellious, only waiting for the majority of the people to bring his fanaticism into action causing him to pounce violently upon you. For let them twist and pervert the facts as much as they will, we assure you, most gracious Lord, that in your Netherlands there are more than one hundred thousand men maintaining and following the religion, the confession of which we now deliver to you. Nevertheless, in none of these persons was ever seen any preparation for revolt. Indeed, never a word was heard from these persons that would lead to insurrection.

We have spoken, most gracious Lord, of the great number of our brothers not to cause your minor officers and servants any fear or terror, but rather to refute the slanders of those who through lies could make those who do not envy us to do so.³ Besides, we have thus spoken to move you to pity. For sadly, if you stretch forth your powerful hand to wash it in the blood of so many people, before God, what devastation will it work in your subjects, what wounds in your people, what weeping, what lament, what groaning by the women, by the children, and by family and friends? Who shall be able to behold with eyes dry and not bathed in tears, many honorable citizens, loved by all and hated by none, delivered over to dark and dreadful imprisonments, endure the oppressions and tortures ending in the most shameful torments and death more cruel and barbaric than were ever invented by the heathen and by ungodly tyrants? while their wives, if they are

3 French: *...make us odious.*

able to flee, wander about in foreign countries, begging for bread from door to door with their little children clinging to their neck?

O most gracious Lord, may it not be that posterity describes your reign as bloody and cruel. May no one say that the honor of your ancestors, the greatness of your father, and your own virtues and piety were darkened by a cruelty, a cruelty I say, natural to the beasts but unworthy of man. It would be a cruelty contradicting what a prince and ruler should be, whose greatness and true piety are expressed especially by kindness and compassion—the genuine marks of distinction between a true king and a tyrant.

As regards the persecution that we endure not only as enemies of your crown and of the common good, but also as enemies of God and of His church, we humbly petition you carefully to judge this matter according to our confession of faith that we present to you being ever ready and willing, if it be necessary, to seal it with our own blood. Through this confession, as we hope, you will acknowledge that we are unjustly vilified as schismatics or as disturbers of the unity of society, as disobedient and as heretics, since we are committed to and confess not only the most fundamental points of the Christian faith that are contained in the symbols of the common faith but also the whole doctrine revealed by Jesus Christ for a life of righteousness and salvation. This doctrine was preached by the evangelists and apostles, sealed in the blood of so many martyrs, preserved purely and wholly in the early church; until it was corrupted through the ignorance, greed, and the lust for praise of the preachers, through human discoveries and human institutions contrary to the purity of the gospel.

Our opponents shamelessly deny that this gospel is the power of God unto salvation and reject all those who believe it, when they condemn and murder us because we do not receive what is not found in it. Nor are they innocent of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit when they assert that the entire treasure of the wisdom of God and the means abundantly sufficient to our salvation are not contained and present in the Old and New Testaments. Rather they claim that their inventions are necessary; that we are accursed and not worthy of the natural fellowship among men, but only worthy to be put to death in the body and pressed down in our souls into the abyss of hell. While

ignoring the truth, our enemies hold their inventions to be of equal or even of higher esteem and worth than the gospel.

The weakness of our flesh staggers before these words, terrified by the threats of those who have the power to reduce our bodies to ashes. But on the other hand, we hear what the apostle says: “Though an angel should descend from heaven and preach to us something other than that gospel you have received, he is accursed.” We hear Saint John, who concludes his prophecy with these words: “For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book; if anyone adds to them, God will lay upon him the plagues that are written in this book.” Briefly stated, we see that we are commanded to follow God’s Word alone and not whatever seems right to us; for we are forbidden to add to or to detract from the holy commandments of the great God. Jesus Christ tells us that He has given to us all that which He had heard from His Father; and if He were silent (because of the weakness of the apostles) about something that He had promised to reveal to us through the Holy Spirit whom He would send to us, we are assured (because He is the Truth itself) that He has kept that promise. The promised mysteries were made known and are contained in the Gospels and the writings of the apostles, after the aforesaid promise was made and the Holy Spirit was poured out. It appears by this fact, that those individuals misuse this passage of Scripture, who by this word “mysteries” understand, (something the apostles did not and could not endure) their own ceremonies and useless superstitions, contrary to God’s Word.

We merely present it, even though their errors would be easy to demonstrate by means of the testimony of Scripture (but we are admonished to use the means and brevity in a letter that is appropriate), for we fear to be bothersome to your Majesty. We humbly petition you, in the very Name of the one who has established and preserved you in your kingdom, that you do not permit those in authority who are overcome by greed, lust for honor and praise of men, and other evil inclinations, to use your arm, authority, and power to satisfy their lusts, satiating and filling it with the blood of your subjects who are praised for their genuine zeal for the fear of God and His service. For they would persecute us on the grounds of the evil charge that we are

guilty of insurrection, desertion, and other offenses, with which they inflame you against us.

However, most gracious Lord, consider, has it not always been true that the world hated the light and opposed the truth; and that he who speaks this word of truth faithfully is considered guilty of insurrection, because people incite others to oppose him? On the contrary, one must attribute the tumult and offense to the one who has been the implacable enemy of God and men, namely the Devil, who, not willing to lose his kingdom, which exists in idolatry, the false worship of God, whoredom, and other innumerable errors forbidden by the gospel, raises tumult and opposition everywhere in order to resist the progress of the gospel. Add to that the ingratitude of the world, which, instead of thankfully receiving the Word of her Master, her shepherds, and her God, causes her to oppose the same because of, among other reasons that could be mentioned, the long time that she has lived in unfaithfulness and error. The world of unbelief willfully resists, through prescription of the spirit of the ages, Him who has made the world and the ages and for which all thanks is due.

It belongs to you, most gracious Lord, it belongs to you to have knowledge of these matters in order that you may oppose the errors, no matter how intractable, being deeply rooted in the ages. It belongs to you to protect the innocence of those who have been more oppressed than heard in their just cause. In this manner, the Lord will bless and preserve you. The Lord lift up His face and cause it to shine upon you, protect and maintain you in all prosperity. Amen.

SOME TEXTS

Of the New Testament, that admonish every believer
to confess his faith before the world.

Matthew 10

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

Mark 8 and Luke 9

Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

I Peter 3

Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

Romans 10

With the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

II Timothy 2

If we deny him, he also will deny us.

Process Theology: Philosophical Idolatry

Daniel Holstege

Introduction

Process theology is philosophical *idolatry*. There may be no equivocation concerning this. This must be the conviction of everyone who believes in the truth of biblical Christianity. This must certainly be the conviction of every Reformed believer. We may not take a purely intellectual or indifferent attitude toward process theology. It is *idolatry*, which sets up a different God than the God of Scripture. When process theology is weighed in the scale of biblical truth, it is found entirely wanting and therefore must be entirely rejected. Process theology has dreamed up a God of its own making, an idol god that is no God at all. The god of process theology is merely a necessary component of a complex philosophy. We will see that he is weak and changeable; he is not all-powerful but shares his power with the world. It is difficult to imagine how such a God could be worshiped. The process god is more like an equal to the world than its sovereign Creator. Therefore process theology must be rejected as an idolatrous philosophy and damnable false religion.

Process theology rejects all the traditional, biblical teachings concerning God. To such an extent is this true, that when process theologians use the word “God” they mean something entirely different from what the traditional believer means. Nothing can be taken for granted. Every idea you have of God must be thrown out. God is not transcendent. He did not create all things out of nothing. He is not outside time. He is not outside space. He is not all-powerful. He is not independent and self-sufficient. Rather, God is *in* the world and was forever *with* the world. He *becomes*, *grows*, and *develops* with that world. He *suffers* with that world and experiences *joy* with it. These experiences contribute to his very life and being. They make him who he is. Thus, the god of process theology is not so different from the idol gods of the ancient pagans. Like them, he too lives

inside the universe and is affected by it. Like them, he too does not have sovereign control over the universe. Christians today must reject process theology as a modern form of pagan idolatry. It is idolatry clothed in modern philosophical garb. Let us not be enticed by Satan's new approach. Let us recognize process theology for the wickedness that it is.

In this paper I will first explain what process theology is and then move on to give my evaluation and criticism. I will first briefly treat the historical origins of process theology and look at the philosophy from whence it came. Then I will discuss the main teachings of process theology itself, after which I will show why it must be rejected. In this way I will demonstrate that process theology is a modern form of philosophical idolatry.

Historical Origins

Spiritual origin

The historical origin of process theology is ultimately the unbelieving heart of man. The heart of unbelieving man is the source from which all false theologies and religions arise. This is according to the principle laid down in Romans 1:

When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image...who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator (vv. 21-25).

In Paul's day this referred to the pagan idolatry of Greece and Rome. The Greeks and Romans dreamed up myriads of gods from their own vain imaginations. They looked at creatures such as the ocean, sky, and forest and imagined that these must be embodiments of deity. They looked at themselves and created gods after their own image. And then they worshiped these creatures rather than the Creator. This may seem primitive and silly, but this is exactly what process theology has done. The God of process theology arises from the same unbelieving imagination, albeit in a modern mind. Like their ancient predecessors,

process theologians have looked at the creation and imagined their god from what they found there. As Norman Geisler has remarked, process theology “is a classic error of creating God in man’s own image, which image is in turn extrapolated from an organismic model of nature.”¹ The god of process theology has not created the world, but he is *in* the world. This too is creature worship.

Alfred North Whitehead

More specifically, the historical origin of process theology is the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947).² Whitehead was an English philosopher who began his career studying mathematics and the philosophy of nature. He was an agnostic with regard to belief in God. But in 1924 he came to Harvard University in the United States and began to develop his “philosophy of organism,” which is now known as “process philosophy.” This led him to assert the existence of God as a necessary component of his organismic view of the world and reality. The greatest of his works in this regard is *Process and Reality* (1929), which is his “*magnum opus*, central to an understanding of Whitehead’s mature metaphysical position.”³ In this dense and complicated work, Whitehead lays out his view of reality as an ongoing process of becoming. His theological views come out here as well. God is part of the ongoing process of reality, according to Whitehead. In his mind, God may not be “treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is

1 Norman Geisler, “Process Theology,” *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, Ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 280.

2 David Ray Griffin, “Process Theology,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Ed. Erwin Fahlbusch, et. al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 364-369.

3 Donald W. Sherburne, ed., *A Key to Whitehead’s Process and Reality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 1. Most of my references to Whitehead’s thought will be from this book. Whitehead’s *Process and Reality* is highly dense, unorganized, and difficult to understand. But this book by Sherburne intends to give access to *Process and Reality* by organizing the main topics and summarizing them using Whitehead’s own words.

their chief exemplification.”⁴ God, too, is subject to metaphysical principles. In fact, he exemplifies them more than any other.

But Whitehead’s philosophy was largely ignored for more than three decades after he began to formulate it.⁵ The reason for this was that philosophy at that time was anti-metaphysical and materialistic, whereas Whitehead’s philosophy was metaphysical, God-affirming, and organismic. At any rate, in the 1960s “a spate of books on Whitehead’s philosophy inaugurated a period of greater interest.”⁶ The journal *Process Studies* and the Center for Process Studies in Claremont, California were born in the early 1970s to promote the Whiteheadian philosophy. But the great influence of Whitehead’s philosophy on *theology* was due to a man named Charles Hartshorne.

Charles Hartshorne

Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000) was the son of a Pennsylvania minister who studied under Alfred Whitehead at Harvard in the 1920s. Although the son of a Christian minister, Hartshorne was taught to place his trust in philosophical reasoning over biblical revelation. He pursued philosophy in the halls of American academia and became a distinguished thinker in the Whiteheadian school.⁷ According to Alan Gragg, Hartshorne’s philosophy is “strikingly similar and most profoundly indebted to that of A. N. Whitehead.” Gragg goes on to remark that “it is well-nigh impossible to imagine Hartshorne apart from Whitehead.”⁸ The clearest evidence of Hartshorne’s dependence on Whitehead is his unreserved acceptance of the idea that the universe is essentially *becoming*. Hartshorne agrees with Whitehead that even God “is ceaselessly changing in a dynamic process of creative advance that will never end.”⁹

It was Hartshorne who focused especially on the theological side

4 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 179.

5 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, p. 363.

6 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, p. 363.

7 Alan Gragg, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind: Charles Hartshorne*, Ed. Bob E. Patterson (Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1973), p. 11ff.

8 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 13.

9 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 16.

of process philosophy and thereby developed what has come to be called “process theology.” Because of his special attention on God, Gragg states that Hartshorne “deserves the title ‘the God-intoxicated philosopher’ as much as any thinker since Spinoza.... In fact, Hartshorne explicitly states that, on the most fundamental level, the question of God is the *sole* question of metaphysics.”¹⁰ For that reason, Hartshorne’s greatest influence has been on American theology, not philosophy. Gragg states that Hartshorne’s process theology is “one of the most creative and viable options on the American scene.”¹¹ Indeed, process theology *has* found great acceptance in the spheres of liberal Christianity. Some prominent contemporary process theologians include John B. Cobb, Jr., David Ray Griffin, and Norman Pittenger, among others.¹²

Process Philosophy

Since process theology is rooted firmly in process philosophy, we must first have a general understanding of the philosophy. Process philosophy is a metaphysical philosophy. It is an attempt to explain the most fundamental realities of the universe, the realities that form the basis for all things. In this regard it is a minority in twentieth century philosophy, because metaphysics was largely given up as a hopeless endeavor. Nevertheless, Alfred Whitehead was convinced of the possibility of metaphysics. In his philosophy he attempted to explain the basic realities of the universe. He called it the “philosophy of organism.” But the fundamental notion of his philosophy was *process*. Whitehead taught that the most basic units of reality are not static, unchanging particles, but instances of experience. These occa-

10 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 73.

11 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 14. Alan Gragg wrote this book in the early 1970s, when process thought was beginning to gain a greater following. The theological and religious side of it was also becoming more influential, so that Gragg could remark that it was one of the most “viable options on the American scene.”

12 Interestingly, process theology has been popular among a number of Jewish Rabbi theologians, especially those of “Conservative Judaism,” a modern form of Judaism with varying ideas about the nature of God.

sions of experience are the most basic building blocks of the universe. Thus Whitehead's system is a philosophy of process. It is a philosophy that views all of reality as fundamentally in a process of becoming.

Whitehead termed these basic units of reality "actual entities." He describes them in *Process and Reality* as follows,

'Actual entities'—also termed 'actual occasions'—are the final real things of which the world is made up. There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space . . . and these actual entities are drops of experience, complex and interdependent.¹³

The term "actual entity" means "most basic thing" or "most real thing." The other terms Whitehead uses, such as "occasion," "throb of experience," "process of feeling," and others, point out that these most basic things are not pieces of matter, but instances of experience. They are occasions, events, experiences. But even though actual entities are the most basic things in the universe, they are still "complex and interdependent" according to Whitehead. These "occasions" are complex, inasmuch as they are constituted by their many "feelings" or "prehensions."¹⁴ Each actual entity appropriates data from other actual entities, which data becomes part of the "real internal constitution" of the actual entity.¹⁵ In this way, the most basic things in the universe are instances of becoming. They are instances in which information is absorbed from one entity into another. They are individual occasions that are part of the universal, never-ending process of becoming.

If actual entities are the most basic things in the universe, what

13 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay on Cosmology, Corrected Edition* (New York: The Free Press, A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., 1978), p. 18.

14 A "feeling" or "prehension" is a "process of appropriation of a particular element." They are "activities" which make up each actual entity. They may be "positive," in that they *appropriate* something from another actual entity; or "negative," in that they *exclude* something from another actual entity. The activity of prehension is what makes an actual entity what it is: it is a prehending thing (Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 8).

15 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 9.

are the things we *experience* in our everyday life? Whitehead calls these things “nexūs” (plural of “nexus”) or “societies.”¹⁶ A nexus is a “macrocosmic entity” made up of many “microcosmic” actual entities. Nexūs are things like men, trees, houses, and all objects in our everyday experience. A nexus is a group of actual entities that have something in common, some “particular fact of togetherness.”¹⁷ Most nexūs are also “societies.” A society is a nexus with “social order.” The actual entities of a society perpetuate their togetherness so that, for example, a tree remains a tree from moment to moment. But this area of process philosophy is not our focus.

One fairly important concept to understand is Whitehead’s notion of “satisfaction.” As we have seen, actual entities are instances of experience and becoming. Satisfaction, then, is the culmination of the experience, attained when the actual entity reaches the point to which it aims. It is “the attainment of the private ideal which is the final cause” of the becoming. “The attainment of a peculiar definiteness is the final cause which animates a particular process; and its attainment halts its process.”¹⁸ In other words, an actual entity has a certain goal that it wants to reach. That goal urges it into action, so to speak, until it is achieved. Once an actual entity is “satisfied,” its process of becoming ends, making it “objectively immortal” and the data for a future process of becoming.¹⁹

In Whitehead’s philosophy, God contributes the “subjective aim” of every process of becoming. “Subjective aim concerns the *direction* to be taken” in the process of becoming. Every process of becoming “faces the question of what sort of entity it will make itself.”²⁰ God contributes the subjective aim in order to influence each process to go a certain way. God tries to accomplish what he desires for his *own* maximum satisfaction:

God offers for each actual entity, as its subjective aim, a vision of what that entity might become. This subjective aim constitutes the ideal for

16 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 230.

17 Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 20.

18 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 70.

19 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 14.

20 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 28.

growth on the part of each actual entity that would result in maximum ordered complexity in the world were it realized in fact—this is God’s mode of operation in the world, designed to produce the kind of world that, physically prehended by his consequent nature, would result in maximum intensity of satisfaction for him.²¹

According to this view, God does not compel or coerce actual entities to become what he wants, but he “lures” them in the direction he wants. He does not sovereignly control all things, but he exerts a certain influence on them. As Griffin puts it, “The divine power... is necessarily persuasive; it could not be coercive in the sense of unilaterally determining what happens in the world.... God’s power is misconstrued if it is thought to be all-controlling power.”²² God puts the bait out there, so to speak, to entice actual entities. This is his mode of working in the world. In this way he tries to achieve a universe that would be the “maximum intensity of satisfaction for him.” He seeks the greatest “intensity of harmonious feeling in the world.”²³

Process Theology

It is not really possible to draw a sharp distinction between process philosophy and process theology, because they are basically the same. The best way to describe the relationship is probably to say that process theology is based on the philosophy. But really process theology is just an elucidation of the theological side of the philosophy. By “process theology” I refer to the historical, theological movement given impetus by Charles Hartshorne in the mid-twentieth century. We turn now to the main tenets of this philosophical theology.

Naturalistic theism

Process theology teaches “naturalistic theism” as opposed to “supernatural theism.” In agreement with Alfred N. Whitehead, process theologians insist that the metaphysical principles involved in this world apply also to God.

21 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 244.

22 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, pp. 365-366.

23 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 28.

Included in these metaphysical principles [according to David Ray Griffin] are the basic causal principles involved in the causal relations between actual entities, including God and other actual entities—which is why divine causality in the world is always an exemplification of, never an interruption of, these principles.²⁴

Griffin's claim is that the principles that govern the inherent process of actual entities apply to God also. These principles are fundamental to *all* realities, including God himself. In other words, God himself is subject to the same natural laws and principles that govern the entire universe. As Whitehead put it, God may not be "treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification."²⁵ Process philosophers and theologians are adamant about this point. For them, any notion of God that does not harmonize with their metaphysical principles must be rejected on the charge of "incoherence." Really their whole project is an attempt to form a rationally and scientifically "coherent" understanding of "God." But by subjecting God to metaphysical principles they have constructed a naturalistic god, a god who does not transcend the "laws of nature" but "exemplifies" them. Indeed, they call God the *chief* exemplification of metaphysical principles.

According to the doctrine of naturalistic theism, then, God is not *supernatural* so that he transcends the universe, but he is a *natural* part of the universe. He is not ontologically elevated above the world, but he is *in* the world and *intrinsic* to it. Thus, this view is known as "panentheism." This term means literally "all in God." All things are in God and he is in them. According to Alan Gragg, Charles Hartshorne frequently used the term "panentheism" to describe his view. Gragg goes on to say that "Hartshorne's position is that literally everything exists in God and that God, like the universe, has no

24 David Ray Griffin, "Process Theology and the Christian Good News: A Response to Classical Free Will Theism," *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, Ed. John B. Cobb, Jr. and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), p. 6.

25 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 179.

external environment.”²⁶ Griffin puts it this way: “The term ‘panentheism’ emphasizes the idea that the existence of a world is internal to God—that it belongs to the very nature of God to be in relation to a world. What exists necessarily is not simply God but God-with-a-world.”²⁷ Thus, process theology rejects the traditional teaching that God transcends this world and is wholly different from it. But it also rejects the notion that God and the world are identical (pantheism). God is neither of these. He is *in* all things.

The analogy employed by Hartshorne to illustrate the relation between God and the world was that of the mind-body relationship in human beings: “Stated precisely, the analogy is that God is to the world as the human mind is to the human body. Or, the world is God’s body, and God is the world’s mind or soul.”²⁸ Just as the soul and body interpenetrate one another, so also God and the world interpenetrate each other. God is able to exert immediate influence on all things in the universe even as the human mind is able to influence all parts of the body. The analogy, like all analogies, can be pressed only so far. Its main point is to illustrate that God is *in* the universe and *united* to it and yet not *identical* with it.

Since God is *in* the world it is evident that He is also *in* space and time. Space and time are perhaps the most fundamental realities in the created universe. All things in the universe exist in space and time. According to process theology, God also exists within the parameters of space and time. The result is that the universe had no beginning and will have no end:

Hartshorne maintains that there is no eternity outside or above the temporal process. He asks man to live without eternity in any traditional sense and to be content with the everlasting-ness of temporal change.... the world, just as God, *never had a real beginning and will never have a final end* (my italics).²⁹

26 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 91.

27 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, pp. 365-367.

28 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 93.

29 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, pp. 17-18.

Process theologians do accept the claim of modern science that the universe as we know it began with a bang some ten to twenty billion years ago. For them, that was not the origin of all things. The most fundamental realities are not protons, neutrons, and electrons. More fundamental still are the actual entities that lie beyond these particles. Even if the minutest *observable* particles originated ten to twenty billion years ago, there were still more basic entities that existed before that time, and that have always existed. Thus, Griffin states that naturalistic theism “does not entail [the belief] that our particular universe, which evidently has existed for only ten to twenty billion years, exists naturally, but only that some world or other – some plurality of finite actualities – always exists.”³⁰ The particular universe (or “cosmic epoch”) in which we live has not always existed. But “some world or other” has always existed and will always exist. Before our current cosmic epoch there were “no molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, or photons, not even any quarks [theoretical subatomic particles, DJH]. There was a multiplicity of finite actualities... embodying no principles other than the purely metaphysical principles, which are instantiated in every world....”³¹ It was a time of chaos, and God existed with that chaos of undefined, finite actualities “embodying no principles” except “purely metaphysical” ones. He existed eternally (in the sense of “forever in one direction”) with that chaos and very gradually brought into being the universe as we know it. The bottom line in this regard is that God is not outside space and time, but he is within them. He always existed with the world, and together their existence will continue forever.

Dipolar theism

Process theology is often referred to as “dipolar” or “bipolar” theism because it posits a twofold nature in God. Moreover, there are two senses in which process thinkers have posited this twofold nature. They have spoken of God’s “primordial” and “consequent” natures, and they have spoken of his “abstract” and “concrete” natures. Whitehead and Hartshorne held to both, though Whitehead emphasized

30 Griffin, “PT,” *Adequate God*, p. 6.

31 Griffin, “PT,” *Adequate God*, p. 30.

the former, and Hartshorne the latter.³² This dipolar view of God is an essential concomitant of panentheism. Both traditional theism and pantheism are monopolar. They both assert that God has one mode of being: He is either ontologically *different* from the world or the *same* as the world. But panentheism asserts that God is different *and* the same; he *affects* the world and *is affected* by it. Thus, Gragg's statement seems accurate when he says, "One will always misunderstand Hartshorne's doctrine of God as long as he tries to conceive of God's being as simple. His view is that the nature of God is irreducibly complex."³³

First of all, God's nature is said to be "primordial" and "consequent." This was the emphasis of Whitehead. Whitehead considered God's primordial nature to be basically that by which he *lures* actual entities to become what is most satisfying to him. God is "the lure for feeling, the eternal urge of desire."³⁴ The primordial nature of God is conceptual, containing the "absolute wealth of potentiality."³⁵ It contains all the potential directions in which the world might go in conceptual form. God places these potentialities before the actual entities of the universe and tries to persuade them to follow his lead. But as primordial, God is not yet fully real. He lacks the actuality of all the potentialities within him and lacks consciousness.³⁶ But these things are achieved in his "consequent" nature, by which he prehends the physical world. He takes it into himself, with the result that "there is a reaction of the world on God."³⁷ In his consequent nature, God is affected by the world and he evolves with it: "God's consequent nature grows with the growth of the world."³⁸ In this sense, then, God himself is *in process*. He does not remain the same, but he *becomes* and *evolves* with the world and in response to the world.

In the second place, God's nature is said to be "abstract" and

32 Griffin, "PT," *Adequate God*, p. 6.

33 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 83.

34 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 180.

35 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 179.

36 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 179.

37 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 181.

38 Sherburne, *Key to Whitehead*, p. 227.

“concrete.” This was particularly the emphasis of Charles Hartshorne. With this distinction Hartshorne tried to balance a “both/and” conception of God. In his abstract nature God is absolute, infinite, immutable, impassable, and creative.³⁹ But this nature of God is merely an abstraction from God’s concrete nature. It is a description of God’s existence, which is itself “not a fact but rather the principle of possibility of all facts.”⁴⁰ Thus, God’s abstract nature is not really real, but a mere abstraction from God’s concrete nature, which is the main thing. In his concrete nature God is relative, finite, changeable, passable, and created, i.e., the opposite of what he is in his abstract pole.⁴¹ In this pole God interacts with the world and is affected by it. He changes and suffers; he depends on the world and is created by it. Hartshorne claimed that one must maintain both of these poles in God. He said that monopolar theisms have erred by asserting one of the two poles and rejecting the other.⁴² Both poles must be maintained, even though they are opposites. Hartshorne claimed that this is not a contradiction but two different *aspects* of God, both of which are necessary. But one cannot escape the charge of teaching flat contradiction simply by claiming to teach two aspects. God cannot be finite and infinite. Those are opposites that cannot both exist at the same time in the same being. That is a flat contradiction, and it demonstrates the absurdity of process theology.

Creation

Process theology rejects the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and asserts a certain creation out of chaos.⁴³ The traditional view of God invariably includes the doctrine of creation out of nothing. As the Bible states in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” God created the heavens and earth out of nothing.

39 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, p. 365; Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 84.

40 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 84.

41 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 84.

42 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, pp. 84-85.

43 John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 65.

He created something when there was nothing (except himself). But process theology denies this, asserting rather that God and the world always co-existed. There was never a time when one of them did not exist with the other. However, before our cosmic epoch, “the world” was nothing but a chaotic “plurality of finite actualities,” as Griffin describes it.⁴⁴ Process theologians liken this primitive chaos to the account of Genesis 1:2, which states that the earth was “without form and void.” In that primitive world there were no *observable* things, but there *were* disordered actual entities. Creation, in process theology, is the gradual evolution of those disordered actual entities into the world as we know it over the course of billions of years.

God’s role in creation is purely *persuasive*. We noticed this already in connection with Whitehead’s notion of “subjective aim.” The “subjective aim,” according to Whitehead, is the ideal or “vision for growth” that God places before actual entities. It is the lure by which God entices an actual entity to follow a certain path of becoming. After he establishes the initial aim, the actual entity may either choose it and follow God’s proffered path, or reject it and follow some other path of becoming. In the words of Cobb and Griffin:

[The] initial aim does not automatically become the subject’s own aim. Rather, this “subjective aim” is a product of its own decision. The subject may choose to actualize the initial aim; but it may also choose from among the other real possibilities open to it, given its context. In other words, God seeks to persuade each occasion toward that possibility for its own existence which would be best for it; but God cannot control the finite occasion’s self-actualization.⁴⁵

This is God’s *modus operandi* in the world, according to process theology. Therefore, it is also his mode in creating. Since his mode of action is purely persuasive, it is clear that the universe as we know it could not have been created in a moment. It took billions of years for God to lure the primitive chaos into the complex cosmos that exists today. However, in the earliest moments of our particular universe,

44 Griffin, “PT,” *Adequate God*, p. 6.

45 Cobb and Griffin, *PT: Intro*, p. 53.

God's persuasive power produced "quasi-coercive effects,"⁴⁶ i.e., effects that *seem* to have been caused by an act of omnipotent power. The explanation for effects that are quasi-coercive is that at the beginning of our cosmic epoch God supposedly lured the chaos into a state of great complexity. But from that point on, "divine persuasion would never again, as long as this world exists, be able to guarantee quasi-coercive results."⁴⁷ From that point on, God's power was limited by the freedom of the more complex actualities he had brought about.

With this view of creation, process theologians claim to overcome the problems of atheistic Darwinism, which claims that evolution takes place purely from "the combined effect of random variations and natural selection."⁴⁸ The entire process in which one species evolves into another takes place through very tiny steps – a little change here, a slight alteration there – which take place randomly. Darwinians claim that this whole process is "explainable without appeal to any nonlocal influence [i.e., God, DJH]."⁴⁹ But process theologians point out that this position involves insurmountable difficulties. The main difficulty is that it cannot account for significant jumps in the evolutionary process. Our experience of the world, according to process theologians, tells us that such jumps must occur if evolution is to be possible. We do not observe a range of development between one species and another. Rather, we observe distinct species. Thus, if evolution is true, there must have been periods of accelerated development in which one species made a significant jump into another.

Darwinism does not allow for such jumps in evolutionary process, but process theology does. According to Griffin,

given the idea that God proffers initial aims to creatures, which consist of more or less novel possible forms for them to actualize, we can think of the saltations [significant jumps, DJH] as neither divinely determined nor wholly accidental but as self-determined responses to felt possibilities...process theology, while insisting that God works

46 Griffin, "PT," *Adequate God*, p. 30.

47 Griffin, "PT," *Adequate God*, p. 30.

48 Griffin, "Process Theology," *Encyclopedia*, p. 366.

49 Griffin, "Process Theology," *Encyclopedia*, p. 366.

entirely by persuasive power, offers a robust doctrine of God as the creator of life and all its species, in that the first emergence of life and every emergence of a new species thereafter required a specific form of divine creative-providential activity.⁵⁰

Thus the claim of process theology is that God lures an entire species to become a new and different species, and when His lure is accepted, the creature follows the new course of action and eventually becomes the new species intended by God. When the species accepts the lure, an accelerated period of development ensues—"the saltation"—at the end of which a new species emerges. In this way process theology claims to be a reconciliation of belief in God as creator and belief in evolution.

However, process theology asserts that God is not only *creative* but *created*. In his concrete and consequent nature, God is in process of becoming. He is creating himself and being created by the world, even as the world creates itself and is created by God. They mutually affect each other in an endless process of becoming. Alan Gragg interprets Hartshorne's theology this way: "In panentheism, God's supreme relativity definitely means that God is a cocreator of man and the world and also that man is a cocreator of himself *and of God*."⁵¹ The human race and really the entire universe create God just as much as he creates them. All things are interrelated with God, so that all of reality is literally a *creative process*. Everything, from God to the tiniest speck of dust, is in the process of being created.

God takes into his own being all the experiences of mankind, so that they play a large part in creating the being of God. God experiences the suffering and the joy of men, and his very being is affected and even *created* by those experiences. According to Gragg,

[God] must share perfectly in miseries as well as joys of all creatures, preserving this painful awareness in everlasting memory. Thus he is radically dependent upon others for his happiness, for he must suffer when others either endure or produce suffering. The panentheistic

50 Griffin, "PT," *Adequate God*, p. 29.

51 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 95 (author's own italics).

God perpetually actualizes himself both in the sublimely blissful joy of sharing the joys of others and in the cosmic crucifixion of feeling supreme sympathy for the agonies of all creatures. He is the cosmic Sufferer.⁵²

Thus, human beings and all creatures have a profound effect on God's being. Their experiences are his experiences. He experiences *absolutely all things* in the universe, and those experiences become part of him. In this way too God is created and becomes what he is through the ongoing experiences in the world itself.

Process Christianity?

We turn now to a consideration of how process theology deals with Christian theology. Despite the obvious fact that process theology conceives a completely different god than the God of Christianity, process theologians still claim to be Christian. Despite the fact that the process god arises almost entirely out of Whiteheadian philosophy, Griffin states that "to date, most, but not all, process theologians have been Christians."⁵³ He says that process theologians use their philosophical doctrines to deal with Christian themes. In fact, process theologians even claim that they teach the God of the Bible more faithfully than traditional theists. They contend that the traditional view is "glaringly inconsistent with itself and inimical to the biblical portrayal of God as the heavenly Father who grieves over His estranged children."⁵⁴ To their minds the Bible *obviously* teaches that God changes and suffers, that he reacts to the world and is affected by it. The traditional view, they argue, is the result of distorting biblical notions with the ideas of Greek philosophy. It is the result of refusing to acknowledge the biblical portrayal of God as suffering and changing and insisting on the notions of Greek philosophy.⁵⁵

"Christian" process theologians claim to maintain what Griffin

52 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 97.

53 Griffin, "Process Theology," *Encyclopedia*, p. 367.

54 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 81.

55 Robert K. Gnuse, *The Old Testament and Process Theology* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), p. 4.

calls the “primary” doctrines of Christianity.⁵⁶ When one considers that process theology is derived entirely from worldly philosophy,⁵⁷ it seems impossible that it could affirm distinctly Christian and distinctly *revealed* doctrines. Nevertheless, they claim to do so. One wonders whether this is simply an attempt to retain the vestiges of Christianity. One wonders whether this is done merely to attract nominal Christians who want to retain some of their Christian heritage. One wonders. The rhetoric promoting process theology in its literature and on the Internet certainly points in this direction. At any rate, we will look briefly at the process interpretation of the Trinity as one example of how it deals with Christian doctrine.

The Trinity, like all of theology, is completely redefined by process theology. The Trinity of process theology arises out of its own philosophical viewpoint. Process theologians have constructed a Trinitarian doctrine out of three aspects of God: his primordial nature, his consequent nature, and his “creativity.”⁵⁸ In his encyclopedia entry Griffin writes, “The divine threefoldness can hence be understood as consisting of divine creativity, creative love, and responsive love.”⁵⁹ The “creative love” refers to God’s primordial nature, according to which he lovingly allures the world to become the best it can be. The “responsive love” refers to God’s consequent nature, according to which he is affected by the world and responsive to it. It is the nature according to which he experiences pain and responds in loving compassion. The third aspect, “divine creativity,” refers to God as the ultimate embodiment of creativity. As we have seen, process theology does not consider God to be the only creative one in the universe. The world itself has creative power. Nevertheless, God’s creativity is primordial and ultimate.⁶⁰ These three aspects, then, constitute the process “Trinity.”

It is quite obvious that this view of the Trinity is not at all in line

56 Griffin, “PT,” *Adequate God*, p. 8.

57 And they accuse *traditional theism* of being based on worldly philosophy? [*sic!*]

58 Cobb and Griffin, *PT: Intro*, p. 109.

59 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, p. 368.

60 Griffin, “PT,” *Adequate God*, p. 26.

with the Christian dogma established at Nicea and Constantinople. The traditional Trinitarian dogma of three *hypostases* in one *ousia* is rejected. And yet Griffin still uses the terms *persona* and *homoousios*. He writes, "Applying the idea that all three 'persona' are *homoousios*, the point would be that the God known in the creation, in the incarnation of Jesus, and in our immediate experience is acting in one and the same way."⁶¹ This statement is wrong and misleading because Griffin appears to be affirming three persons in the Godhead, when he is not. In another book, which he co-authored, we read: "When 'person' is taken in its modern sense, God is *one person*. When 'person' is taken in its traditional sense, *two persons* can be distinguished, God as creative love and God as responsive love" (my italics). What about the third? The third "person" is said to be the "unity" in which the other two are held together, which is not "another person in the same sense that the other two are persons."⁶² That is to say, it is not a person at all.

In fact, none of the so-called "persons" in the process Trinity are persons at all. A "person" is the individual subsistence *and* the self-conscious subject of a rational, moral nature. In the Christian Trinity, then, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are individual subjects who say "I," and are the subjects of the divine thinking, willing, and doing. But the "persons" of the process Trinity are not such. They are mere *aspects* of the divine being. The primordial nature does not say "I" in distinction from the consequent nature. There are not three egos in one being. There is one being with three different aspects. This is just a modern form of the ancient heresy of modalism, according to which God is one in essence *and* person, but reveals himself in three different *modes*. Griffin even states that the three "persons" of the process Trinity are simply "three ways of knowing God."⁶³ When one considers what is meant by "person" in process theology, it is clear that the traditional Christian doctrine of the Trinity is denied. The process Trinity is just another example of a very ancient heresy, clothed in new philosophical garb.

61 Griffin, "PT," *Adequate God*, p. 26.

62 Cobb and Griffin, *PT: Intro*, p. 109.

63 Griffin, "PT," *Adequate God*, p. 26.

Evaluation and criticism

Process theology must be rejected entirely because it is philosophical idolatry. Some Christian thinkers claim that there are positive things that we can learn from process theology. For example, in an essay on process theology Norman Geisler states that “there are a number of very significant insights to be gained from an understanding of contemporary process theology.”⁶⁴ Geisler is a leading representative of conservative evangelical theology today. He and others with him are too willing to “learn” from the “insights” of apostate and secular philosophy. Process theology is a false religion that sets up an idol god and promotes the worship of this idol god. Its god is crafted according to human philosophy. It is not the God of Scripture, even though Christian ideas and terminology are employed to describe this god. It is a god that has been tailor-made to the “needs” of modern man. Because we may have no other gods beside Jehovah (Ex. 20:3), we must reject the process god as well.

1. Process theology is based on reason.

My fundamental criticism of process theology is that it is based entirely on reason. By this I am not referring to the epistemological debate between rationalism and empiricism. The battle between these two schools largely comprises the history of modern philosophy. The former maintains that humans have innate ideas from which they can deduce certain truths. The latter maintains that humans have no such innate ideas and can know nothing apart from experience. When I reject process theology as based on reason, I am not opting for the latter. Rather, I am rejecting all theologies that are *based* on the reasoning of man, whether these theologies are rationalistic or empirical.

Process theology is based entirely on human reasoning. It is based on the reasoning of Alfred N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, to be specific. This is no secret. Process theologians themselves openly state that this is the case:

Because of its employment of Whiteheadian-Hartshornean process philosophy, process theology is one of the few contemporary types of

64 Geisler, “PT,” *Tensions*, p. 267.

theology to be grounded in a metaphysical position in which theism is defended philosophically and science and religion are included within the same scheme of thought.⁶⁵

Alfred Whitehead asserted the existence of God as an essential component of his metaphysical system. Whitehead believed in the supremacy of reason for discovering truth. In *The Function of Reason* he states that the supreme authority for knowledge is the interplay between real-world facts and speculative thought. He goes on: "But even this supreme authority fails to be final, and this for two reasons. In the first place the evidence is confused, ambiguous, and contradictory. In the second place, if at any period of human history it had been accepted as final, all progress would have stopped."⁶⁶ Thus, he states that speculative reason must be disciplined to transcend facts and "make thought creative of the future."⁶⁷ In his own philosophy, Whitehead viewed himself as interplaying between the observable facts of the world and his own speculations. Charles Hartshorne also viewed philosophical reasoning as "indispensable for theology." He placed "more stress on sound philosophical reasoning than upon faithful acceptance of revelation."⁶⁸ In so doing, these men *arrived* at a certain "belief" in God through and on the basis of the interplay between "facts" and "speculative thought." As Whitehead weaved his intricate philosophy of organism, he was led to see the absolute necessity of the divine being as the animating force of the universe, the force that gently nudges all things forward in this never-ending process of becoming. In process theology God's existence and reality are asserted as necessary to the system. They are not something *believed by faith*.

But any theology based on human reason must be rejected. First of all, human reason is faulty and error-prone. With regard to spiritual things, bare reason cannot demonstrate truth conclusively. Herman Bavinck states that knowledge supplied by general revelation, includ-

65 Griffin, "Process Theology," *Encyclopedia*, p. 364.

66 Alfred North Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (Princeton: University Press, 1929), pp. 64-65.

67 Whitehead, *Function*, p. 65.

68 Gragg, *Hartshorne*, p. 19.

ing that obtained through reason, “is not only meager and inadequate but also uncertain, consistently mingled with error, and for far and away the majority of people unattainable.”⁶⁹ This is certainly also true of Whitehead’s process philosophy. Secondly, if theology is based on human reason, then God is subject to the mind of man. A process theologian would have no problem with this since he believes that man is a cocreator with God. Man has power like God. Indeed, to some degree man *is* God. But to the pious believer this cannot be. God is not subject to man’s mind, nor is he merely an essential component in a metaphysical system. Thirdly, a god who is the product of human reason is simply an idol. And what is an idol but the product of man’s imagination? Many philosophers assert the existence of God. But their gods are all different. Each one is unique. This shows that their “gods” are simply the idols of the individual minds from whence they come. Each one is a product of the unique experiences and fanciful speculations of the particular philosopher. The god of process theology is no different.

In contrast to process theology we must derive our understanding of God from *revelation*. The only way the true God can be known is through revelation. Bavinck states that religion is not even possible apart from revelation. The reason is that

the deity to which a given religion connects a human is a supernatural invisible power. It is inaccessible to ordinary human investigation; science leaves us in the lurch here. If we are to know something about God, he must come forward out of his hiddenness, in some way make himself perceivable, and hence reveal himself.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding process theology’s claim to have true knowledge of God through scientific and metaphysical reasoning, it is not possible to know God unless he reveals himself. Indeed, God’s revelation of himself in creation stares process theologians in the face, although they

69 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), Trans. John Vriend, Ed. John Bolt, p. 313.

70 Bavinck, *RD*, pp. 285-286.

suppress it and distort it with their depraved minds. Moreover, God has revealed himself *fully* and *infallibly* in the holy inspired Scriptures. That this is true must be *believed* by faith according to Scripture's own testimony concerning itself, because Scripture "resists all naturalistic and rationalist explanations of its origin and attributes it solely to an extraordinary operative presence of God the Holy Spirit."⁷¹ And as Bavinck goes on to say, Scripture maintains the distinction between God and the world. It does not present the so-called "naturalistic theism" of process theology but honors God as elevated above the world and distinct from it.⁷²

2. *Process theology is opposed to the God of Scripture.*

In light of the main tenets of process theology, it is clear that the god of process theology is not the God of Scripture. Nevertheless, many process theologians claim to be Christian and even claim to present a biblically accurate theology. Robert Gnuse claims that process theology more accurately portrays the God of the Hebrew Scriptures than traditional Christian theology. This is because traditional theology, in the judgment of the proponents of process theology, has "dismissed" the apparent sufferings and emotions of God as mere anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. By contrast, process theology takes them literally.⁷³ But despite these claims, process theology simply does not teach the God of Scripture. Norman Geisler makes this his primary criticism when he writes, "Perhaps we may summarize many of the criticisms of the panentheistic God by noting that He is not the God of the Bible."⁷⁴ This will be demonstrated in several ways.

First of all, the God of the Bible is not only *immanent* with regard to the world, but He is also *transcendent*. Process theology denies the transcendence of God by its teaching of naturalistic theism, namely, that God is a natural part of the world. Scripture teaches that although God is "not far from every one of us" (Acts 17:27), he is still "high and

71 Bavinck, *RD*, pp. 353-354.

72 Bavinck, *RD*, p. 354.

73 Gnuse, *Old Testament*, p. 4.

74 Geisler, "PT," *Tensions*, p. 280.

lifted up” as the king of the universe (Is. 6:1). He is exalted above the heavens (Ps. 57:5); indeed, he is “above all” things (Eph. 4:6). Not only is his name excellent in all the earth, but his glory is set above the heavens (Ps. 8:1). The teaching that God is “exalted,” “high and lifted up,” and “above” the world means that God is transcendent with respect to the world. In his essence he is fundamentally and ontologically above the world. As Herman Hoeksema put it, “There is an impassable gulf between the world and his infinitely glorious being. He is God. He is the absolute. He transcends all the existence and all the relations of the creature.”⁷⁵ This basic truth distinguishes the true God from that of process theology.

Secondly, the God of Scripture is the sole Creator of the heavens and the earth. He is *exalted above* the universe because He *created* it. This too is denied by process theology. But Scripture is clear that God alone created all things by the word of His power. The very first verse of the Bible states, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,” and all the rest of Scripture expresses its hearty agreement (e.g., Ps. 33:6-9; Heb. 11:3; II Pet. 3:5; Rev. 4:11). The narrative in Genesis 1 makes clear that this was the *beginning* of all things because God created them out of nothing. God created time because this was the ultimate and absolute “beginning” of all things. If it was the beginning in an absolute sense, then there was no time “before” the beginning. God could create time because He is *outside of* time as the eternal one. This is denied by process theology too. But the “in the beginning” of Genesis 1 clearly teaches that God is the eternal Creator of time. God created space too, because the space that makes up the heaven and earth is essential to them. Before the beginning there was no spatial universe as we know it. Process theology’s notion that God is *within* space and time is biblically untenable. Moreover, Genesis 1 very clearly explains that God created all the realities of the universe: light, water, land, plants, animals, and man. There were no actual entities existing in a chaotic, primeval world, which were then lured to become our universe. God sovereignly created a mature universe *ex nihilo* in six, twenty-four-hour days. That is Scripture.

75 Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2004), p. 70.

The rationalistic notion of process theology is completely unbiblical—indeed, anti-biblical.

Thirdly, the perfections of the divine nature revealed in Scripture are denied by process theology. Process theologians deny God's immutability and impassability. They claim that he can and does change and that he is subject to pain and suffering. They contend that Scripture speaks of God as changing and suffering in his very nature. But this is incorrect. If one claims that the biblical language speaking of God's repentance describes his very nature, he faces innumerable contradictions. For example, in Malachi 3:6 God says, "I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." In James 1:17 the apostle states that with God there is no "variableness" (literally "change") or "shadow of turning." And in Deuteronomy 32:4 we read that God is "the Rock, his work is perfect." In these and other passages of Scripture God is presented as unchanging and perfect within himself. He is pictured as a rock because his work is perfect. If he is perfect in his work, he does not change in respect to it. The god of process theology does change. He is not a rock but a river that is constantly changing and becoming, constantly flowing and altering its course. His work is not perfect, but he is always trying to actualize the greatest possible satisfaction in the world. The God of Scripture is perfect in himself and therefore he does not change or become. He has no need to *become* because he always *is* perfect.

Therefore, in spite of process theology's objections, we must interpret God's "repenting" and experiencing human emotions as anthropomorphism. God reveals himself in terms that we humans can understand. Hoeksema's words are instructive here: "We must remember that the eternal and immutable God reveals himself in time, and that which is thus revealed to us in a succession of moments is eternally and unchangeably in the mind of God."⁷⁶ But when explaining these expressions we must not *simply* call them anthropomorphisms. God is *revealing* something about himself in these things. God is revealing something to us when he speaks of his "hand" and "eyes." He is revealing something concerning himself when he speaks of himself as "grieving." Our human faculties and experiences are *reflections*,

⁷⁶ Hoeksema, *RD*, p. 110.

vague though they may be, of God's nature, which allow us to know something about God himself. But the great difference is that God's nature is unchanging, whereas we creatures constantly change and develop.

Process theologians also deny God's independence and omnipotence. They claim that God is dependent for his existence and happiness on the world itself. He does not exist purely in and of himself, but his existence is inextricably bound up with the existence of the world. Therefore, he does not have sovereign power over the world either. The world has power to create itself and God. The future of both God and the world is open to an infinite number of possibilities, and God cannot completely control which is actualized. This is a gross deviation from the true God of Scripture. In Acts 17:25 we read that God does not need "anything, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." In Romans 11:36 the apostle states about God that "of him, and through him, and to him are all things." The name of God is "Jehovah," which means I AM THAT I AM. God is not dependent on anything for his existence. He is what he is in himself. Moreover, as the absolutely independent being, God has sovereign and omnipotent power over all things. This is the clear teaching of Scripture. In Psalm 115:3 the psalmist writes, "Our God is in the heavens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased." God does not *lure* or try to *persuade* the world to do what pleases him, but he *does* what pleases him. He is *able* to do his will because he is the "Lord God *Almighty*," as Scripture so frequently exclaims (e.g., II Cor. 6:18; Rev. 4:8). He has almighty power, so that he is able to do whatever he wills to do. That is the God of Scripture. But that is not the God of process theology.

Conclusion

Because of process theology's radical departure from the theology of the Bible, it has not made significant inroads into Reformed Christianity. But process theology *has* made inroads into liberal Protestantism. For example, it has exerted great influence on denominations like the United Methodist Church and United Church of Christ. John B. Cobb states that "process theists are more often members of

old-line denominations and seek to give content and assurance to the waning beliefs of their members.”⁷⁷ The *beliefs* of the members of these churches are waning because they no longer believe the truth of Scripture. They seek rational and scientific explanations for reality. They are nominal Christians who represent modern man, who is lost on the seas of rationalism, scientism, and existentialism. The openness of process theology to the theories of modern science makes it very attractive to many people. In it they see a way to reconcile their “Christian” beliefs and their faith in science. Process theology is an elastic, flexible religion that is not bound by Scripture but receptive to the contributions of science and philosophy, as well as other religions. Accordingly, process theologians are also promoters of religious pluralism and tolerance among the world’s religions.⁷⁸

But although this is the current situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we must not assume that process theology will never penetrate the realm of conservative Christianity. A number of evangelicals already express that there are positive aspects to process theology, things from which we may learn. Moreover, the virtually ubiquitous acceptance of theistic evolution in Reformed and Presbyterian circles points out that conservative Christians have already opened the door to the ultimate authority of science and reason. Today theistic evolution and open theism are sinking their roots even more deeply into the soil of Protestant evangelical Christianity. If Reformed and Presbyterian churches do not repent of this despicable abandonment of the faith, they will eventually embrace process theology. Like the faithless Israelites of old, they will forsake Jehovah God and follow after the gods of the heathen. We have a high calling to maintain the truth of Scripture over against this terrible apostasy. May God be gracious to us that we may be faithful unto the end. ●

77 John B. Cobb, Jr., “Introduction,” *Adequate God*, p. xiv.

78 Griffin, “Process Theology,” *Encyclopedia*, pp. 366-367.

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Book Reviews

Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 4: *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, Herman Bavinck, ed. John Bolt, tr. John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 944 pages. \$50.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8010-2657-7. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

This large and theologically solid volume represents the culmination of the huge project begun by a few men in several Reformed denominations in 1994: the translation into English for the first time and publication of Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. To this project, from the beginning, a goodly number of Protestant Reformed men have contributed liberally, both financially and in other ways.

Herman Bavinck was professor of dogmatics, first in the Christian Reformed Church (in the Netherlands) at Kampen from 1882 to 1902 and from 1902 to his death in 1921 in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN) at Amsterdam.

As a dogmatician, Bavinck was steeped in the Reformed tradition from Calvin on, familiar with the early church fathers, knowledgeable of the other main branches of the Christian religion, particularly the Roman Catholic Church and theological modernism, well-read, and very much

interested, in the secular literature on contemporary culture, willingly bound by the Reformed confessions, and deeply and thoroughly biblical.

To read Bavinck is an education and a joy for all who love the Reformed faith.

The contents of this concluding volume are rich: the doctrine of salvation; the doctrine of the church; and the doctrine of the last things. The section on the Bible's teaching concerning the return of Christ and the end of all things was earlier published in English by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, the society formed for the express purpose of translating and publishing Bavinck, as the paperback book, *The Last Things*. In addition, volume four contains the Scripture, name, and subject indices of all four volumes.

The Reformed theology taught and defended in this book is for the most part familiar to readers of this journal. Essentially, it is the doctrine of Calvin and the Reformed confessions,

although Bavinck has developed the truth and put his own stamp on Reformed dogmatics. Fundamentally, it is the theology of Herman Hoeksema, although Hoeksema also developed the truth, put his stamp on Reformed dogmatics, and purified Bavinck's theology of the dross of common grace.

Salvation

Bavinck's doctrine of salvation is a learned confession of sovereign, particular grace. Regeneration precedes faith. One reason for this confession on the part of Reformed Christianity is the Reformed Christian's conviction that "the salvation [he] had received was a gift of God." Behind his activity of faith and repentance as its cause lies the grace of God (65). And this grace of regeneration is efficacious and insuperable, that is, "ultimately irresistible" (82).

The fundamental issue between the Reformed faith and all forms of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, specifically, Rome and Arminian Protestantism, regarding salvation is this: "At the end of all the interactions, who makes the final decision," man or God? (66). "The grace of God in Christ, grace that is full, abundant,

free, omnipotent, and insuperable, is the heart of the gospel" (87).

Faith, for Bavinck, is not "a condition, a work, which alone turns a possible salvation into an actual salvation," but the gift of God, earned by Christ for the elect (36, 37). "Neither faith nor conversion is the condition that in any way acquires salvation for us. They are only the way in which the benefits of the covenant enter into the subjective possession of those for whom they were acquired" (122).

Discussing "a universal call through the gospel" in light of the Reformed confession of limited atonement and of the election of some only, Bavinck does not compromise, indeed, boldly contradict, the doctrines of particular, efficacious atonement and of predestination, as do the contemporary advocates of the "well-meant offer of the gospel." In the "offer," God "does not say what he himself will do—whether or not he will bestow that faith.... He only tells us what he wants us to do." The English translation, "wants," is misleading and incorrect here, suggesting, in spite of Bavinck's explicit denial in the context, that God "aims" at the salvation of all men without exception. The Dutch original

reads, “*Hij verklaart alleen, wat Hij wil, dat wij zullen doen, dat wij ons verootmoedigan zullen,*” etc. (“He declares only what He wills [that is, commands] that we should do, namely, that we should humble ourselves,” etc.). Bavinck is making the classic Christian and Reformed distinction between the will of God’s decree (what God has planned according to His good-pleasure) and the will of God’s precept (what He commands of His human creatures).

In his explanation of the universal offer of salvation, Bavinck denies that God “aims...at the salvation of all.” If this were the case, as was the teaching of Rome and the Arminians in Bavinck’s day and as is the teaching in addition of the proponents of the “well-meant offer of the gospel” in the Reformed churches today, the preaching of the gospel would be “ineffective” and “useless.” An aim (which is the same as a “sincere desire”) on God’s part for the salvation of all would imply either the “ignorance or incapacity [of] God.” In their confession that predestination governs the universal “offer,” that is, the serious external call of the gospel to all who hear, reprobate as well as elect, “the Reformed have had the

courage to say that that outcome [particularly, of the external call of the gospel] corresponds to God’s will and purpose.” (Bavinck’s use of the past perfect tense is certainly fitting for the twenty-first century; this courage has long since been lost; mostly, it has wilted before the slander, “hyper-Calvinist!”) Otherwise (and here is the fundamental issue in the controversy over the “well-meant offer”), “God would no longer be God. History cannot and may not be a sparring partner for God” (35-37).

Although denying that the universal offer is an expression of a sincere and gracious aim to save all to whom the offer comes, Bavinck does go on to speak of blessings for the reprobate through this offer and of the offer’s being “repressive grace” (a singularly appropriate, odd adjective for a strange grace). Nevertheless, it is not Bavinck, but editor Bolt, in a footnote, who speaks in this context of “common grace” (38, 39). Of these blessings for the reprobate in the preaching of the gospel to them, as of a “repressive grace” or a “common grace,” there is not so much as one word in the Reformed confessions, whether “The Three Forms of Unity” or

the Westminster Standards. Paul speaks a different language: "... and whom he will he hardeneth... willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction" (Rom. 9:18, 22).

Regarding the gift of faith, Bavinck affirms as Reformed orthodoxy that faith is assurance of one's own salvation in Christ. Calvin's "description of saving faith as the 'firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us'...can be considered correct as well as complete." "Essentially, what else is Christian faith but the assurance—based on God's witness and worked in our heart by the Holy Spirit—that 'the eternal Faith [*sic*; should be "Father"—DJE] of our Lord Jesus Christ...is our God and Father because of Christ his Son?" (128)

Bavinck is here refuting the Puritan and "further reformation" error regarding faith, which, denying that "faith carries its own certainty with it," has plunged, and is still plunging, multitudes into doubt and despair.

Nomistic Pietism, on the other hand, erred when it shifted the assurance of salvation from the

"being" (*wezen*) to the "well-being" (*welwezen*) of faith and considered it attainable—aside from extraordinary revelations—only in the way of continual introspection and prolonged and anxious self-examination. Instead of leading one's spiritual life by this method to the mountaintop, it gradually deprived that life of all certainty and robbed it of all spontaneity. "Nothing more certainly inhibits a feeling than continual meticulous examination of the question [of] whether one has it" (131).

There are few doctrines concerning which most Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches need instruction more and to which they are more opposed than Bavinck's doctrine of the Reformed covenantal view and rearing of the infant children of believing parents. The consensus of Reformed theologians has been that "only elect children were as a rule regenerated before their baptism" (57). Elect babies of believers, therefore, have the faculty, or "habit," of faith before they actively believe: "If they [babies] are children of the covenant, they are also believers before they can actually believe"

(101). Reformed theology “arrived at the unanimous confession that the children of believers were as much included in the covenant of grace as their believing parents.... The Holy Spirit could grant them the grace of regeneration...he did this consistently in the children of believers who died in childhood...the Holy Spirit also frequently did this in the case of children who were born in the church, grew up in it, and later joined it by a personal confession. Therefore, in general the children of believers should, in accordance with the judgment of charity, be regarded as elect and regenerate until from their ‘talk’ or their ‘walk’ the contrary was evident” (68).

So radically have contemporary Reformed theologians and churches departed from the classic Reformed doctrine of covenant children, so violently do they condemn this classic Reformed doctrine as un-Reformed, and so much have they convinced Reformed people and, apparently, themselves that the classic, traditional, confessional doctrine of children in the covenant is novel, heretical, and dangerous that Bavinck ought to be quoted at length. It will also be apparent

how vitally important the classic Reformed view of God’s inclusion of children in the covenant is for healthy, spiritual rearing.

The confession of regeneration as the implantation of the new life principle, accordingly, further holds within it an excellent pedagogical value. It is not an incontrovertible dogma, of course, that *all* covenant children or even all *elect* covenant children have already been regenerated in their infancy before or in baptism. Reformed theologians have never held this view in this rigorous sense. But they firmly maintained that such a rebirth in early childhood before the years of discretion *could* take place, since the Spirit of Christ is not bound to the consciousness and will of human beings. They confessed that such a rebirth in early life in fact often *did* take place, especially in the case of children whom God took from this life in their infancy. Finally, they held firmly to the rule that we must regard and treat all covenant children born and baptized in the fellowship of the church not as pagan children, but in accordance with the judgment of charity, as true children of

the covenant, until from their “talk” and “walk” the contrary is evident. At this point we cannot set forth in detail the great power and value inherent in this view for Christian nurture, the nurture that occurs in the family as well as that which takes place in the school and the church. But it characterizes Reformed education and upbringing in distinction from that of Anabaptists and Methodists; maintains the bond between nature and grace; proceeds from the reality of the covenant of grace and baptism; believes in the unity and organic development of the spiritual life; and fully recognizes that God does not always work faith and repentance in the human heart suddenly, but often—indeed as a rule—causes them to proceed and develop from the implanted life gradually, by a psychological and pedagogical process (124, 125).

It is noteworthy that Bavinck understood the phrase in the Reformed baptism form, “our children...again are received unto grace in Christ,” as speaking of regeneration and, therefore, as a reference to elect children (73, 74).

Church

“The Reformed linked the church most intimately with election.” Essentially, in Calvin’s description, the church is “all the elect collectively who are known only to God.” This is the “invisible church.” “While election is the foundation of the church, it only manifests itself in faith and good works.” Thus, the church becomes visible (288-291). “The Reformation posited the distinction between the visible and invisible church,” and this distinction is right (302, 303).

“The key mark of the [true, instituted] church [is] the Word of God” (312).

With regard to the attributes, or perfections, of the church, the claim (and name) of the Roman Catholic Church are spurious. Rome is not the “Catholic” church: “Mutually contradictory are the terms ‘Roman’ and ‘catholic’.... The name ‘Roman’ or ‘papal church’ expresses its nature much more accurately than ‘Catholic’” (322, 323).

Both word and sacraments are means of grace, according to the Reformed faith. It is “Christ who administers it [the word] by the Holy Spirit” (459). “God [also] employs them [the sacraments]

to impart his grace" (470). The personal power of both word and sacraments is the Spirit of Jesus Christ (459). The Spirit does not work by word and sacraments always "in the same manner," that is, a gracious, saving manner: "In accordance with the unsearchable good pleasure of God, he uses that word for bringing people to repentance but also for hardening; for the rising but also for the falling of many" (459).

Bavinck's application of the marks of the true church is weak, indeed objectionable. Intent on guarding against the forcing of consciences by men, he slights the solemn duty of every confessing Christian to believe the truth of Scripture. His view of the many differing churches constitutes an erroneous "pluriformity" of the church. Bavinck himself avows "pluriformity": "Since the [sixteenth-century] Reformation the church has entered the period of pluriformity." Bavinck suggests that a church becomes false only when the last believer has disappeared from it and that the last believer may leave only after he has determined that no other believer remains. There is virtually no possibility that one clearly recognizes and heartily damns any

religious organization as a false church. Indeed, Bavinck denies that one leaving the Roman Catholic Church for a Reformed church should condemn Rome as "false."

Those, therefore, who have come to believe that the Protestant church is better than the Roman Catholic Church and that the Reformed church is purer than the Lutheran, the Remonstrant, or the Baptist, must without condemning their own church as false, leave it and join the other (317-319).

This abysmal teaching explains, in part, why the orthodox members of the *Gereformeerde Bond* in the Netherlands remained in the utterly corrupt and apostate state church, the *Hervormde Kerk*, endlessly. A leader of the *Bond*, Dr. C. Tukker, once replied to my question, why he stayed in the state church of the Netherlands, this way: "*Mijn moeder is een hoer, maar zij is mijn moeder*" ("My mother is a whore, but she is my mother"). It explains why the majority of the members of the *Bond* and almost all the members of Bavinck's and Kuyper's Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the end went along into

the merger church, the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), which has abandoned the Reformed confessions, permits the teachings of any and every doctrine, including that God does not exist, and avows sodomy—a false church. And, no doubt, it explains why orthodox individuals stay in nominally Reformed churches in North America that have long ago decisively repudiated virtually everything truly Reformed, and are far developed in apostasy.

God's word about the marks and their application in Articles 27-29 of the Belgic Confession is radically different from that of Bavinck.

The Last Things

Bavinck's eschatology is amillennial, not because pessimistic Dutch theologians are constitutionally prone to amillennialism, but because this is the doctrine of the last things of Scripture. Bavinck's theory of explaining the Old Testament prophecies of the future Messianic kingdom of Christ is distinctively Reformed, and Christian, and decisive against both millennial errors. Both dispensational premillennialism and postmillennialism make their literalistic interpretation of figurative

Old Testament prophecy the basis of their dream of a coming earthly, carnal kingdom of Christ in history. The Reformed interpretation of Old Testament prophecy finds the fulfillment of the figurative language in a spiritual kingdom of Christ.

And this kingdom [of Messiah] is sketched by the prophets in hues and colors, under figures and forms, which have all been derived from the historical circumstances in which they lived.... But into those sensuous earthly forms prophecy puts everlasting content.... Prophecy pictures for us but one single image of the future. And this image is either to be taken literally as it presents itself—but then one breaks with Christianity and lapses back into Judaism—or this image calls for a very different interpretation than that attempted by chiliasm (654-658).

The New Testament views itself...as the spiritual and therefore complete and authentic fulfillment of the Old Testament. The spiritualization of the Old Testament, rightly understood, is not an invention of Christian theology but has its beginning in the New Testament itself. The Old Testament

in spiritualized form, that is, the Old Testament stripped of its temporal and sensuous form, is the New Testament (660).

As for the thousand years—the millennium—of Revelation 20, they are “symbolic... denot[ing] the holy, blessed rest of believers who have died and are in heaven with Christ” (684).

Bavinck, therefore, does not relax the vigilance of the church of the twenty-first century by the promise of a future “Christianizing” of the world and a “golden age,” or by the prospect of a pre-tribulation rapture. On the contrary, he gives the church the necessary warning of a coming Antichrist and tribulation.

Scripture clearly teaches that the power of antichrist has its own history, manifests itself at different times and in different

ways, and finally evolves into a general apostasy and the breakdown of all natural and moral ties that now still hold back such apostasy; then [this antichrist spirit] embodies itself in a world empire that utilizes the false church and apotheosizes itself by deifying the head of that empire. Christ himself, by his appearing, then destroys this anti-Christian power in its highest and latest manifestation (678).

The translation and editing of volume four are consistently excellent, particularly the summations of the chapters by John Bolt.

Volume four ought to be in the library of every Reformed minister of the word. The Reformed laity will find the book readable and profitable. ■

Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume I, 1523-1552, compiled and introduced by James T. Dennison, Jr. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books. Pp. xii + 820. \$38.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-60178-044-7. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

This is the first volume of a multi-volume set containing various Reformed statements of faith from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries translated

into English. Dr. James T. Dennison is editor, compiler, and in many instances the translator of the documents included in this volume. In addition, he has writ-

ten informative introductions to each of the documents that are included. Many of these documents appear in English for the first time. Among the contents of this volume are theses presented at various disputations, personal statements of faith, official confessions of faith, and catechisms. The contents represent various traditions in the Reformed branch of the Reformation. Thirty-three documents are included in this initial volume and are arranged chronologically.

The documents included in this first volume are:

- Huldrych Zwingli, Sixty-Seven Articles (1523)
- Huldrych Zwingli, short and Christian Instruction (1523)
- The Ten Theses of Bern (1528)
- The Confession of the East Friesland Preachers (1528)
- William Farel, Summary (1529)
- Huldrych Zwingli, *Fidei ratio* (1530)
- The Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)
- Confession of the Vaudois (1530 or 1531)
- Huldrych Zwingli, Exposition of the Christian Faith (1531)
- Articles of the Bern Synod (1532)
- The Synod of Chanforan (1532)
- The Confession of Angrogna (1532)
- The (First) Basel Confession (1534)
- The Bohemian Confession (1535)
- The Lausanne Articles (1536)
- The First Helvetic Confession (Second Basel Confession) (1536)
- John Calvin, Catechism (1537)
- John Calvin, Geneva Confession of Faith (1536/37)
- John Calvin, Catechism (1538)
- Waldensian Confession of Merindol (1541)
- The Confession of the Waldensians of Provence (1543)
- The Confession of the Vaudois of Merindol (1543)
- Walloon Confession of Wessel (1544/45)
- John Calvin, Catechism (1545)
- Juan Diaz, *Suma de la Religión Cristiana* (1546)
- Juan Valdes, Catechism (1549)
- Consensus Tigurinus (1549)
- Thomas Cranmer, Anglican Catechism (1549)
- The London Confession of John à Lasco (1551)
- The Large Emden Catechism; or Catechism of the Immigrant Church in London (1551)
- The Confession of the Glastonbury Congregation (1551)
- Confessio Rhaetiae* (1552)
- John Calvin, *Consensus Genevensis* (1552)

The reader will be impressed with the fundamental theological unity, notwithstanding the geo-

graphic diversity, of the various branches of the Reformation, as that unity comes to expression in the documents included in this volume. The great *solas* of the Reformation (*sola fidei, sola Scriptura, sola Christus, sola gratia*) are reiterated again and again. As one would expect, there is frequent and unequivocal denunciation of Rome's false doctrines, practices, and worship—a testimony against the fatal compromises too many are only too ready to make today. Rome's doctrine of free will is banished from the Reformed camp as a scurrilous intruder. And the doctrines of sovereign grace, grounded in God's eternal decree of predestination, are confessed and vigorously defended. The concern of the Reformed for the godly instruction of the youth comes out frequently, with parents and officebearers alike pointed to

their calling respecting the training of the up-and-coming generation.

Reformed ministers, theologians, seminary students, teachers, and church members are indebted to Dr. Dennison and Reformation Heritage Books for making this rich resource available. We commend the editor and publisher alike for this first volume and eagerly anticipate the subsequent volumes in the set. Together they have done a distinct service in compiling, translating, and publishing these Reformed statements of faith, a precious part of our Reformation heritage.

The usefulness of the volume would be enhanced by a set of indices, but perhaps this awaits the final volume in the set.

A valuable addition to any theological library! Sturdily and handsomely bound! Highly recommended! ■

The Letters of Geerhardus Vos, edited with an Introduction by James T. Dennison Jr. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2005. 274 pages (cloth). \$29.99. ISBN 0-87552-187-8. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

Geerhardus Vos was a Reformed theologian, who taught at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan from 1888 to 1893 and at Princeton

Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey from 1893 to 1932, when he retired. At Princeton, he was a colleague of B. B. Warfield, William B.

Greene, Robert Dick Wilson, Caspar Wistar Hodge, J. Gresham Machen, O. T. Allis, and other notables.

Vos' wife was the well-known Catherine Vos, author of *The Child's Story Bible*. His daughter was the wife of Dr. William Radius, my esteemed instructor in Greek at Calvin College.

Vos died in Grand Rapids in 1949.

The content of this book is not Vos' theology, but letters he wrote to Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen, Henry Beets, Ned Stonehouse, F. W. Grosheide, Paul Woolley, and others between 1883 and 1946. In addition, the book contains a few of Vos' poems.

The Life

Prominent in the book is the introduction, a "Life of Geerhardus Vos," of more than seventy pages. The author is the editor of the book, James T. Dennison Jr., well-known in Reformed circles as the editor of Francis Turretin's *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Of this "Life" Dennison remarks that it is the "most thorough account of the life of Geerhardus Vos published to date."

The biographical sketch of

Vos invites, indeed demands, criticism of a serious failure on the part of the Princeton professor. One is loath to give the criticism, partly because of the maxim, "*De mortuis nihil sive bonum*," and partly because Geerhardus Vos was evidently graced with the Christian virtue of humility, which caused him to shun the limelight.

Nevertheless, the fault must be condemned, both because Dennison not only raises the failure, but also justifies it and because this same fault in the Reformed world of seminary professors today contributes mightily to the triumph of false doctrine in the churches and, thus, the destruction of the churches and the damnation of souls.

Vos failed to contend for the faith in the hour of its crisis in Princeton Seminary and in the Presbyterian Church in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s.

During Vos' professorship at Princeton, theological liberalism got the upper hand in the Presbyterian Church, as evidenced by the Auburn Affirmation (of unbelief concerning the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith), and in Princeton Seminary, as effected by President J. Ross Stevenson's

reorganization of the seminary. When J. G. Machen and others went out to form Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, not only did Vos stay behind in the apostate seminary and denomination, but he also supinely submitted to the wicked decrees of the liberals by signing the documents requiring him to knuckle under.

No one questions whether Vos understood what was happening, or recognized the great issues. The letters make plain that Vos was fully cognizant of the events and the issues.

Some of Vos' admirers have excused him by appealing to his age. This excuse is inexcusable. The call to defend the faith knows no limitation of age. Besides, Vos would teach at Princeton Seminary for three more years after Stevenson's officially committing the seminary to liberalism in 1929. Vos would live for another twenty years.

Dennison does not excuse Vos. He justifies him. Vos, a descendant of pietistic old world seceders, was so consumed with his personal relationship with God that he shied away from doctrinal controversy and church strife.

But every Christian, much

more every minister, and far more every Reformed seminary professor, is called by God "earnestly [to] contend for the faith" (Jude 3). Obedience to this call, which necessarily involves doctrinal controversy and church strife, is also part of the seminary professor's "personal relationship to God." Calvin too, by his own admission, was naturally a shy and retiring soul, desirous only of the quiet life of the theological scholar. But he was compelled by Farel and the Holy Spirit to sacrifice his desires for the sake of the gospel and church of Christ. The Reformed "Form for the Installation of Professors of Theology" charges the professor of theology with the calling that he "caution [his students] in regard to the errors and heresies of the old, but especially of the new day" (*The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*, Grandville, MI, 2005, 297).

Dennison's attempt to identify Vos with the isolated prophet Jeremiah fails simply by virtue of the reality of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah took a stand against the liberalism of his day, boldly and publicly. He spoke out, loudly and strongly. He became a "man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth," so

that every one of the liberals and apostates “doth curse me” (Jer. 15:10). The isolation of Jeremiah was that of the dungeon, not the safe and comfortable study. And the reason is significant. When Jeremiah was resolved to remain quiet, because of the opposition of his ecclesiastical foes, God’s word “was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay” (Jer. 20:9).

The sin of Prof. Vos in the 1920s and 1930s at Princeton is the sin of most scholars in the nominally Reformed and reputedly conservative seminaries everywhere in the world today. It may not be excused, much less justified. The truth of God is at stake, and the souls of men.

The scholars mostly remain deathly quiet and studiously inactive (and peacefully in their apostatizing or apostate churches), pursuing their personal relationship with God and their gratifying academic studies, as false doctrine destroys the Reformed faith in their churches, indeed, as false doctrine is taught and defended in the very seminaries in which they work.

I refer, among others, to the open and even official teaching of a love of God in Jesus Christ,

whether in the gospel or in the covenant of grace, for more humans than only the elect (the error, in fact, that paved the way, in the late 1890s and early 1900s, for the more obvious liberalism in the Presbyterian Church in the USA, as Vos observes in his letters at that very time).

I refer to the theology of the Federal [Covenant] Vision, that repudiates and attacks justification by faith alone and, with this doctrine, every one of the truths of salvation by sovereign grace confessed by Dordt and Westminster, *on the basis of the doctrine of a conditional covenant of grace*.

I refer to the astounding denial of the inspiration of Holy Scripture by a Peter Enns, until recently professor at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, to which denial he gave brazen expression in his book, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Baker, 2005), and to the defense of his teaching this unbelief to the seminarians by a majority of the faculty at Westminster. It was the denial of inspiration by the old liberalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that occasioned the formation of Westminster Seminary.

Eighty years later, the same heresy flaunts itself, and is defended, at Westminster.

Dennison himself has exposed this fundamental liberalism, that is, unbelief concerning the Bible, at Westminster (and other “evangelical” seminaries), thus showing himself the rare exception—a scholar who *does* contend for the faith once delivered. Having demonstrated that Prof. Enns and others publicly teach that much of the Old Testament is “myth,” Dennison writes (ironically):

We will now learn the meaning of a Biblical text from the current mythological whim of gurus like Dr. Enns and Dr. Longman and a whole host of Ray Dillard [Dillard taught Old Testament studies at Westminster until his death—DJE] devotees. And out of it all, we will realize that the same acculturation and liberalism that eroded ‘Old Princeton’ is now eroding ‘Old Westminster’ (not to mention long-gone Fuller Theological Seminary and now Wheaton College and other erstwhile once-upon-a-time bastions of orthodoxy) (“Old Testament Historical Books: A Critical Review,” *Kerux: The Journal of North-*

west Theological Seminary 22, no. 1 [May 2007]: 38-46).

The (Biblical) Theology

Although the book about Vos concerns his letters, not his theology, both the biography and the letters themselves raise the matter of Vos’ unique theology. The reviewer, therefore, has the opportunity to comment on this theology. Geerhardus Vos is regarded as the father of an orthodox “biblical theology.” By “biblical theology” is meant a theology that, doing justice to the progressive nature of biblical revelation and working exegetically with Scripture, sets forth the doctrine of God (in the broadest sense, including all topics of theology) in a certain distinct period of divine revelation, or of a certain writer of Scripture, for example, the theology of the first five books of the Bible, or Paul’s doctrine of the last things.

About Vos’ orthodoxy, there is no question. The biblical theology of Vos was essentially different from that of the old liberalism. Vos’ own work in the field has been profitable to the Reformed churches. His book *The Pauline Eschatology* was usually on my list of required reading for the students in dogmatics.

Nevertheless, biblical theology—the biblical theology of Vos—must be criticized. Biblical theology as such, not only the abuse of it by unfaithful theologians, must be criticized.

There is inherent in biblical theology the determination to discover and set forth the theology of a certain dispensation of revelation without regard on the part of the theologian for the *whole* of divine revelation and especially without regard for the *system* of truth authoritatively defined in the creeds, the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards. This method of theology defends itself by a very loud appeal to the sole authority of Scripture and with a thinly veiled accusation that systematic theology, particularly the systematic theology of the creeds, is not the product of close, careful exegesis of Scripture.

But no Reformed theologian may conduct a study of any part of Scripture, or of any distinct period of divine revelation, or of any particular writer of the word of God, apart from a deliberate and controlling consideration of the whole of revelation. To put a fine point on it, every study of the Old Testament, whether Moses, the prophets, or the writings, must

be made, consciously, in such a way that the resulting theology is guided by and in harmony with the fuller and clearer revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

No Reformed theologian may do exegesis of any part of Scripture, including earlier periods of revelation, with a view to determining the theology of that part of Scripture without regard for the “analogy of faith.” Specifically, no Reformed theologian may interpret any part of Scripture outside the binding authority of the very systematic creeds of the Reformed churches. He has sworn to the church and to God that he will perform all his work, including his exegetical work, with an eye fixed on the creeds, within the (very spacious) boundaries of the creeds, and in harmony with the creeds.

The insinuation of biblical theology that systematic theology, particularly the creeds, is not exegetically grounded, or insufficiently concerned with the interpretation of Scripture, is false (which is not to say that individual systematic theologians may not be guilty of this egregious error).

In fact, no theologian is *able* to do the work of theology without regard for the whole of Scripture and for doctrinal convictions.

The orthodox biblical theologian will be influenced by his commitment to the doctrines of sovereign grace. The heterodox biblical theologian will likewise be influenced *in his exegesis* by his hatred for predestination, limited atonement, and efficacious grace.

What makes a critique of biblical theology imperative in our day is the use of it to disparage the systematic theology of the Reformed creeds, especially the Canons of Dordt and the Westminster Confession of Faith, that is, the gospel of salvation by sovereign, particular grace, thus paving the way for the teaching of a universal, conditional, and resistible grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Biblical theology—a biblical theology antagonistic to systematic theology—is an engine driving the movement of the Federal [Covenant] Vision.

Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., disciple of Vos and proponent of Vos' biblical theology in Presbyterianism today, has given expression to the inherent drive of biblical theology to replace systematic theology, rather than to serve it.

All this prompts the not entirely modest proposal, in view of objections that can be raised

against the term “systematic theology,” to discontinue its use and instead to use “biblical theology” to designate the comprehensive statement of what Scripture teaches (dogmatics), always insuring that its topical divisions remain sufficiently broad and flexible to accommodate the results of the redemptive-historically regulated exegesis on which it is based. This, it would seem to be, is the ultimate resolution of the relational question raised in this essay (“Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38, no. 3 [Spring 1976]: 298).

The humble handmaid has aspirations to become the lordly queen.

Zeal for biblical theology explains in part Gaffin's enthusiastic promotion of Norman Shepherd's wholesale attack on all the doctrines of grace as systematized in the Canons of Dordt in his *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (P&R, 2000) and his resolute defense of the heresy of the Federal [Covenant] Vision at the 2003 General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the case of John O. Kinnaird (for

Gaffin's defense of both Shepherd and Kinnaird, as well as Gaffin's own beliefs regarding the doctrinal issues raised by the Federal [Covenant] Vision, see Paul M. Elliott, *A Denomination in Denial: An Evaluation of the Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, Teaching the Word, 2006, 27-41).

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians and churches willing to remain faithful to the gospel of the Reformation as systematized in the Reformed and Presbyterian creeds must examine biblical theology critically.

The Letters

With regard to the letters themselves of *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, they are not merely of interest. Some of them are exceedingly significant.

I mention several of Vos' more important observations in the letters.

The movement in the Presbyterian Church in the USA in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to revise the Westminster Confession intended to introduce the "Arminian" heresy into that creed (it was already in that church). The basic issue was, in

effect, to "remove the Calvinistic doctrine of election from the symbols of Westminster and replace them with Arminian formulas." The changes urged by the liberals were "very radical." Such was the weakness of officebearers, "themselves orthodox," that they were willing to "put up with it" and were "broadminded enough to include Amyraldianism in it [the 'Calvinistic System']" (132, 135, 141, 165; letters to Bavinck and Kuypers).

And what "Arminian formula" did the liberals, in fact, insert into the Westminster Confession in 1903 in order to "remove the Calvinistic doctrine of election" from that symbol? The now confessional and binding statement that God loves all men without exception with a love that desires to save them all. This, of course, is the very doctrine that the Christian Reformed Church adopted as official dogma in its common grace decision of 1924; that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church virtually adopted in 1948 by its approval and distribution of the report of its committee on "The Free Offer of the Gospel"; that almost all reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches warmly embrace and

passionately defend as fundamental Calvinism; and the denial of which warrants the branding of the Protestant Reformed Churches as “hyper-Calvinists.”

Also contributing to the apostasy of the Presbyterian Church, the apostasy that would become aggressive and official in the Auburn Affirmation and that would drive Machen out of the church, was the failure of the Church to exercise discipline upon the heretics.

In the churches at large things look miserable. Church discipline is fallen very much into disuse and what is more the realization that it *must* be exerted dutifully has been lost.... They allow opinions to be expressed and spread unhindered. Opinions which, without any doubt, not only assail the Reformed doctrine but also the army of Christianity (184; letter to Kuyper).

The same false doctrines that were destroying the Presbyterian Church were also present in the Reformed Church in America (RCA). The great need, Vos thought, was that “all the Dutch people of Reformed principles [be] one, and could form a separate denomination. It seems to

me that isolation is the only thing that can protect us against washing away with the current” (142; letter to Kuyper).

A serious error in the Christian Reformed Church in 1891 (when Vos was still teaching at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI) was that many ministers viewed infant baptism as merely “a symbolic offer of the covenant on God’s side” to all the baptized infants, rather than as “a seal of the gospel promise,” which is “unconditional.” These ministers, Vos noted, had adopted the doctrine of “Pieters and Kreulen,” ministers of the churches of the Secession of 1834 in the Netherlands. This covenant doctrine was “offensive” to Vos, since it was an effort, albeit “unconscious” (in Vos’ charitable opinion), “to brush aside the principle of the sovereign grace of God...in the covenant” (147, 152, 153ff.; letters to Warfield and Bavinck).

In closest connection with the doctrine of infant baptism that troubled Vos was the powerful movement in the Christian Reformed Church already in the late 1800s to cut the covenant loose from election, that is, to deny that God’s eternal election governs the covenant, the

covenant promise, and covenant salvation. "The covenant," Vos wrote, "is employed to render election harmless." In order to do this, the Christian Reformed theologians reduced the covenant of grace to a "conditional offer of the gospel." Election was still adhered to by these men, but in name only. For them, election is "something separate that may not influence and have a lasting effect on any other field. I cannot help but think that this leads to an un-Reformed covenant theory" (149; letter to Kuypers).

Vos' letters indicate, and Denison's life of Vos confirms, that Christian Reformed ministers severely and publicly criticized Vos for teaching that election governs the covenant, on the basis of Romans 9. Their clever ploy was to represent Vos' supralapsarianism as the object of their attack, when, in fact, as Vos observed, the real object of their hatred was election itself.

Such was the vehemence of the criticism of Vos for his doctrine of the covenant that, if the criticism did not drive him out of the Christian Reformed Church, it strongly influenced his decision to leave Calvin Seminary for Princeton (149, 160ff.; letters to Kuypers and Warfield).

This same Christian Reformed thinking about election and the covenant would officially and formally drive Herman Hoeksema out of the church in 1924. The same deceptive tactic of making Hoeksema's supralapsarianism the root of his supposed doctrinal error would be employed (when, in fact, his foes opposed his confession of election, whether supralapsarian or infralapsarian, as governing the preaching of the gospel and the covenant). The tactic is still being used, as witness Jelle Faber's *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Inheritance Publications, 1996).

Today, it is the men of the Federal [Covenant] Vision, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated") and their several daughters, and all defenders of a conditional covenant of resistible grace with every baptized child who are vigorously carrying out the project Vos exposed, and suffered at the hands of, in the early 1890s in the Christian Reformed Church: "render election harmless."

The necessary implication of which is: render the will of man exceedingly harmful. ■

Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008. Pp. xvii + 506. \$35.99. Hardcover. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

Commemorating the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company is publishing several books in the "Calvin 500" series. To date, both this book and the smaller book by David Hall, *Legacy of John Calvin*, have been printed.

As the title indicates, this book is a "collection of commentaries on Calvin's *Institutes*" (xv), and particularly of the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. In his foreword, J. I. Packer asserts that this edition was one of the wonders of the literary world, spiritual world, and theological world.

Calvin opened his work with a prefatory address to King Francis I; so William S. Barker opens this work with an essay entitled "The Historical Context of the *Institutes* as a Work in Theology." Barker notes that Calvin wrote the *Institutes* in the context of persecution, seeking "to demonstrate the orthodoxy and orderly conduct of the Protestant movement" (4) in distinction from the Anabaptists. Calvin pointed out that the Reformers, not Rome, were in line with the

teachings of Scripture as confessed and developed by the early church fathers. Calvin's purpose was to instruct in the Reformed and biblical faith, and ultimately to promote godliness and piety. The essay concludes by examining the place of the *Institutes* in the history of theology, quoting and referring to the praises of many.

Chapters 2-19 contain summaries of various sections of the *Institutes*, each chapter being written by a different contributor. The chapters are arranged in the classic order of the six *loci* of Reformed doctrine, which, as anyone familiar with the *Institutes* knows, was *not* the order Calvin used in presenting his material. Accordingly, although Calvin did not treat the doctrine of predestination until book 3, that section of the *Institutes* is reviewed in chapter 5 of this volume; the examination of Calvin's treatment of justification appears in this volume *before* the examination of his treatment of sanctification; and the last chapter of this volume treats eschatology, which Calvin treated in book 3, *before* his treatment of ecclesiology.

Some of the contributors summarize Calvin's thought concisely and accurately, with minimal comment and analysis. Others give more extensive analysis of Calvin's thought in addition to their summary. In some instances they present Calvin's thought not only from his *Institutes* but also from other of his writings. Other times they bring the studies and conclusions of other Calvin scholars to bear on the particular doctrine that they are treating.

Calvin sets forth the subject of man's knowledge of God not only in his *Institutes* but also in various of his commentaries. K. Scott Oliphint treats that general subject, and the more specific matter of God's revelation in nature, in chapter 2. Oliphint notes that Calvin begins *covenantally*—treating the matter of the knowledge of God first in relation to man's knowledge of himself. Oliphint then summarizes Calvin's teaching regarding the knowledge of God that all men have, how men can have it, and how fallen man perverts this knowledge.

In treating this material, Oliphint appears to be speaking more for himself than for Calvin when he says that "man is ineradi-

cably and eternally image of God" and that if God (that is, God's image) "were ever removed from us, we would cease to exist" (24). Referring to the debate between Barth and Brunner regarding whether Calvin taught a natural theology, Oliphint argues that Calvin taught that natural man could not come to know the true God by His revelation in nature, but that the regenerate man can.

In chapter 3, "Calvin's Doctrine of Holy Scripture," Robert L. Reymond succinctly summarizes Calvin's teaching regarding Scripture's necessity, authority, self-attesting character, credibility, unity, and inerrancy. That Calvin did indeed understand the Scriptures to be inerrant, Reymond defends against the contrary position of some scholars.

Douglas Kelly investigates Calvin's treatment of the doctrine of God (chapter 4). After briefly examining Calvin's treatment of God's spirituality and its implication for the prohibition of image worship, Kelly treats Calvin's writings on the Trinity at length. Kelly summarizes Calvin's defense of the use of non-biblical terms to set forth the doctrine of the Trinity; quotes the significant definition of "person" that Calvin gives; and then

expands on Calvin's defense of the eternal deity of both Son and Spirit, rejecting the idea of subordinationism. "It is precisely here in Calvin's clear distinction (though not division) between God's essence and God's personhood—and in how he applies it to the full deity of the Son and the Spirit—that his great contribution to trinitarian theology lies" (75).

R. Scott Clark analyzes Calvin's view of predestination in chapter 5. He begins by noting that the doctrine is a "catholic" doctrine—taught well before Calvin's time, and by many Reformers other than Calvin. Arguing that Calvin's doctrine of predestination was exegetical, Clark examines Calvin's teaching on the subject as set forth in his commentary on the book of Romans. Arguing that Calvin's doctrine was theological, he analyzes the pertinent section of the *Institutes*. And arguing that Calvin's doctrine was pastoral, comforting God's people and motivating them to holy living, he analyzes Calvin's sermons on Ephesians.

Comprehensive is Joseph A. Pipa's treatment of Calvin's doctrine of creation and providence (chapter 6). Though Calvin says little about the mode and process

of creation, Pipa defends him against the assertion of Benjamin B. Warfield that "Calvin... teaches a doctrine of evolution" (126) and against the notion that, had Calvin been privy to the scientific information we have today, Calvin would surely not hold to a literal six-day creation, and to the idea of a young earth. Pipa notes Calvin's treatment of angels and devils in connection with the doctrine of creation. Pipa brings out both the polemical and practical points Calvin makes in treating providence; the great reformer was concerned to apply this doctrine to the edification and comfort of the believer.

In chapter 7, Michael Horton writes of the paradox of Calvin's view of humanity, in that Calvin speaks both of man's dignity by virtue of creation and man's corruption by virtue of sin. In dealing with Calvin's view of total depravity, Horton indicates that Calvin refused "to accept a total eradication of the divine image" (157) and that Calvin taught that the "Spirit is at work savingly in the elect, but also in common grace toward the reprobate" (158). Throughout this chapter much is made of Calvin's teachings regarding common grace.

That Calvin made statements that lead some to conclude that he taught a common grace is beyond question; but Horton's error is that he reads Calvin, who wrote in the 1500s, through the lens of a twenty-first century notion of common grace. The words that Horton later uses to assess the debate regarding supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism could as well be used with regard to the idea of common grace: "this is a later debate that can only be anachronistically inserted into Calvin's thinking" (164).

A fascinating treatment of Calvin's view of the covenant is found in chapter 8, written by Peter A. Lillback. Lillback notes the disagreement of scholars over Calvin's understanding and use of the covenant (170-180), and correctly notes that the covenant—particularly as established with Abraham—encompasses the entire scope of salvation history (181). He points out what Calvin understood to be the comparison and the contrast between the old and new covenants. He concludes that "Calvin's covenantal thought is not unclear although it is complex since he fully and rigorously grounds it in Christ" (210).

Fascinating though the chapter

is, Lillback gives hints of his own erroneous covenant view. Raising the issue of the covenant of works once and only once in this chapter, Lillback asserts in his introductory comments that "an elementary form of the covenant of works appears in Calvin's writings" (169). And in surveying what scholars have said about Calvin's covenant view, Lillback indicates that some consider Calvin's predestinarianism to be "incompatible with the conditional covenant of the Rhineland Reformers" (170), but later concludes that Calvin does "stand in accord with the Rhineland Reformers' covenant perspective" (204), implying that Calvin viewed the covenant as conditional. As I say, these are "hints." On the basis of this chapter, one would not be quick to charge Lillback with having a wrong covenant view. However, reading this chapter in light of Lillback's book *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (see review by David Engelsma in the November 2001 issue of *PRTJ*) one sees in this chapter hints of Lillback's erroneous covenant view.

Derek W. H. Thomas examines the part of Calvin's Christology that deals with Christ's per-

son, natures, and office (chapter 9). Thomas indicates that Calvin adhered closely to Chalcedon, and took issue with heresies regarding Christ's person and natures. In this connection, he defends Calvin in the matter of the death of Servetus. As this volume is a scholarly work, most chapters containing scores of footnotes, it struck me as quite odd that Thomas would make the following statement, and give no evidence or reference to support it: Mary was "a perpetual virgin in Calvin's view!" (212).

Chapter 10, authored by Robert A. Peterson, treats "Calvin on Christ's Saving Work." After giving a clear summary of each section and subsection of *Institutes* 2.16-17, Peterson makes four comments: 1) While many tend to emphasize either God's love or God's justice in Christ's death, Calvin equally emphasized both; 2) Calvin's view of atonement contrasts with Anselm's; 3) Christ's death was penal substitution; and 4) while "limited atonement is a logical extension of Calvin's thought," Calvin himself was "ambiguous or contradictory" on the question of whether atonement is limited or unlimited, "but that he maintained

the intrinsic efficacy of the atonement" (247).

"Justification and Union with Christ" (chapter 11) is written by Richard B. Gaffin. After examining how Calvin treated the doctrine of justification in successive editions of his *Institutes*, he underscores that, for Calvin, justification flowed from faith (union with Christ), and therefore God always bestows it with sanctification. Gaffin also indicates that Calvin's view of justification was the biblical and Reformed notion of the imputing of an alien righteousness to the sinner.

Joel R. Beeke examines Calvin's teaching regarding the Holy Spirit, faith and assurance, and repentance (chapter 12). Noting that Calvin often makes paradoxical statements regarding faith and assurance, Beeke sets forth four principles that governed Calvin in making his statements. This section is worth a more careful notice than I have time to give it in this review.

In chapter 13, after referring to Calvin's well-known threefold use of the law, David Clyde Jones devotes a section to surveying how the ten commandments were used throughout church history—contrasting Augustine's view of the law (grace) with Rome's view

(works). Jones notes that Calvin treats the law in connection with redemption in Christ—for Christ is the fulfillment of the law, and gives the grace to obey. Jones closes by noting that Calvin preached the law pastorally, showing that the gospel both empowered and motivated us to obey.

Chapters 14-16 are straightforward, section by section summaries of Calvin's teaching regarding ethics and the Christian life (chapter 14, by William Edgar), prayer (chapter 15, by David B. Calhoun), and worship and the sacraments (chapter 16, by W. Robert Godfrey).

In chapter 17, Joseph H. Hall treats Calvin's view of church government, including a treatment of the offices of the church, the authority ("power") of the church, and the authority of church councils. Defending Calvin against critics, Hall emphasizes that Calvin taught the presbyterian form of church government to be the form demanded by Scripture.

David W. Hall treats Calvin's view of civil government as set forth in his *Institutes* as well as in his sermons and commentaries (chapter 18). Noting that the extent of Calvin's treatment of this subject is disproportionate to its

international influence for centuries after Calvin's death, Hall devotes a section to explaining how Theodore Beza, Christopher Goodman, John Ponet, and others disseminated Calvin's ideas. He concludes that "everywhere Calvinism spread, so did its views of both respecting government and limiting it" (440).

Cornelis P. Venema begins his survey of Calvin's eschatology—particularly the resurrection of the body and life everlasting—with the *Institutes* (chapter 19). He draws on other writings and secondary literature to emphasize that Calvin was averse to speculating about eschatological matters not set forth in Scripture; to defend Calvin over against those who criticize his view of the intermediate state as being too individualistic; and to emphasize that Calvin looked for heaven in heaven, not on earth, when Christ returned.

The last chapter of the book is an expansive bibliography of Calvin's writings, biographies of Calvin, works regarding the cultural context in which Calvin labored in Geneva, and other works related to his theology and hermeneutics. An index of Scripture references, and an index of subjects and names, concludes the volume.

To read an original work is always preferable to reading a summary and analysis of that work. In that light, anyone who has the time and interest ought to read the *Institutes*.

But summaries and analyses have their place; and this volume serves that function well.

This volume is a good summary of Calvin's work. Good, in that in most instances it is faithful to what Calvin said. Good, in that it is not too short; the reader is given the substance of what Calvin wrote. And good, in that it is not too long; were the book much longer, it would cease being a summary, and become a restatement of the *Institutes*.

This volume also alerts the reader to debates regarding and criticisms about Calvin's ideas, that have arisen in the years after he wrote.

And it will whet one's interest to read the *Institutes*, in whole or in part. My interest was piqued to read again various parts of the *Institutes*—the sections on faith and assurance, and on the Christian life, to name only two; and more than once I pulled my copy of the *Institutes* off the shelf to find out whether Calvin really said that, or whether the author was faithfully summarizing him.

As a *complement* to the *Institutes*, and not a *substitute* for them, this book serves a valuable purpose. ■

With Heart and Mouth: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession, by Daniel R. Hyde. Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 2008. Pp. xi + 543. \$24.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 0-97936-775-5. [Reviewed by Ronald Cammenga.]

The Belgic Confession of Faith is one of the beloved Three Forms of Unity, the three confessions that together form the creedal basis for Reformed churches around the world. With the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dordt, the Belgic Confession gives expression to

the fundamental doctrines of the Reformation. It is the earliest of the Three Forms of Unity, having been written in 1561. And it is the confession that contains the most complete summary of the fundamental doctrines of Holy Scripture.

Daniel Hyde's commentary

explains the thirty-seven articles of the Belgic Confession. The explanation is thorough, instructive, and, for the most part, biblical. The Reverend Hyde, pastor of the Oceanside United Reformed Church in Oceanside, California, provides a valuable resource for understanding the doctrines that are articulated in this Reformed confession, a confession that is too often not given its due in Reformed churches. Originally the chapters of the book appeared as articles in the Reformed monthly *The Outlook*. Convinced that the articles deserved a wider distribution, the Reformed Fellowship has brought them together in a single volume.

The first chapter sets the historical background to the Belgic Confession, including a well-written biography of its author, Guido de Brès. The second chapter provides an overview of the Belgic Confession, including the structure of the Confession. Chapters three through thirty-nine treat the articles of the Belgic Confession successively. The content of the chapters faithfully sets forth the content of the Belgic Confession and demonstrates that the Confession, in turn, faithfully articulates the truth of sacred Scripture.

Among the commendable

features of the book is the fact that each chapter concludes with a few “Study Questions,” with the exception of chapter 6, which is undoubtedly an oversight. The “Study Questions” commend the use of the book by Bible study classes or discussion groups. The book also contains helpful endnotes that add to the overall value of the book. In addition, the author provides his readers with an extended bibliography, identifying helpful resources for further study of the Belgic Confession. The book lacks a subject index, which would be a useful addition in future printings and would enhance its usefulness for research. No book of this kind should be published without such an index. Included as an appendix is an English translation of the dedicatory epistle to the Belgic Confession by Dr. Alastair Duke. For some time, the editors of PRTJ have planned the printing of an English translation of this dedicatory epistle, which we also include in this issue. This dedicatory epistle has not been readily available. Bringing it to light by means of these translations ought to enhance the appreciation of Reformed folk for the treasure and sacrifice represented in the Belgic Confession.

This reviewer offers two main negative criticisms.

First, chapter 14, which deals with the Belgic Confession's treatment of the truth of creation, makes allowances for theistic evolution, particularly in the form of the Framework View. Although the view is not mentioned by name, it is clear that Hyde makes allowance for this heresy, as does also Westminster Seminary West (California), of which he is a graduate, and the United Reformed Churches, in which he pastors.

The question of when God created or how long it took him is a moot point for the Confession and is not the purpose of what we confess. Despite the personal belief of many of the Reformers that the earth was roughly six thousand years old, this never entered the official Confession of the Reformed churches. The purpose of the Confession is to declare the wonderful works of God, to put into words the song in our hearts, to join the saints around the throne in heaven not in speculating about days or the age of the earth... (p. 156).

This same openness to theistic evolution (what the Framework

View is) appears in the third study question at the end of this chapter: "In line with what our *Confession actually says* [emphasis is Hyde's], we did not deal with the days of creation. Ponder that for a moment and consider that neither the great ecumenical creeds nor the *Three Forms of Unity* speak to the issue of the days of creation. Should this be an issue that divides us as confessionally Reformed, conservative, Bible-believing Christians?" (p. 160).

This allowance for the heresy that denies biblical creation is regrettable. It is also inexcusable, both from the standpoint of the teaching of Scripture and the confessions. Although there was difference of opinion among the Reformers regarding the age of the earth, all recognizing that the exact age of the earth is not given in Scripture, all were convinced of the "young earth" view. Additionally, all the Reformers were agreed that the days of Genesis 1:1-2:3 were literal, successive, twenty-four hours days. All understood the Genesis account to be a historical account of the creation of the world, a historical account that rules out any form of evolutionary teaching. The Framework View is heresy, and it

is a heresy that will undoubtedly work its leavening influence in the coming years in the churches and institutions that have made allowances for it.

A second criticism is the imposition on article 14 of the Belgic Confession of the teaching of the covenant of works. The article reads, “For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed....” To draw out of that statement the doctrine of the covenant of works, including its teaching of the possibility that Adam could merit eternal life by his obedience, is contrived and far-fetched. No such teaching is intended or expressed by the

wording of article 14. One who insists on what the Confession “actually says” ought to grant that. The command was a “commandment of life” inasmuch as God’s promise was to preserve Adam in the life that he had in the Garden. Nothing more. To appeal to article 14 in support of the false teaching of the covenant of works is unwarranted.

Notwithstanding these two criticisms, this volume is recommended. It will prove to be a valuable resource for anyone who is teaching or studying the Belgic Confession of Faith. *With Heart and Mouth* is a worthwhile addition to any theological library. ■

Coming to Grips with Genesis: Biblical Authority and the Age of the Earth, ed. Terry Mortenson and Thane H. Ury. Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008. Pp. 478. \$16.99 (paper). ISBN-10: 0-89051-548-4. [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

To say that the heresy of evolution has made serious inroads into Reformed and Presbyterian churches today is to state the obvious. Like the Protestant churches generally and the Roman Catholic Church, many Reformed and Presbyterian churches have made their peace with evolution. The heresy is boldly promoted from the pulpit, in the seminary, in the Christian college classroom, and

in the Christian day-school. The broader assemblies put their stamp of approval on the error and protect those who defend it, many of whom are officebearers. Not only the scientific community, but the churches join in the celebration this year of the 250th anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birth. By many in the religious community the man who despised biblical Christianity is hailed as a champion of

free thought. And about his false teaching concerning the origin and development of life it is said that there is room for believing both it and the Bible. The man whose body is interred in Westminster Abbey has arguably exercised a greater influence on Western society than any ecclesiastic or royal personage buried in the same place.

Coming to Grips with Genesis confronts the error of evolution head-on. The book contains chapters by fourteen Christian scholars who expose and refute the error of evolution. The book aims particularly at theistic evolution, the form of the error cloaked in the garb of Christianity. The various forms of the error of theistic evolution are described and challenged: the gap theory, theistic evolution proper, the day-age theory, progressive creationism, and the framework hypothesis. *Coming to Grips with Genesis* is a refreshing defense of the literal, historical, confessional view of six-day creation, as well as the universal flood of Noah's day and a young earth. The chapters are not written from a technical, scientific viewpoint, but defend biblical creationism and refute evolution from an exegetical and theological standpoint.

The authors are to be commended for their insistence on the primacy of Scripture over scientific and geological evidence. The defense of creationism rests on the teaching of Scripture and the teaching of Scripture alone. William D. Barrick, in his chapter entitled "Noah's Flood and Its Geological Implications," has this to say:

All study of the Flood needs to begin with the biblical record itself. Careful analysis of the record in Genesis 6-8 should be the only basis upon which anyone considers potential geologic implications.... Far too many evangelicals have allowed the *a priori* nature of the biblical text to slip away by making it subject to external confirmation (pp. 252, 253).

Throughout the book, the contributors consistently take the position that the Christian view of origins rests on the clear revelation of God in Scripture. While the findings of science properly understood support the teaching of Scripture, these findings and man's interpretation of them do not establish the truth of Scripture. Scripture as divinely, infallibly, and verbally

inspired is the only and ultimate authority for origins.

This reviewer found a number of the chapters of this book especially helpful. The chapter entitled "A Brief Overview of the Exegesis of Genesis 1-11: Luther to Lyell," by David W. Hall demonstrates clearly that the literal view of the opening chapters of Genesis is the historic view of the Christian church. Terry Mortenson's contribution, "'Deep Time' and the Church's Compromise: Historical Background," includes a clear repudiation of the principle of uniformitarianism. "Is Nature the 67th Book of the Bible?" by Richard L. Mayhue explores the proper relationship between special revelation and general revelation. In this chapter Mayhue rejects the view that "nature" is the 67th book of the Bible, and rejects the position that special revelation is to be interpreted in the light of general revelation. An excellent chapter! Robert V. McCabe's "A Critique of the Framework Interpretation of the Creation Week" is thorough and penetrating. McCabe describes the framework view in detail and names its promoters in contemporary evangelicalism, also in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. He demonstrates that the

framework view is unbiblical and represents an accommodation of the biblical view of creation to the pressures of evolution. "Whence Cometh Death? A Biblical Theology of Physical Death and Natural Evil," was written by James Stambaugh. In this chapter, Stambaugh provides biblical refutation of the position accepted by every form of evolution that death was present in the creation from the beginning, and did not have its origin in the judgment of God over man's sin. The chapter contains an excellent treatment of this attendant error of evolution.

Coming to Grips with Genesis is dedicated to Dr. John C. Whitcomb, Jr., for many years an ardent defender of biblical creationism against evolution. The book contains a short biography of Whitcomb, as well as a bibliography of his writings.

This is one of the best defenses of the literal, historical, biblical account of God's work of creation that has been published in recent years. Ministers, seminary professors, college professors, Christian school teachers, seminarians, and college students will profit greatly from its contents. The book deserves a wide audience. Heartily recommended! ■

The Lord's Supper: Five Views, ed. Gordon T. Smith. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008. Pp 157. \$18.00. Paper. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

For fifteen years or more, publishers such as InterVarsity Press and Zondervan have published books in which several writers from various Christian backgrounds write an essay on a doctrinal or ethical topic from the viewpoint of their own background, and respond to the essays of the other contributors. The value of such books is twofold: first, in a concise way the reader learns the position of different branches of Christendom regarding that particular topic; and second, the reader sees how that doctrine is being developed, for good or bad, in the churches today.

This is one such book. Its editor, Gordon Smith (president of reSource Leadership International for Theological Education) asked the various contributors not only to summarize their tradition's view of the Lord's Supper, but also to relate that view to the person and work of Christ, to that tradition's view of the church, and to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Presenting the Roman Catholic view is Jeffrey Gros, professor

of church history at Memphis Theological Seminary in Memphis, TN. The Lutheran contributor is John R. Stephenson, professor of historical theology at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catharines, ON. Leanne VanDyke, academic dean and professor of Reformed theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, MI, presents the Reformed view. The Baptist View is summarized by Roger E. Olson, professor of theology at George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, TX. And Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA, wrote the chapter entitled "The Pentecostal View."

No question about it, the book was informative. Nevertheless, this book was a disappointment for various reasons.

The Pentecostal view.

Being less familiar with the Pentecostal view of the Lord's Supper than with other views, I found this chapter most informative.

Focusing on classical (not charismatic) Pentecostalism, and after noting that Pentecostalism does not have a unified view of the church and sacraments, Kärkkäinen presents the main points of the Pentecostal view. First, Pentecostals prefer to speak of the Lord's Supper as an ordinance rather than a sacrament, rejecting the notion that grace is bestowed by the elements themselves. Second, as to the theological meaning of the Lord's Supper, Pentecostals are Zwinglian in emphasizing that Christ is not really present. At the same time, Kärkkäinen speaks of Christ's spiritual presence. Third, he relates the Lord's Supper to the Pentecostal view of divine healing, referring to I Corinthians 11:30-32 and Isaiah 53:4-5. Commemorating Christ's death is a "healing event" (127). He further notes that the Pentecostal view of the Lord's Supper indicates that "Pentecostalism...is not primarily a 'Spirit-movement,' but rather thoroughly christocentric" (129).

The Baptist contributor, himself a former Pentecostal, points out the mistake of Pentecostalism in expecting physical healing in this life: "I have personally known of several Pentecostals who have

struggled with doubt about their salvation because of ongoing physical illness, in spite of faithful praying" (143). Truth comforts; distortion of the truth does not. How comforting, though, when by partaking of the Lord's Supper God's people are strengthened in their faith that Christ, having died on the cross to take away our sins, heals us by raising our bodies to be free of disease!

Misrepresenting the view of one's own tradition.

Not as a whole, but on particular and significant points, both Jeffrey Gros and John Stephenson misrepresent the view that they are presenting.

Setting forth Rome's view, Gros says that Christ is present "sacramentally" and "bodily," and that the Eucharist does not compete with Christ's atonement, but rather "sacramentally re-presents it" and "perpetuates" it (19). He specifically refers to the Heidelberg Catechism's assertion that the mass denies the sacrifice of Christ, as being that which Rome would never say. Interestingly, Gros indicates in a footnote that his summary of Catholic teaching is largely borrowed from quotes and paraphrases "of the

Christian Reformed Dialogue with the Catholic Church in the United States and Canada” (pp. 16-17). To this point, he has said what we would expect any Roman Catholic to say.

His misrepresentation is found in his treatment of transubstantiation. Gros says that in explaining the mystery of Christ’s bodily presence, the word “bodily” should not be misunderstood to teach “a localized or fleshly presence” (17), for Catholics deny a localized or fleshly presence of Christ. He explains the term “transubstantiation” as being part of a medieval worldview based on Platonic and Aristotelian thinking. If we were to understand this today, he argues, we would consider absurd the debate over whether Christ’s body is present in the Lord’s Supper or not.

Reading Gros, one is left with the impression that Rome does not teach the presence of Christ in His human nature at the table. This causes the Lutheran contributor “to shudder when Gros also repudiates Jesus’ ‘fleshly’ presence” (32), because Jesus said the bread was His body! The Reformed contributor considers Gros’ explanation of transubstantiation to be “quite helpful as a point of comparison

with the Reformed position” (34; note—a point of *comparison*, not of *contrast*); and the Baptist says, “Anyone familiar with Catholic theology has to wonder whether Gros’s interpretations of Catholic doctrine are the same as the magisterium’s or whether they are his own interpretations, not necessarily shared by the church’s magisterium” (36). I’m in agreement with the Baptist contributor here.

Stephenson develops the main point of the Lutheran view—the real, bodily supernatural presence of Jesus Christ. Two statements indicate that he misrepresents Lutheranism: first, his statement in a footnote that this real presence of Christ is *not* explained by the omnipresence of Christ’s human nature (52), and second, his statement that the Lutheran view of Christ’s real presence “could conceivably coexist with Roman transubstantiation” (52). Reformed believers judge both Rome and Lutheranism to be in error as regards their view of Christ’s presence; but even Lutherans have distinguished themselves from Rome on this point, by teaching consubstantiation rather than transubstantiation. Again, the Baptist Roger Olson makes this point in his response.

Insufficient explanations of the doctrine.

Some contributors could have used their space better to develop the view that they were presenting. Particularly I thought this to be the case with those presenting the views of Rome and of the Reformed churches.

After setting forth Rome's view in five pages, Jeffrey Gros devotes more than eight pages to telling us how Rome has been busy in ecumenical dialogue on the subject of the Lord's Supper. I would have been more interested in further explanations of Rome's view itself.

Presenting the Reformed view, Leanne VanDyke gave an overview of the teachings of Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, and John Calvin, noting areas of similarity and difference. While correctly arguing that Calvin's view is "the most vital and fruitful for contemporary Reformed traditions" (68), and while making some passing references to the Second Helvetic Confession and the French Confession of 1562, she could have done more to develop the official Reformed view of the Lord's Supper, not only as Calvin saw it, but as the Reformed confessions set it forth.

Specifically, no mention is made of the Reformed denunciation of the Romish mass, as found in Q&A 80 of the Catechism, nor to the longest article in the Belgic Confession, entitled "The Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Article 35).

Both the Baptist and Pentecostal contributors refer to the diversity of groups within their tradition as a reason why their essay could be only a general survey, and not a real development of the doctrine.

Scripture, anyone?

Stephenson indicates that "all contributors to this volume, along with our intended target audience, accept the inspiration of the Holy Scripture and hence acknowledge its accuracy and submit to its authority" (42). In that light, two weaknesses of the essays come to mind.

The first is a paucity of Scripture references. The Roman Catholic contributor does identify those passages in which the Gospel writers and Paul speak to the matter of the Lord's Supper, and makes a few other references to Scripture in his essay. Topping the list of frequency of Scripture references, the Lutheran contribu-

tor makes about two dozen, and coming in second is the Pentecostal contributor with twelve. The Baptist contributor makes two explicit Scripture references, while the Reformed contributor makes not one, except for referring to Jesus' statement "This is my body," and even then gives no Scripture reference.

The second is that even when reference is made to a passage, no substantial exegesis of the passage is given.

As has been noted, the emphasis of the articles is on setting forth what a certain tradition believes about the Lord's Supper, but little explanation is given as to *why* it believes what it does on the basis of God's Word.

"An exercise in ecumenism"

No doubt part of the reason for the paucity of Scripture references is found in the purpose of the book. It is openly and unabashedly ecumenical. "Hence, this collection of essays is an exercise in ecumenism," writes the editor on page 9. And he concludes that, though the differences in understanding the Lord's Supper are "legitimate" (?) and "substantial," they don't negate the fact that by partaking of the

Lord's Supper, "We are increasingly made one with Christ as we abide in him and he abides in us, and we are made one with another in the fellowship of the Spirit" (148). The sentence is true, if the "we" is the true believer within the body of Christ; but because the editor refers it to Christians of every stripe and background, in promotion of an ecumenical spirit, it is not true.

It stands to reason that in a book of this sort, each writer will point out those areas in which the various traditions agree. But that the various writers point to these areas of agreement as opportunities for future "dialogue" shows that the writers themselves are ecumenically minded.

As this was the book's main purpose, the one point it impressed upon me most is that Christians are more willing to discuss those things they have in common, than those in which they differ for scriptural reasons. "Dialogue" is a nice word, indeed; but dialogue will never resolve differences by leading to a deeper understanding of truth.

Was it his ecumenical spirit that led Jeffrey Gros to speak as he did regarding Rome's view of Christ's presence? If not, this

spirit did lead him to explain why the Lord's Supper divides Christians: "Because of our fierce attachment to Christ and our understanding of the relationship of the church in Christ's unique mediatorial role in salvation" (14). We are divided because we all love our Lord—the Lord common to us all! As if the real reason why children fight and squabble at the dinner table is their deep love for their father!

While the book promotes an ecumenical spirit, it also indicates the futility of looking soon for the fruit of ecumenical dialogue in seeing all Christians

of various backgrounds partaking of the sacrament together with the sanction of their churches. Until others agree with Lutherans that Jesus is bodily present in His flesh ("This is my body"), John Stephenson will have none of it. And rightly so, even if his exegesis is wrong!

The Christ who is Lord, and whose Supper we eat, unites His true, spiritual church by leading her more deeply into the knowledge of the truth. This book demonstrates how far from that knowledge much of Christendom is. ■

The Six Days of Genesis: A Scientific Appreciation of Chapters 1-11, by Paul F. Taylor. Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2007. Pp. 221. \$13.99. Paper. [Reviewed by Douglas J. Kuiper.]

Paul Taylor works for the organization "Answers in Genesis." As a scientist who submits to the authority of the Scriptures, he views Genesis 1-11 as a record of literal history, believes that God created the world in six 24-hour days, and holds to the view that the earth is relatively young—about 6,000 years. This book is a defense of that view; the author considers his work to be a "devo-

tional yet scientific" explanation of Genesis 1-11.

That Taylor does not attempt to prove the Scriptures to be true by means of science is worthy of note: "We believe the Bible because it is the Word of God. We don't believe it merely because of being convinced by the science" (sic, 24). He has a high view of Scripture: "I believe the entire Bible to be the Word

of God, authoritative, sufficient, complete, and inerrant. In this I include the Book of Genesis” (16). He contends that when one who studies science begins with such a high view of Scripture, “we observe that our scientific facts, as we get to learn them, fall into place” (20). Properly understood, science will demonstrate the truth that Scripture teaches.

Having set forth these initial observations, Taylor proceeds in chapters 2-9 to lead the reader through the Scripture’s narrative of God’s creative work (Gen. 1), evaluating them scientifically. Chapters 10-13 treat Genesis 2-3. Each of the final eight chapters of the book are devoted to one more chapter in Genesis, so that in chapter 21 Taylor treats the matter of the tower of Babel as recorded in Genesis 11.

Repudiating evolution.

Demonstrating his conviction that these chapters are to be taken literally, Taylor rebuts the gap theory (chapter 2); shows why it is improper to appeal to II Peter 3:8 to teach that the days of creation week were longer than 24 hours (chapter 3); posits that God created a mature earth (chapters 5 and 6); and underscores that Genesis 1 is

not poetry, but historical narrative (chapter 6). In chapter 7, dealing with the creation of animals, he shows how evolutionary theory is biologically wrong. In chapter 16, dealing with God’s announcement of the Flood, he says that the Flood was a global event.

Two specific evidences for repudiating evolution were interesting. First, the fact that society observes a seven-day week (80-81). Taylor observes that the week is the only time period with no astronomical basis (not governed by the sun or moon). That being true, the evolutionist has every reason to try to make a six-day or ten-day week—and some have attempted to do so. But the week is part of God’s creation, and our observance of the week is demanded by the fourth commandment. That society continues to use the seven-day week as a period of time is a testimony against its own unbelief. Second, Taylor finds scriptural evidence against a bronze age followed by an iron age, which idea is part of the evolutionist’s view of history, in Tubal-Cain’s pioneering work with all metals (123).

Scientific observations.

Generally, Taylor’s scientific

observations in these chapters are easily understood and familiar to one who is committed to the doctrine of creation. Furthermore, he makes scientific observations only when he thinks appropriate—not necessarily in every chapter. Many readers who are not scientifically astute will find this book easily understandable.

Once I found his scientific observations too deep or technical for me to evaluate well (54-60). Although Taylor believes that God created a mature creation, he does not use this as his reason for explaining why we see the light of those stars that might be more than 6,000 light years away; rather, he appeals to a cosmological model proposed by D. R. Humphreys, which adapts the ideas of Bernhard Riemann regarding the curvature of space. I am in no position to evaluate this model. However, I am unashamed to continue to explain how Adam saw the light of the stars by saying that God created a mature creation.

Some of Taylor's scientific observations were new to me. First, he attempts a scientific explanation for why men did not live as long after the flood as before, which explanation relates to the difference between the amount of water in the

atmosphere before the flood and the amount of water after the flood (131-132). Second, he indicates that hydrodynamic experiments have demonstrated that the size and shape of the ark was exactly the best to withstand the great tidal forces of the flood (147-148). Third, he does not entirely dismiss the idea of an Ice Age, but considers that it could not have lasted more than a few hundred years after the Flood, and not covered more than a third of the earth (170-171).

Overall, Taylor is sound in his doctrine. He understands that death is the result of sin, and sin is due to the fall, so that one error of evolution is that it speaks of death before the fall. That Eve, being created out of Adam, cannot thus represent all women as their head, as some liberals and feminists argue, he sees.

Errors of doctrine and hermeneutics.

Throughout the book Taylor gives evidence of doctrinal stands that the Protestant Reformed churches would judge erroneous. Taylor judges that fallen mankind, even atheists, still bear God's image. He speaks of the covenant being one-sided (Christ alone saves us), but at the same

time consisting of an agreement. God's covenant with Noah he considers to be one of common grace. He refers to the offer of salvation in two significant places—first, when God spoke to Cain after Cain had killed Abel; second, regarding Noah's work of preaching and building the ark. Rather than considering these to be offers of salvation to Cain and the wicked world, the Reformed reader should view them as God's pronouncing judgment upon impenitent sinners.

While Taylor is usually sound in his interpretation of Scripture, some of his observations involve questionable methods of interpretation.

Taylor gives the meaning of the names of the ten men in the line of the covenant before the flood, then puts these names together into a sentence that spells out a dramatic statement of the gospel (134-135). That the names are significant in their own right I do not dispute; that God meant the church to string them together to find a statement of the gospel, however, is farfetched.

Taylor also finds significance in the fact that the ark rested on the 17th day of the 7th month, that at the Passover this 7th month

became the 1st month of Israel's year, and that Jesus rose the 17th day of the 1st month—that is, on the same day as that on which the ark rested (167). Frankly, I have to study this matter more carefully before coming to a definite opinion on it.

These errors do not detract from the book's value. The value of the book is that it explains the events of Genesis 1-11 in such a way as to demonstrate that Scripture and science, properly understood, do not contradict each other. Furthermore, the book is written in a simple style and in plain language, so that it takes neither a theologian nor a scientist to read and understand it. Indeed, the book is recommended to a wide audience. ■

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