

# THE ORDER OF SALVATION



HERMAN BAVINCK

# **THE ORDER OF SALVATION (ORDO SALUTIS)**

**ABRIDGED AND MADE EASY TO READ**

**HERMAN BAVINCK**

**MONERGISM BOOKS**

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### About This Edition

This volume is a revised and abridged adaptation of Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 3 by Herman Bavinck. While the original theological substance has been carefully preserved, the language has been updated for clarity, readability, and devotional warmth. Archaic expressions, technical terminology, and culturally distant illustrations have been simplified or removed—without compromising the biblical depth, doctrinal integrity, or spiritual richness of Bavinck’s thought.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) was used under careful human oversight to assist in the editorial process.

This edition is not intended as a replacement for the full original work, but as a faithful companion and accessible gateway into Bavinck’s theological vision.

Adapted with reverence and care from:

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## THE UNIVERSAL SEARCH FOR SALVATION

**B**ecause Christ continues His work as Prophet, Priest, and King in heaven, we must understand that salvation is entirely God's work from beginning to end. Just as God created the world and governs it through Christ—revealing His justice, grace, power, and wisdom—so He also applies Christ's saving work to His people through the Holy Spirit. Salvation is not man-made; it is God's design, revealing His glory and grace.

The Bible presents a unique view of salvation. Unlike the philosophies and religions of the world, it does not begin with human effort or wisdom. Nearly every religion teaches some form of salvation or redemption. People everywhere long for lasting peace, joy, and security—something that neither education, wealth, culture, nor success can provide. That longing points to a deeper truth: we were made for God, and our hearts remain restless until they rest in Him.

In that sense, all people are, knowingly or unknowingly, seeking God—the highest good and our eternal joy (Acts 17:27). But because our hearts

are darkened and our thoughts corrupted, we do not seek Him rightly. Pagan religions do not understand God's holiness, the depth of human sin, or the grace revealed in Christ. Without knowing the Savior, they all teach some form of salvation by works. People try to earn divine favor through ritual, moral effort, or personal discipline.

At its heart, every false religion denies the one true God and tries to replace grace with human effort. Think of the Tower of Babel: “*Let us build a tower to the heavens and make a name for ourselves*” (Gen. 11:4). Even when these religions speak of redemption, it is not through grace but through human striving. Whether through sacrifices, prayers, good deeds, or strict discipline, the burden is placed on the individual. In every case, people are their own saviors. These are *autosoteric* religions—self-saving systems.

In primitive religions, the idea of sin is often weak or missing entirely. Redemption is about appeasing spirits or gaining good fortune through rituals. In more developed religions, morality plays a greater role, but salvation is still based on good works. The idea is the same: if you do what is right, the deity will reward you.

Some religions emphasize a practical life—serving others and doing good in daily tasks. For instance, in Zoroastrianism, even farming is seen as a holy act: “He who sows grain, sows holiness.” Other religions, like Buddhism, see life itself as suffering, and so salvation is found in detaching from all desires and withdrawing from the world. In both approaches, salvation is something you must achieve through your own strength. As Buddha famously said: “*Be your own light. Be your own refuge. Do not look for help outside yourself.*”

Even Islam, which came after Christianity, does not offer a true view of grace. It teaches that salvation comes from avoiding punishment, not from a deep deliverance from sin itself. Forgiveness is given to those who believe in Allah and Muhammad, and who fulfill religious duties—but it is earned, not freely given. In this system too, salvation is not a gift from God, but a reward for human effort.

Philosophies are no different. They teach that the way to salvation is through personal virtue or moral self-improvement. Some say it's through action, others through self-denial or quiet meditation. But always, the message is the same: you must save yourself.

This pride in self-effort runs deep. Seneca said the gods merely ensure that we live—but living well is up to us. Cicero believed people shouldn't thank God for being virtuous, because virtue is something we achieve, not something we receive. "*Did anyone ever thank the gods for being a good person?*" he asked. In this way, salvation is turned into a personal achievement, and grace is forgotten.

## THE SCRIPTURAL VIEW OF SALVATION: GRACE

**T**he Bible presents a radically different vision of salvation from what the world offers. From the very beginning, it is God who takes the initiative. After humanity's fall into sin, it is God—by His grace—who steps in to put enmity between the serpent and the woman, drawing His people back to Himself (Gen. 3:15). He calls Abraham, chooses Israel to be His treasured possession, makes a covenant with them, and gives them His law (Gen. 12:1; Exod. 19:4–6). He provides atonement through the blood on the altar (Lev. 17:11), and everything He does is a testimony to His love and care for His people (Isa. 5; Jer. 2:21).

Israel's relationship with God was never earned through obedience. The covenant was not a contract of works, where blessing was traded for performance. It was grounded in God's gracious election and steadfast love. Yet, those who received this covenant were expected to walk in obedience—not to earn God's favor, but as a response to it. Faithful obedience was the proper expression of covenant life.

Even so, not all responded rightly. Some rejected God outright, living lawless and irreverent lives (Ps. 14:1; Mal. 2:17). Others, like the Pharisees later on, took pride in external rule-keeping and trusted in their own righteousness (Jer. 7:4). But among them were a faithful remnant—those who loved God’s law and meditated on it with sincerity, not to boast in their own goodness, but to honor God from the heart.

These believers did not pretend to be sinless. Though they cried out for justice and spoke of their integrity, they also confessed their sins deeply and often. They prayed for mercy and rested their hope on God’s grace (Pss. 32; 51; 130; Isa. 6:5; Dan. 9). Their righteousness wasn’t about moral superiority—it was about trusting in God, leaning on His promises, and finding refuge in His mercy.

The Old Testament is filled with rich words that describe this trust in God:

- *They believed in Him* (Gen. 15:6)
- *They trusted and took refuge in Him* (Ps. 18:2)
- *They feared Him, hoped in Him, waited for Him, leaned on Him, and clung to Him* (Ps. 33:18, 91:14; Isa. 28:16)

This living faith was what marked the true people of God. As Scripture says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Just as keeping God’s commandments could be called righteousness, so too could this wholehearted trust in Him.

### **The Old Testament: Grace and the Rise of Legalism**

The kind of righteousness described in the Old Testament—one rooted in trust and dependence on God—is itself a gift of God’s grace, a work of His Spirit. Israel was never righteous on its own merit. God chose them not

because they were faithful, but in spite of their stubbornness (Deut. 9:4–6). All wisdom, life, power, and blessing flowed from Him alone (Ps. 36:9; Jer. 2:13). The humble heart of the godly in Israel gave all glory to God and prayed, “Not to us, O Lord, but to your name give glory” (Ps. 115:1).

The faithful knew that everything—salvation, wisdom, repentance, even obedience—must come from God. He promised to be their God and make them His people. Even when they broke His covenant again and again, God remained faithful for the sake of His own name. He promised not to abandon them, but to restore them, forgive them, and give them a new heart and a new spirit (Deut. 30:6; Ezek. 36:26; Jer. 31:31–34). The entire covenant rested on God's grace—not human achievement.

Yet history shows that Israel repeatedly turned from this grace. After the exile, a shift occurred. When Ezra and Nehemiah led the returned exiles to recommit to the Law, Israel took on a new seriousness about obedience (Neh. 8–10). This marked a dramatic change. Before the exile, the people had repeatedly fallen into idolatry. Afterward, they became rigidly devoted to the Law and rejected idolatry altogether. While this zeal for the Law was commendable in part, over time it became extreme.

The living God was slowly replaced in the hearts of the people by an obsession with the Law itself. Especially as Israel faced suffering and oppression, they began to see the Law—not God—as their primary hope. The voice of the prophets began to fade, and a new legalism took over.

In this new system, Israel still longed for the Messiah, but not as the one who would deal with their sin and bring in a new covenant. Instead, they expected a political deliverer who would overthrow their enemies and restore their national power. The Law was elevated as eternal wisdom—the source of life and salvation. It became the measure of all things.

This way of thinking saw God and man as two parties in a contract: humans offered obedience, and God gave blessings in return. Every act was weighed on the scales of the Law. People believed their good deeds earned merit, obligating God to respond in kind. Even repentance, prayer, almsgiving, and fasting were treated as works—ways to earn forgiveness and secure favor. If one person's righteousness fell short, another's could make up for it—whether a patriarch, a prophet, or a living saint.

In this legal system, grace gave way to merit. Atonement was no longer about God covering sin in mercy, but about people trying to tip the scales of justice through their own efforts. The heart of the covenant—God's gracious forgiveness and transforming power—was buried under a mountain of human rule-keeping.

This strict focus on law-keeping (nomism) led to two opposite responses among the Jews. Some, especially among the Pharisees, believed they had fully kept the law. Whether sincerely or in self-deception, they became proud and felt entitled to God's blessing (Matt. 19:20; Luke 18:11). They saw themselves as righteous and expected reward in return.

Others, however, came to a very different conclusion. They realized that true righteousness could not be achieved by human effort. The more seriously they tried to keep the law, the more deeply they felt its weight. They were left uncertain of their standing before God. Instead of finding joy in Him or peace in His presence, they lived in fear and spiritual bondage, held captive by the fear of death (Heb. 2:15).

As their understanding of the law deepened, the burden only grew heavier. It became a yoke they could not bear (Acts 15:10). One ancient Jewish writing, 4 Ezra, puts it this way: "We who have received the law must still perish because of our sins."

This was the impasse: even with God's law in hand, people could not attain righteousness or peace through works. The law, though holy and good, could not save—it only revealed the depth of their need.

### **The Gospel of the Kingdom: God's Reign and Grace**

To grasp the comfort of Jesus' gospel, we must first understand the spiritual condition of Judaism in his day. Many Jews longed for God's kingdom, but they imagined it as a political power that would restore Israel's dominance. Jesus, however, proclaimed a kingdom entirely different—one of grace, not works; of the heart, not of political might.

This kingdom is indeed a treasure, something to be sought above all else (Matt. 6:33; 13:44–46). Yet it is not earned like a wage, but received as a gift. Jesus said its citizens are not the self-righteous, but the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful (Matt. 5). Even children, tax collectors, and sinners can enter—those the world often overlooks (Matt. 18:3; 21:31). The requirement is not personal merit, but repentance and faith—a turning from self to trust in God's grace (Mark 1:15).

While the kingdom has a future, eternal glory, it is also present now. It is growing, spreading like yeast through dough or a seed in soil (Matt. 13). It is spiritual, not external; a reign of God over hearts made new.

This righteousness that opens the door to the kingdom is itself a gift from God (Matt. 6:33). Forgiveness, eternal life, and entrance into the kingdom are not rewards for law-keeping—they are blessings of divine mercy, given to the undeserving (Matt. 9:13; Luke 18:30). Even our repentance and faith are gifts of grace, not products of our own will (Matt. 11:25–27; John 6:44, 65).

After Jesus' death and resurrection, this message became clearer. The apostles now understood that Jesus secured all the blessings of the kingdom

—righteousness, forgiveness, eternal life—through his suffering and death. He rose in triumph and now pours out these blessings through the Holy Spirit, whom he received in full measure after his ascension (Eph. 4:8–10).

While Jesus accomplished our salvation on earth, he now applies it from heaven. He is our Prophet, Priest, and King—continually working through the Spirit to make his people holy. That same Spirit who empowered Jesus in his earthly ministry (Luke 4:1, 18) now lives in his people. Jesus offered himself by the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14), and was raised in power by the Spirit (Rom. 1:4). After ascending to heaven, he sent the Spirit to dwell in his church and lead her to glory.

So closely is the exalted Christ united to the Spirit that Paul says, “The Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17). Not that Christ and the Spirit are the same person—but that in his exaltation, Christ is so full of the Spirit that he now gives life through him. He is the “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45), who leads his church by the power of the Spirit from glory to glory.

Through Christ, we do not climb our way to God. God comes to us. The kingdom is not for those who earn it, but for those who receive it by grace. In Jesus, the kingdom has come—and in him, the King himself welcomes all who trust in him.

### **The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit**

One of Christ’s first great acts after ascending into heaven was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Having been exalted to the right hand of the Father and having received the promised Spirit, Jesus poured out that Spirit upon his church (Acts 2:33). The Holy Spirit comes from the Father, is received by the Son, and is then given to the church by Christ himself (John 15:26; 14:26). Jesus had told his disciples that this would happen only after he was glorified (John 7:39).

This doesn't mean the Spirit was absent before Pentecost. The Old Testament frequently mentions God's Spirit, and even before Christ's death and resurrection, the Spirit was active—filling Elizabeth and John the Baptist, guiding Simeon, and anointing Jesus himself (Luke 1:15, 41; 2:25–27; John 3:34). But something new and world-changing happened at Pentecost.

Before this moment, the Spirit had been present in particular people for particular tasks. But now, because of Christ's ascension, the Spirit was given to the whole church to dwell in her permanently, making her his temple. This is one of the great works of God in history—like creation and Christ's incarnation. Through this outpouring, God gave birth to the church as a global and spiritual body, no longer tied to one nation or place, but sent into the world with a mission for all peoples.

This outpouring had long been promised. The prophets had spoken of a day when the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh—on sons and daughters, young and old, even servants (Isa. 44:3; Joel 2:28). John the Baptist had echoed this, saying that the Messiah would baptize not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire—a cleansing, purifying fire (Matt. 3:11). Jesus himself promised his followers that after his departure, he would send the Spirit to guide, comfort, and remain with them forever (John 14:16; 16:7).

This Spirit, Jesus said, would work in two ways. First, he would dwell in the hearts of believers—comforting, teaching, and leading them into all truth. But second, the Spirit would also confront the world—convicting it of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8–11). This work would flow outward from the church into the world, exposing its need for salvation.

Even before Pentecost, Jesus prepared his apostles for this gift. On the evening of his resurrection, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). This was a special empowerment for their apostolic calling. But on Pentecost, the gift of the Spirit was given not just to them, but to all believers—about 120 men and women gathered together in prayer (Acts 1:14; 2:1–4).

Though the phrase “filled with the Holy Spirit” had been used before, it now took on deeper meaning. Previously, the Spirit would come for a time to equip certain individuals. But now, he would dwell with all of God’s people continually. Just as Christ had taken on human flesh once and for all in the incarnation, the Spirit now took the church as his lasting dwelling place.

This indwelling of the Spirit marks the church as Christ’s own body and gives her a life of her own—not confined to Israel, but expanding to the ends of the earth. Pentecost marked the church’s true beginning as a global, Spirit-filled people.

The giving of the Spirit also confirms the exaltation of Christ. Just as the Spirit sanctified Christ in his suffering and raised him in power, so now the Spirit shapes and sanctifies his body, the church—until she becomes the fullness of Christ, who fills all in all (Eph. 1:23). The Spirit who perfected the Son in his humanity is now perfecting the church in her unity, holiness, and mission.

### **The Power and Purpose of Pentecost**

When the Holy Spirit was poured out after Christ’s ascension, it brought visible and powerful effects in the lives of his disciples. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit filled them so fully that they began to speak in different languages—not with unintelligible babbling, but with real, recognizable

speech (Acts 2:4). Luke, who wrote the book of Acts and worked closely with Paul, clearly describes this as a miracle of *speaking*, not just of hearing. The disciples weren't merely making strange sounds; they were proclaiming God's mighty deeds in actual languages the crowd could understand (Acts 2:6–8).

This gift of languages was different from the “tongues” mentioned in Paul's letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14). In those gatherings, the gift of tongues required interpretation, and the speech wasn't always intelligible to others. But in Acts 2, the miracle was that uneducated Galileans were suddenly able to speak real, foreign languages they had never learned. These were languages spoken by Jews visiting Jerusalem from all over the known world. And in those languages, the disciples declared the wonders of God—especially the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

That moment wasn't meant to turn the disciples into multilingual evangelists. It wasn't that the crowd couldn't understand Greek or Aramaic—most could. Rather, this miracle was symbolic and powerful: the newly born church was declaring God's works to all nations. It was a sign that the gospel was no longer limited to one people or one land. It was going out to the whole world. Just as the angels sang at creation and rejoiced at Christ's birth, now the newborn church itself sings—this time, in many tongues—the greatness of God's saving work.

Though this Pentecost miracle was unique, it marked the beginning of many extraordinary signs of the Spirit's presence in the early church. In the Judaism of the day, the Holy Spirit was rarely mentioned, and God seemed distant. But when Christ appeared and the Spirit descended upon him in love and power, everything changed. That same Spirit came upon the

church, not in vague whispers, but in tangible ways that stirred hearts and changed lives.

As the gospel spread, the Holy Spirit often came after people believed—sometimes at baptism (Acts 2:38), sometimes when the apostles laid hands on them (Acts 8:17; 19:6). Along with the Spirit came specific gifts: courage in preaching (Acts 4:8, 31), deep faith (6:5), joy and comfort (9:31), wisdom (6:3), prophecy (11:28), and yes, sometimes tongues (10:46), healings (3:6), and visions (10:19).

These powerful signs weren't just for show. They amazed the crowds and, at times, stirred opposition and persecution. But more importantly, they opened hearts to receive the gospel. In that early season of church life, these visible demonstrations were necessary. They gave the Christian message credibility, rooted it in power, and prepared the way for the enduring witness of Christ in the world.

### **The Holy Spirit and the Fullness of Salvation**

In the days of the apostles, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit brought not only great power, but also deep spiritual transformation. Paul himself received many extraordinary gifts—he was converted through a personal encounter with the risen Christ, and he regularly received divine revelations (Acts 9; 2 Cor. 12). He preached with boldness and performed miracles through the power of the Holy Spirit, leading many Gentiles to believe (Rom. 15:18–19).

But Paul made it clear that these special gifts were not unique to him. The Spirit gave different gifts to different believers, just as He saw fit (1 Cor. 12:11). These gifts, Paul said, were the *first fruits*—a foretaste of the full inheritance we will receive in glory (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 1:14). Though these spiritual gifts were valuable, Paul stressed that they must always serve the

body of Christ and align with the confession that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor. 12:3). They were never meant to elevate individuals or create divisions.

That's why Paul encouraged believers to seek the gifts that build up the church, especially prophecy over speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14). Above all, he elevated love as the most excellent gift—the one that gives all others their meaning and purpose (1 Cor. 13). In doing this, Paul shifts our focus from rare and dramatic signs to the Spirit's deeper, ongoing work: transforming hearts and uniting the church in holiness, love, and truth.

Even in the Old Testament, the Spirit wasn't just seen as the source of power, but as the giver of spiritual life (Ps. 51:12; Ezek. 36:27). Jesus reinforced this when He told Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born again by the Spirit (John 3:3, 5). Before He left His disciples, Jesus promised that the Spirit would come to live in them—comforting, guiding, and representing Him (John 14–16).

While the early church witnessed many miraculous signs, the greater work of the Spirit was the formation of a new people. The believers were deeply united—devoted to the apostles' teaching, sharing in fellowship, breaking bread, and praying together (Acts 2:42). They were filled with joy, courage, faith, and love. The Spirit knit them into one body and empowered them to follow Christ in a hostile world.

The Spirit is not a mere helper from afar. He is fully God—one with the Father and the Son—and He brings believers into full fellowship with the Triune God. Through Him, all of Christ's blessings become ours.

But the Spirit does more than deliver the forgiveness of sins. Salvation is not just about being declared righteous; it's also about becoming new. Christ didn't just remove the guilt of sin—He broke its power. He died and rose again so that we would no longer live for ourselves but for Him (2 Cor.

5:15). Where sin once ruled, grace now reigns. The righteousness we receive through Christ brings new life, not just a new legal status.

That's why the Spirit doesn't just work faith in our hearts—He also gives us a new nature. Faith is not only trusting God's Word; it's the beginning of a transformed life (2 Cor. 5:17). Through the Spirit, Christ lives in us (Gal. 2:20), and we live in Him (Rom. 8:1; Col. 3:11). This union with Christ is the heart of Christian life. He is our life, our righteousness, our joy, our everything.

### **The Spirit Fills Believers with the Fullness of Salvation**

When the Holy Spirit dwells in us, not only does Christ come to live in our hearts, but God the Father does too. By His Spirit, God fills His people with His presence so that, in the end, He will be “all in all” (John 14:23; 1 Cor. 15:28). Through this union with Christ, the Spirit also gives us a share in all of Christ's blessings: His wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). The Spirit assures us that we are God's children and that we are loved by Him (Rom. 8:14–17; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 5:5).

The Spirit sets us free from the bondage of the law and makes us a united people—a church with a common life and a single Head, Jesus Christ (Acts 2; Gal. 4–6). He binds believers together into one body (1 Cor. 12:13), leads them to the Father (Rom. 8:15), and unites them in a shared confession: “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3). He produces love and unity among them, makes them grow in grace, and helps them mature in Christ (Eph. 4:1–16; Phil. 2:1–2).

The Holy Spirit brings new life (John 3:5; Titus 3:5), gives understanding and spiritual insight (John 16:13; 1 Cor. 2), and supplies each believer with gifts for the good of the church (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12). He renews us and

sanctifies us (Gal. 5:16–22), seals us as God’s own, and guarantees our final glorification (Eph. 1:13–14; Rom. 8:11, 23).

From the earliest days, the church understood that salvation comes through faith in Christ. Believers knew they had been chosen by God, adopted through Jesus, and kept by His grace. They saw Christ not only as the one who reveals God to us, but as the one who shed His blood for our forgiveness and gave Himself to make us new. He is our High Priest and the foundation of our faith—He saves us, keeps us, and builds us up.

Salvation is not something we earn. It doesn’t come from our wisdom, our goodness, or our good deeds. We are saved by grace alone, through faith in Christ, according to the will of God (Eph. 2:8–9). Those who reject the blood of Christ are condemned; those who trust in Him are justified by faith from the very beginning.

The early Christian writers, known as the Apologists, echoed these truths. They affirmed that salvation is found in Christ alone—He bore the curse, satisfied God’s justice, and saves all who repent and believe. Justin Martyr wrote that grace comes before good works, awakening faith. Irenaeus emphasized the Holy Spirit’s role in renewing hearts. Origen acknowledged that human will is powerless to repent without God’s help; it is God who initiates and empowers our turning to Him.

This growing awareness of grace was even stronger in the writings of the early Latin church fathers, especially those who influenced Augustine. Tertullian taught that God’s grace overrules our sinful nature and even our will. Cyprian reminded believers, “We have nothing to boast of, for nothing is our own.” Ambrose spoke of a grace that softens the heart and stirs the will, declaring that even our desire for God is God’s gift.

Yet despite these glimpses of gospel truth, the early church often drifted in the wrong direction when it came to how salvation is applied to the sinner. Though Christ's death was rightly seen as the basis for salvation, many believed that we must cooperate with grace through our own free will to receive it. Faith became more about agreeing with Christian teaching, and repentance was treated as a kind of payment for sin.

In this system, sins committed before baptism were forgiven, but sins committed afterward required penance—acts like prayer, fasting, and giving—which were seen as compensating for sin. Over time, these external works were wrongly viewed as the path to salvation. Instead of depending on the Spirit to apply Christ's work to the heart, salvation was often reduced to a checklist of religious duties.

The Christian life was misunderstood as copying Jesus' example, especially His suffering. Martyrs, monks, and ascetics were held up as the ideal Christians—not because of the Spirit's transforming power, but because of their extreme self-denial. The gospel was being replaced by a new kind of law.

## PELAGIUS AND AUGUSTINE: TWO VISIONS OF GRACE

Pelagius moved further away from the true gospel of grace than anyone before him. While earlier Christian thinkers still held to basic Christian truths, Pelagius returned to the self-reliant mindset of pagan philosophy, especially that of the Stoics. He broke all connection between Adam's sin and our own. According to him, Adam's fall brought neither guilt, corruption, nor even death to humanity. As a result, Christianity, in his view, was no longer essential for salvation. One could be saved, he claimed, simply by following natural law or the moral code of religion, without any need for Christ.

In Pelagius's system, there was no place for the inner, renewing work of the Holy Spirit. He did use the word "grace," but he redefined it into something far less than what Scripture teaches:

1. **Natural grace** – the basic ability God gives everyone to choose and do good.

2. **Instructional grace** – the outward teaching of the law or gospel and Christ's example, meant to guide and inform, not to transform.
3. **Rewarding grace** – forgiveness and future blessing, given to those who believe and do good works.

For Pelagius, grace was not a powerful, saving gift. It didn't change the heart or overcome sin. It was just a kind of help—available only to those who proved themselves worthy by using their natural abilities well. God's grace was not necessary for every good work, and many deeds, he said, could be done without it at all.

### **Semi-Pelagianism: A Softer Error**

Later, Semi-Pelagianism tried to soften these ideas but kept the same underlying mistake. It taught that while sin wounded the human soul, it didn't kill it. People were still free to choose good, though they needed some help from grace to follow through. Grace and human will had to work together. God offered grace to all, but it only worked if people used their free will to cooperate.

In this view, it's up to us to begin the work of salvation by turning to God, and then He gives more grace to help us along. Faith starts with us; grace only helps it grow. God helps those who help themselves. There is no place for powerful, irresistible grace. Even the idea that grace comes before our choosing God (prevenient grace) was mostly denied.

### **Augustine: Grace from Start to Finish**

Augustine took a completely different path. He believed that human beings are totally corrupted by sin as a result of Adam's fall and completely

unable to do anything spiritually good on their own. Early in his life, Augustine thought that God called people, but they had to believe by their own effort. But around AD 396, meditating on 1 Corinthians 4:7, he realized a deeper truth: even our willingness to believe is a gift from God.

For Augustine, grace is not just the external preaching of the gospel or the outward sign of baptism. True grace is something much deeper. It is God's hidden work in the heart—His Spirit giving us faith, stirring fear of God, producing love, and empowering obedience. It is a supernatural gift joined to nature and truth, creating in us a deep, burning love for God. This grace is the result of God's mercy and His eternal choice, not something we earn.

Because of that, grace is truly **grace**—entirely free and unearned. The Holy Spirit works in us not because of anything we've done, but to *produce* in us what we could never do ourselves. Grace comes *before* every good thing—it awakens the unwilling heart, opens blind eyes, and creates faith. It gives us the desire and strength to love and obey God.

Augustine put it this way: “God works in human hearts not only to reveal truth, but to create holy desires.” This grace is also **irresistible**—it always accomplishes God's purpose. No heart is too hard for God. His grace replaces the heart of stone with a heart of flesh. All those whom God has chosen will not only be able to come to Christ—they *will* come to Him.

### **Grace and the Human Will**

God's grace does not cancel our will—it sets it free. Grace doesn't destroy human freedom; it heals it from the bondage of sin. As Augustine put it: “Do we make free will useless by grace? Certainly not! We establish it. For grace restores the will to its proper health.”

Augustine acknowledged that our decision to respond to God's call is real. People either believe or refuse to believe willingly. Yet even this willing

response is the result of grace. Augustine made this clear when he asked, “What do you have that you did not receive?” The human heart can only receive what God gives—and if it believes, it is because God gave both the gift and the will to receive it.

If someone demands to know why one person yields to God and another does not, Augustine doesn’t give a detailed answer. Instead, he simply points us to the deep mystery of God’s wisdom and justice: “*O the depth of the riches...!*” and “*Is there injustice with God?*” (Romans 11:33; 9:14).

Just as grace begins our salvation, so it sustains and completes it. The same grace that awakens us also enables us to grow in faith and love. God goes before us to help us begin, and He stays with us to help us endure to the end. As Augustine said, “His mercy goes before me when I begin and follows me when I finish.” God starts the work in us by His power, and then cooperates with us as we grow in obedience.

This means we need God’s grace not just for some good works, but for every single act, word, and thought that pleases Him. The entire journey of salvation—from the first spark of faith to final glorification—is a work of God’s grace from start to finish.

### **The Church Rejects Pelagianism**

The early church officially condemned Pelagianism at several councils, including the Synod of Carthage (418), the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Synod of Orange (529). These gatherings affirmed that Adam’s sin corrupted the whole human person, and that salvation—both its beginning and its growth—is entirely the result of God’s grace, not human effort.

These councils taught that grace is not merely external instruction or encouragement. It is the living work of the Holy Spirit within us. Grace gives us the ability to know what is right, to love it, and to do it. It prepares

our hearts, awakens faith, renews our wills, and empowers us to walk in obedience.

Later church leaders upheld this truth as well. For example, the Synod of Quiercy (853) affirmed that human will is freed and healed by grace. Rabanus Maurus said that God works in us through the Holy Spirit, leading and comforting us. Peter Lombard wrote that sinners cannot even desire the good unless grace first sets them free to will it and helps them actually do it.

Theologians like Thomas Aquinas agreed. He taught that while humans can do some outwardly good things by nature, they need grace to love God, keep His law, receive eternal life, and persevere in faith. Every step of the Christian life depends on fresh grace from God.

Even the Roman Catholic Council of Trent, though differing in other areas, affirmed the need for *prevenient* grace—that is, grace that comes before our turning to God. This grace prepares the heart and leads us to seek justification.

Thus, the church clearly and repeatedly rejected both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. It affirmed that we are not saved by our own strength or will, but only by the power of God's grace working in us.

### **Is It Still Semi-Pelagianism?**

While the Roman Catholic Church officially rejects both Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, there's good reason to question how far that rejection truly goes—especially when it comes to how they describe *prevenient grace*, the grace that comes before faith.

On the surface, Rome does affirm that *prevenient* grace involves more than just an external call to obey or believe. Church councils and theologians have described it as an inward movement of the Holy Spirit that stirs the mind and will. For example:

- The Council of Trent spoke of grace as God “touching the heart” through the Holy Spirit’s illumination.
- Aquinas described it as a divine action turning the soul toward God.
- Bellarmine called it a “motion” from God that awakens and assists the will.
- Others referred to it as a supernatural help that prepares a person for salvation.

Yet despite all this, the Catholic system subtly reintroduces Semi-Pelagianism in a different form.

### **The Real Issue: Who Makes the First Move?**

Rome teaches that although sin has wounded the will, it hasn’t destroyed it. People, even without grace, can still do many morally good things and live decent lives. They can even know and love God as Creator. While it may be hard to keep the whole law, it’s not considered impossible.

Rome also teaches that prevenient grace gives a person the *capacity* to believe—but not the act of believing itself. In other words, God helps, but it’s still up to us to say yes or no. According to Trent, people can choose to cooperate with God’s grace or reject it. This makes human free will the deciding factor in salvation.

Some Roman Catholic theologians tried to refine this. For instance:

- **Augustinians** taught that to actually believe, we need more than just the ability—we need a deeper, inner delight in God that

overcomes our sinful desires.

- **Thomists** said that God must perform a “physical action” on the will to make grace effective.
- **Molinists** made the power of grace dependent on whether the person was *predicted* to respond favorably.
- **Congruists** (like Bellarmine) believed grace is effective only when it "fits" the circumstances of a person's heart or life.

But all these views still lean toward Semi-Pelagianism because they make grace dependent on the person's response—rather than the response being the result of grace.

### **Rome's Doctrine of Justification in Practice**

Here's how the Catholic system works in practice:

- **Infants** receive grace and justification in baptism.
- **Adults** who hear the gospel later receive what's called “sufficient grace,” which enlightens the mind and strengthens the will. They can either reject this grace or cooperate with it.
- If they choose to cooperate, this initial grace becomes “helping grace,” enabling them to prepare themselves for justification.

Rome outlines *seven steps* of this preparation:

1. Believing in the truth of God's Word.
2. Recognizing one's own sin.
3. Hoping in God's mercy.

4. Beginning to love God.
5. Hating sin.
6. Desiring baptism.
7. Resolving to live a new life.

In this system, **faith** is just one of these steps—not the heart of salvation. It is merely the beginning, and only becomes “justifying” when combined with love, which comes through the grace infused at justification. In other words, faith alone cannot justify—it is not sufficient unless it is *formed by love*.

### **The Key Difference**

The heart of the matter is this: in Rome’s teaching, grace helps, but it does not guarantee that a person will believe or be saved. Human will remains the decisive factor. In contrast, the biblical doctrine recovered by the Reformers teaches that God's grace not only enables but *secures* the response. Grace is not just a helping hand—it is the power that awakens the dead, renews the heart, and draws sinners to Christ.

### **Rome’s View: Grace That Enables Merit**

According to Roman Catholic teaching, once a person has done everything in their power to prepare themselves—whether by using their natural abilities or responding rightly to the grace already given—God cannot withhold further grace. Though this grace is not earned in the strictest sense, it is viewed as a kind of *fitting reward* (a “merit of congruity”) for the person's sincere effort.

This grace is poured out in baptism. It includes the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the infusion of supernatural virtues, and a share in the divine nature.

Forgiveness of sins accompanies this gift and, along with infused grace, forms the two parts of justification. In this view, sin is forgiven not simply by God's mercy, but because it has been removed or lessened through the internal transformation of the soul. Forgiveness is the negative side of the positive renewal brought about by grace.

But this grace, once received, can be lost—especially through mortal sin. For lesser (venial) sins, confession and acts of penance are required. Still, through infused grace, a person gains supernatural power to do good works. And those works, flowing from grace, are seen as worthy of further grace—even of eternal life—because they spring from a divine source. This is called *merit of condignity*, the idea that our good works, empowered by grace, truly earn heavenly reward.

This reveals the core aim of Rome's view of grace: grace exists primarily to enable people to *merit* eternal life. Even Augustine leaned in this direction. Though he emphasized that grace comes before any merit, he still defined grace largely in terms of *regeneration*—the infusion of love and righteousness that makes good works possible. For him, forgiveness was not central; it was our transformation that mattered most. As Augustine said, “We receive righteousness so that we may deserve blessedness.” In this view, grace gives the power to merit, and merit follows after faith and love. “Grace precedes merit,” he wrote, “but merit arises from grace.”

Ambrose put it this way: “Grace itself deserves to grow, so that, as it increases, it may deserve to be perfected. The will follows grace, not leads it.”

### **A Shift in the Idea of Grace**

Later developments in Roman Catholic theology introduced an even more problematic idea: that grace is not just for fallen sinners—it was necessary

even for Adam before the fall. This led to the view that grace is not only about healing sin but also about lifting human nature into a higher, supernatural realm. Thus, grace took on two roles:

- **Healing grace**, which forgives and renews the sinner.
- **Elevating grace**, which lifts a person above their natural state to a supernatural one.

Healing grace became secondary. The real emphasis shifted from moral transformation (grace vs. sin) to a kind of spiritual upgrade (natural vs. supernatural). In this way, grace became less about God's free mercy and more about a kind of divine energy infused into people—a spiritual power mediated through priests and sacraments. This power, once received, enables people to perform good works that merit even more grace—and ultimately, eternal life.

In short, for Rome, grace is not primarily the favor of God that freely forgives sinners. It is a *quality* or *power* implanted in us to help us become worthy of God and earn our place in heaven.

This interpretation stands in sharp contrast to the gospel as revealed in Scripture, where grace is God's unmerited favor to the undeserving, not a system that enables sinners to earn salvation through a process of transformation and effort. True grace, as Paul teaches, excludes boasting and leads us to rest entirely in Christ, not in our merits (Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 3:24–28).

### **Luther and the Dawn of the Reformation**

The Reformation began, in part, as a protest against the Roman Catholic system of penance. But Martin Luther's deeper insight into the gospel had

taken shape years before his stand against the sale of indulgences. Even as early as 1509–10, in his reflections on Peter Lombard’s *Sentences*, Luther had already begun to grasp that the “righteousness of God” mentioned in Romans 1:17 referred not to God’s justice in punishing sinners, but to the righteousness that God *gives* to those who believe. Some have even argued that the seeds of the Reformation were already sown by 1508–09, during his time at the Wittenberg monastery.

Although earlier theologians, including church fathers and medieval scholars, had occasionally interpreted Romans 1:17 this way, Luther experienced it as a personal breakthrough. He had long thought—based on what he was taught—that God’s righteousness meant his just wrath against sinners. But now, through study and spiritual struggle, Luther saw that it was the gift of righteousness received by faith. This marked the turning point in his own life, and soon would be in the life of the church.

By 1513–15, in his lectures on the Psalms, Luther was already describing grace as the free forgiveness of sins and faith as deep trust in God’s mercy. While his thinking still carried traces of medieval theology, his new understanding grew under the influence of Johann von Staupitz and his reading of Augustine and the mystics—especially *Theologia Germanica*. In his 1515 lectures on Romans, these convictions came into sharper focus: righteousness, justification, grace, faith, repentance, and good works—all were redefined in light of the gospel.

This was not yet a protest against Rome; Luther did not initially see himself as a reformer. But his experience with God’s grace gave him fresh eyes to see the deep problems in church teaching and practice. Already by 1512, and more forcefully in 1517, he began calling for a return to Scripture

and a rejection of the overly complex and speculative scholastic theology that dominated the universities.

The immediate spark for public conflict came when Johann Tetzel, commissioned by the archbishop of Mainz, began selling indulgences—offering supposed relief from sin’s penalties in exchange for money. People were promised forgiveness, not only for themselves, but for loved ones in purgatory. The famous slogan, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs,” may not have come from Tetzel’s own mouth, but it captured the spirit of his preaching.

This indulgence trade was not a rogue abuse—it was a natural outgrowth of the Roman Church’s legalistic approach to salvation. The system reduced grace to a transaction and turned repentance into a work to be performed. Luther’s protest wasn’t just about corruption—it was a bold recovery of the gospel.

From the beginning, the Reformation was about the heart of Christianity: What is the gospel? What does it mean to repent? How is a sinner made right with God?

Luther had once found words like “righteousness” and “repentance” to be harsh and condemning. But through Romans 1:17, he came to see righteousness as a gift received by faith. He realized that the repentance Jesus calls for (Matthew 4:17) is not about performing religious duties or earning forgiveness. True repentance is a change of heart—sorrow for sin, a desire to turn from it, and trust in God’s mercy. Even repentance itself is the fruit of grace.

In his *Ninety-Five Theses* (October 1517) and later sermons on grace, repentance, and confession, Luther taught that true penitence is not found in private confession or acts of satisfaction. Those things are nowhere

commanded in Scripture. Rather, true repentance flows from the cross of Christ. It means embracing a new life in him, receiving his Word of pardon, and walking by faith in his grace.

The sinner is not forgiven because of how deeply they repent—since our repentance is never perfect—but because of God's promise in Christ. Faith alone justifies, not the sacraments, not our efforts, not our penance. In this way, Luther returned the focus of the Christian life to sin and grace, law and gospel, and the forgiveness that comes through faith in Jesus alone.

### **Repentance, Faith, and the Order of Salvation: Luther and Beyond**

There's been much debate about how Luther understood the relationship between repentance and faith. Some argue that early on, Luther taught repentance flows out of faith and love for God. But later, especially after the publication of Melancthon's *Instructions to the Church Visitors* in 1528, it's claimed he reversed that—placing repentance, driven by the law, before faith. This, it's said, was opposite to what Calvin taught: that while his *Institutes* initially placed repentance before faith, he later taught that faith comes first, producing genuine repentance.

But historical research has shown this theory of a “reversal” in Luther's thinking doesn't hold up. For Luther, repentance always had two parts: first, sorrow over sin brought by the law, and second, faith in the gospel—the comforting message of God's grace in Christ. God uses the law to break the hardness of our hearts, and then, through the gospel, draws us into trust and peace. Only when we know the grace of God do we begin to truly love the good. And from that love grows a deeper, lifelong repentance—a turning from sin and a rising to new life.

In Luther's early writings, especially when confronting Roman Catholic teachings on merit and penance, he emphasized that repentance flows from

faith. Later, when responding to those who dismissed the law (antinomians), he emphasized that contrition of heart should precede faith. But throughout his life, his view remained consistent: repentance, faith, and good works are all part of the path of salvation, each grounded in God's grace. This view was echoed by the early Lutheran confessions and theologians, who organized their teaching on salvation under these three headings.

### **Predestination and the Will**

Early in his ministry, Luther clearly taught God's absolute sovereignty in election. He never denied this truth, though as time went on he emphasized more the universal offer of the gospel and God's revelation in Christ.

Melanchthon, however, began to shift. Starting around 1527, he softened his stance on predestination and leaned toward a synergistic view of conversion—where the human will plays an active role alongside God's Word and Spirit. In his *Loci Communes* (1535), he argued that three things are involved in conversion: the Word, the Spirit, and the human will, which can either cooperate with or resist God. By 1543, he described free will as the ability to “apply oneself to grace.” In this view, grace is offered to all, but people must choose to accept it.

The *Formula of Concord* tried to preserve the doctrine of predestination and human inability while also affirming that grace can be resisted. It taught that sinners are completely passive in their conversion—less than a stone or stick—yet still maintained that grace is offered universally and can be rejected. The attempt to hold both positions led to a confusing compromise: humans cannot initiate salvation, yet they retain some passive capacity to receive or resist grace. Many Lutheran theologians eventually said that God

gives “sufficient grace” to all, especially through preaching and baptism, and that people can choose whether or not to resist it.

### **A Shifting Center: From Grace to the Will**

Under the influence of this view, Lutheran theology came to describe salvation as a sequence of stages: calling, enlightenment, contrition, regeneration, faith, justification, adoption, renewal, and finally glorification. Infants receive grace in baptism because they cannot resist it. Older children and adults hear the gospel call, and if they do not resist, they are brought to repentance and faith. Faith is seen as the fruit of regeneration.

But in practice, the emphasis shifted. Salvation became centered not on God’s eternal purpose or covenant promises, but on the individual’s act of believing. Everything—justification, adoption, union with Christ—hinges on whether or not a person exerts faith. If they do, they are saved; if not, salvation is missed. And this faith can be lost and regained many times throughout life.

Though Lutheran theology speaks often of grace, the entire system rests on the human will’s response. God may offer grace, but whether it bears fruit depends on whether we resist it. A person’s final destiny is left hanging on the thread of their ongoing response. The weight falls on the believer’s ability to maintain faith.

### **The Tragedy of a Truncated Vision**

This understanding, while emphasizing personal faith, fails to anchor salvation in God’s unchanging will and covenant faithfulness. It separates grace from God’s eternal plan and fails to see how Christ’s reign touches all areas of life—family, education, society, and government. Faith becomes a private experience rather than a call to live under the Lordship of Christ in every sphere.

In the end, Lutheran believers may enjoy communion with Christ, but they often miss the larger purpose of being part of his kingdom. They are content to rest in grace but are not taught to fight for the glory of Christ in every corner of creation.

## THE REFORMED ORDER OF SALVATION

While the Reformed and Lutheran traditions agree on many points, their understanding of the *order of salvation* takes a notably different shape.

In his writings, Calvin often discusses faith, regeneration, and the Christian life before mentioning election or justification. But this wasn't because he thought they happened in that order. Rather, Calvin understood that salvation begins with God. Election is God's eternal choice, and forgiveness comes through Christ alone—even though we only come to know and experience these things through faith. Over and over again, Calvin insists that the blessings of salvation come only through union with Christ.

This idea sets the foundation for the Reformed view of salvation. If all the benefits of grace flow from being united with Christ, then that union must come first. In fact, the Reformed tradition teaches that this union began in eternity. In the covenant of redemption (the *pactum salutis*), the Father gave a people to the Son, and the Son agreed to redeem them. Christ became

their mediator and representative. And because of this, when Christ died and rose again, his people died and rose with him. All the blessings of salvation—atonement, forgiveness, justification, sanctification, glorification—are already finished in Christ. They aren't waiting to be created; they're already prepared, ready to be received by faith.

Salvation, then, is not something we begin by believing. It's something Christ has already accomplished, and we come to share in it through faith. God grants these benefits in his time through the calling of the gospel. And even then, Christ's work isn't finished. He continues as our mediator—praying for us, ruling us, and applying salvation to us by his Spirit. Just as Christ accomplished redemption, he also ensures its application. He will not rest until he presents his church—pure and complete—before the Father.

This means salvation is the work of the Triune God from beginning to end. The Father planned it, the Son accomplished it, and the Spirit applies it. In every step, God's glory is on display—his justice, mercy, wisdom, and grace. As surely as the work of salvation was completed in Christ, it will also be completed in his people.

### **Salvation in Covenant, Not Isolation**

Salvation isn't individualistic. The elect are not gathered randomly but are united to Christ and to each other in a covenant bond. Just as the human body is born and grows from the head, so every believer receives life from Christ, our Head. The church is not just a group of individuals but a living organism. Every part belongs to the whole.

That's why many Reformed theologians treat the doctrine of the covenant of grace before talking about personal salvation. The covenant provides the context in which salvation unfolds. Believers only *realize* they are part of

the covenant through faith, but their place in the covenant is grounded in God's eternal plan.

### **Grace Received, Not Earned**

Because salvation flows from the covenant, our repentance, faith, and conversion are not conditions we fulfill to enter that covenant. They are gifts flowing from it. The Holy Spirit, whom Christ earned for us, gives these blessings to God's people. The Spirit applies Christ to us—bringing about our regeneration, faith, and repentance. So we do not come to Christ by our own efforts; rather, we are drawn to him by the Spirit who gives us what we need.

### **Repentance Reframed**

This also means repentance is viewed differently than in the Lutheran tradition. Personal experience shaped this difference. Luther struggled for years under the weight of guilt and fear, finally finding peace through faith in God's free grace. Calvin, however, came to believe the truth gradually. For a long time, he hesitated—still tied to the Roman church. But then, as he put it, he was suddenly converted. His heart was overwhelmed, and he surrendered completely to God's will.

For Calvin, conversion wasn't primarily an emotional experience of forgiveness, but a decisive act of obedience—a turning toward God with all his heart. His repentance was marked by submission to the truth he had long known but had resisted. It was the fruit of grace, not a condition for receiving it.

### **Repentance, Faith, and Conversion in Reformed Theology**

Calvin wasn't concerned with building a theory about how people are converted. Instead, he focused on a deeper question: *How can a person who knows he is a sinner be accepted before God?* Like Luther, Calvin

acknowledged that repentance can begin before someone believes—that people may feel deep guilt and sorrow for sin even before they understand God’s grace. But this early sorrow, driven by fear and conscience, is not the same as saving repentance. It’s what Calvin calls a *legal repentance*, not yet grounded in faith and not always leading to salvation.

Calvin rejected the idea, held by some groups like the Anabaptists, that people must go through a time of visible sorrow or works of repentance before they are worthy to receive grace. For Calvin, true repentance doesn’t earn God’s favor—it *flows from faith* and grows only in union with Christ. It is the lifelong pattern of the Christian life: dying to sin and coming alive to righteousness. As he put it, this "mortification and vivification" are both gifts from being united to Christ.

Luther understood this as well. He knew that real repentance involves a love for righteousness and comes from knowing Christ’s benefits. Still, Luther often emphasized that repentance begins with the law. First, God must humble the sinner with fear, sorrow, and a sense of guilt—what he called *passive contrition*. Later reformers like Melanchthon gave this “first sorrow” a more official role, even calling it repentance, so that common people could understand the weight of sin before learning about faith and grace.

So, in Lutheran theology, conversion typically had two parts: contrition and faith—mirroring the distinction between law and gospel. A third part, good works, was sometimes added as the result of repentance: “Then must follow the good works that are the fruits of repentance.”

Calvin, however, moved away from this structure. He focused more on the repentance that follows faith, not the fear that comes before it. This shift was especially clear in his view of children in the covenant. Since they

already belong to Christ and are included in the covenant of grace, conversion isn't about preparing to enter that covenant. It's about growing in it. For Calvin, conversion is part of sanctification—it begins after regeneration and faith, and it continues throughout life. Instead of being marked by “contrition and faith,” Calvin saw its shape as *mortification and vivification*—turning from sin and turning toward God in newness of life.

### **Two Distinct Gifts: Faith and Repentance**

This also led Calvin to view repentance and faith as distinct, though inseparably connected. While repentance springs from faith and depends on it, Scripture often mentions them side by side (e.g., Acts 20:21). So Calvin insists they must be joined but not confused. This distinction brought two key benefits:

1. **Faith became clearly tied to justification.** Justification, for Calvin, was entirely a legal declaration: God acquits sinners solely through faith in Christ. Unlike Lutheran theology, which sometimes blurred the lines, Calvin gave clear biblical grounding for justification by faith alone—and described that faith as a “firm and certain knowledge” of God's promise.
2. **Repentance gained a truly ethical character.** For Lutherans, the first part of repentance—contrition—was mostly about fear and guilt. But for Calvin, repentance involved a heartfelt hatred for sin and a joyful desire to obey God. It meant *mortifying* sin and *vivifying* the soul—turning away from evil and coming alive to righteousness in the Spirit.

Thus, the Christian life wasn't only about receiving forgiveness. For Calvin, it was also about growing in holiness and obedience. While Luther emphasized freedom from the law and expected good works to follow automatically from faith—like fruit growing on a tree—Calvin made room for deliberate effort and struggle in the life of sanctification. He created space to speak of both the believer's legal standing before God and the believer's ethical call to holiness.

### **Repentance as a Whole-Life Response to Grace**

Because Calvin understood repentance as part of the ongoing Christian life—not just a one-time beginning—he could fully acknowledge its *active* dimension. This was harder for Lutheran theology. Since Luther placed repentance (contrition) at the very start of spiritual life, and emphasized human inability, he had to describe repentance mostly in passive terms—as something that happened *to* you. If that passive view was softened, it tended toward *synergism*, the idea that humans cooperate with God in salvation.

Calvin avoided this problem by starting with the believer's *union with Christ*. Repentance, for him, was something the *regenerate* person actively does by the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who are united to Christ are called to fight sin and walk in obedience to God's will. That will is revealed in God's law.

Luther, having mainly experienced the law as condemning, believed Christians were entirely freed from it. He had little room for the law's ongoing use in the believer's life. Calvin, however, affirmed what is called the “third use” of the law—the law not as a means to earn God's favor, but as the *guide* for how redeemed people ought to live. The moral law shows us how to please the God who saved us.

For Calvin, sanctification—our growth in holiness—is just as much a gift of Christ as justification. Since our good works were prepared for us in Christ (Ephesians 2:10), faith doesn't stop with the forgiveness of sins. It presses on toward maturity in Christ, proving itself by its fruits. True faith longs to live for Christ, to resist sin, and to use everything in life for the glory of God.

### **The Two Sides of Repentance: Dying and Rising**

Repentance, in Reformed theology, has two sides: **mortification** (dying to sin) and **vivification** (coming alive to righteousness). Depending on the context—whether speaking to a suffering sinner or an advancing saint—either the dying or the rising may take center stage. This isn't a contradiction, but a reflection of the varied ways God works in different people and situations.

The whole Christian life is built on this pattern. Faith is the root. The law is the rule. And the glory of God is the goal.

Even Luther and Melancthon affirmed that God's glory is the ultimate aim of all things. But in Reformed teaching—especially through figures like Bucer and Calvin—this conviction took deeper root and broader shape. In Reformed theology, obedience to God is not just a personal pursuit of holiness—it is a life poured out for *the honor of God's name*. The goal of the Christian life is to bring every part of our lives into joyful submission to Christ the King, who reigns not only in our hearts but also over the world he came to redeem.

### **Alternative Views of the Order of Salvation: Mysticism and Rationalism**

In addition to the teachings of the church, other ways of understanding salvation have appeared—especially in the forms of **mysticism** and

**rationalism.** These two approaches offer competing views of how a person comes to know God and experience salvation.

### **1. Mysticism: Seeking God Beyond the Ordinary**

Mysticism shows up in many religions and often arises as a reaction against formal, external religion. Whether in Hinduism, Islam, or certain Christian circles, mystics seek a deeper, more intimate communion with God—often through extraordinary experiences that go beyond what regular believers experience.

Mysticism can be healthy when it remains rooted in Scripture and the grace of God. But often it relies on mysterious or even magical forces—like visions, dreams, altered states, or spiritual phenomena—and can blur the line between the Creator and the creature. In extreme cases, it drifts into **pantheism**, where God and humanity are confused or merged together.

More sober forms of mysticism focus on spiritual exercises meant to bring the soul closer to God. Historically, mystics have described a spiritual journey in three stages:

- **Purgation** – cleansing the soul from sin through prayer, repentance, and self-denial.
- **Illumination** – focusing the heart and mind on God through meditation.
- **Union** – experiencing a deep, often indescribable communion with God.

These later stages are described with terms like “mystical union,” “spiritual marriage,” or even “the death of the soul.” The focus is intensely

inward and experiential, often disconnected from the ordinary means of grace, such as the preaching of the Word and the sacraments.

## **2. Rationalism: Trusting Reason Over Revelation**

In stark contrast to mysticism, **rationalism** views salvation mainly in moral and intellectual terms. Christ is seen not as a Redeemer but merely as a moral teacher. The gospel, then, is just a message meant to influence people's minds and behavior. If people choose to accept it, trust in God's goodness, and obey Christ's commands, they can be saved.

In this view, salvation depends on human reason and will. Faith becomes nothing more than agreement with certain truths, trust in God, and obedience to Christ. God is seen as accepting this faith as if it were perfect obedience, even though it's not. The cross becomes a seal of God's message, not a sacrifice for sin. Rationalism ends up replacing grace with human effort, and the miracle of salvation with mere moral improvement.

## ANTINOMIANISM AND NEONOMIANISM: TWO DISTORTIONS

**B**oth **antinomianism** and **neonomianism** reflect distortions of the gospel.

- **Antinomianism** (literally, “against the law”) claims that because Christ has done everything, there’s nothing left for the believer to do—not even repentance or good works. Christ didn’t just bear our guilt, they say—He also took away the power and presence of sin entirely. So now we are perfect in Him, and our ongoing sins don’t really matter. In extreme forms, antinomianism even denies that Christ accomplished anything new, insisting instead that salvation was already complete in God’s eternal decree, and Christ merely revealed it.

This view has surfaced throughout history—from early Gnostics, to fringe groups after the Reformation, to modern-day anarchists and moral

relativists. It disconnects salvation from real transformation and grace from godliness.

- **Neonomianism**, on the other hand, swings the opposite way. It turns the gospel into a new law (a “*neo*” law), saying that Christ made salvation possible, but now people must meet certain conditions—like faith, repentance, or obedience—to receive it. While trying to uphold holiness, this view ends up confusing grace with merit and undermines the sufficiency of Christ’s finished work.

### **The Reformed Alternative**

Against these errors, the Reformed understanding of salvation holds firm to *grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*, while also affirming that this grace is never without effect. Christ not only secures our forgiveness—He also brings us into real union with Himself. From that union flows new life, new desires, and obedience that glorifies God. This obedience is not a condition for salvation but a result of it.

True repentance and holiness are the Spirit’s work in us, not the grounds of our acceptance with God. And far from being mystical or moralistic detours, they are part of the glorious transformation Christ secured in His death and resurrection. Faith looks not inward or upward into ecstasy, nor outward to moral effort, but to Christ crucified and risen, who saves completely and sanctifies thoroughly.

### **Law, Grace, and the True Ground of Justification**

All of the Reformers firmly rejected **antinomianism**—the idea that God’s law no longer applies to believers. While Luther sometimes gave the

impression that the law was irrelevant for Christians (except insofar as they remained sinners), he strongly opposed Johann Agricola, who claimed the law should not be preached at all and that repentance comes only from hearing the gospel. This was a serious distortion. The Reformation never abandoned the law. Instead, it rightly taught that the law reveals our sin and drives us to Christ. More importantly, it emphasized that Christ fulfilled the law perfectly. Our salvation rests entirely on His obedience—His righteousness, not ours.

### **Nomism: A Legalistic Drift from Reformation Truth**

But just as antinomianism twisted the gospel on one side, an opposite error called **nomism** arose, especially under the influence of Socinian and Arminian theology. This view, in both rationalist and pietist forms, crept into Protestant churches and weakened the clear gospel witness of the Reformation.

Rationalist nomism was rooted in the idea that only Christ's **suffering and death** (His passive obedience) mattered, and not His lifelong **active obedience** to the law. Although this view was condemned by Reformed synods in France in the early 1600s, it gained traction, particularly through a theological school in Saumur, France. Teachers there, like John Cameron and Moïse Amyraut, promoted ideas that downplayed human sinfulness and altered the doctrines of election, grace, and justification. Amyraut, for example, taught that God's election was "hypothetical"—based on whether a person would believe. Others claimed that God's grace merely had to be agreeable to a person's circumstances in order to be effective.

The result was a departure from foundational doctrines: the covenant of works, the deep corruption of human nature, and the imputation of Adam's guilt and Christ's righteousness. Instead, these teachers mingled faith and

works, making human obedience part of the basis for justification. This theology, which began in France, spread to England and the Netherlands.

In England, the Episcopal Church was originally Reformed in confession, but Roman Catholic and Arminian views gained ground. Disillusionment with antinomian extremes during the time of Cromwell led many to embrace the so-called "middle way" of Saumur. But such compromise often leaned more toward legalism than grace.

### **Neonomianism: The “New Law” of Sincere Obedience**

This middle way led to a system called **neonomianism**, which taught that justification is no longer based on Christ’s righteousness imputed to us, but rather on our own sincere, though imperfect, obedience—our faith, repentance, and good intentions.

In this view, Christ’s death didn’t actually save anyone but simply made salvation *possible* for all. It created a “salvable state,” in which the old covenant of works—with its demand for perfect obedience—was replaced by a *new law* of grace. This new law supposedly requires only sincere faith and repentance. According to this scheme, Christ satisfied the old law, but now justification comes through our fulfillment of the new law.

Although these teachings gained support, they also sparked strong opposition—often labeled unfairly as “antinomian.” In reality, these critics were better described as “**antineonomians**”—not opponents of God’s law, but of the false teaching that justification depends on human obedience.

These believers held firmly to the moral law’s ongoing authority. They emphasized that Christ completely fulfilled the law in our place and that this law, rooted in God’s eternal nature, still guides our lives. The gospel is not a replacement of God’s law with a lighter version. It is the announcement that Christ has satisfied the law fully, and that we are now

called to live by it—not to earn God’s favor, but in joyful response to His grace.

## THE MARROW CONTROVERSY AND LATER DEVELOPMENTS

This same debate flared up in 18th-century Scotland, sparked by the republication of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*—a book from the 1600s that defended gospel clarity. Some church leaders feared it leaned toward antinomianism, but the deeper issue was that it challenged rising neonomian tendencies in Scottish theology. Critics of the *Marrow*, like Principal Hadow, were orthodox in many respects, but their overcorrections opened the door to Arminian and even semi-Socinian views.

A similar shift occurred in New England theology when Jonathan Edwards rejected the immediate imputation of Adam's guilt and Christ's righteousness. Over time, this moved New England theology closer to the rationalist direction.

### **Faithful Gospel Clarity**

The true gospel neither casts off the law (as antinomianism does) nor places our justification on our own works (as neonomianism does). Instead, it upholds the law, magnifies Christ's perfect obedience, and calls sinners to

trust in Him alone. His righteousness is not only the ground of our acceptance with God—it is also the power by which we are transformed.

In every age, the church must remain watchful. Whether the danger comes from legalism or license, the remedy is always the same: Jesus Christ, our righteousness, our sanctifier, and our King.

### **The Decline of Reformation Clarity in the Netherlands**

Starting in the mid-1600s, the influence of Reformed theology in the Netherlands began to erode. A noticeable shift occurred away from the clear teaching of justification by faith alone—one of the central truths recovered in the Reformation.

One of the first to reflect this change was Johannes Vlak, a pastor in Zutphen from 1674 to 1690. Vlak introduced a distinction between two types of justification. The first, he said, was based entirely on the forgiveness of sins through Christ's death—a justification for sinners. But the second, he claimed, was for the godly: it depended on the believer's own obedience, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and it resulted in eternal life as a reward for good works. In effect, Vlak taught that justification was partly earned by our righteousness.

This drift became more pronounced with preachers like Anthony van den Os, who in the mid-1700s redefined Paul's teaching about "the righteousness of God." For him, it simply meant God's kind willingness to save sinners through Christ. Faith was reduced to a general trust in Jesus and obedience to His commands.

By the 18th century, this weakening of the gospel had spread through much of Dutch Reformed theology. A faithful minority, including men like Holtius, Comrie, and Brahe, resisted these changes. They insisted that human works had no place in our justification and held fast to the historic

Reformed conviction that justification flows entirely from God's eternal decree and is grounded in the righteousness of Christ alone.

But their efforts were increasingly isolated. Even respected theology professors at Leiden—such as J. van den Honert and J. J. Schultens—rejected the teaching of Christ's righteousness being directly and immediately imputed to believers. They argued that faith must come before justification, subtly shifting the foundation away from Christ's finished work.

This new way of thinking found a clear voice in David Kleman, a pastor in Voorburg. He taught that God, in His wisdom and goodness, connects our moral efforts with the gift of faith. According to this view, those who make the best use of their natural abilities—especially when guided by the moral teachings of the gospel—can expect God to grant them saving grace. This made salvation seem like a reward for human effort, not a free gift rooted in God's sovereign mercy.

### **Holding Fast to the Gospel**

What was once a firm foundation—the righteousness of Christ imputed to us by grace alone, through faith alone—was gradually replaced by a view that mixed grace with human merit. But Scripture teaches that our hope is not in our own righteousness, no matter how sincere, but in the righteousness of Christ credited to us (Romans 4:5; Philippians 3:9).

Whenever the church forgets this truth, the glory of Christ is diminished, and the peace of believers is put at risk. Yet even in times of decline, God preserves a remnant who love His truth and proclaim His gospel.

Let us join them in holding fast to the pure doctrine of grace—not merely as a theological idea, but as the very lifeline of our souls.

### **Pietism and the Shift from Doctrine to Experience**

In the wake of debates over faith and works, a different error quietly crept in. Some began to define salvation not by obedience or faith in Christ alone, but by **personal spiritual experience**. In this view, assurance of salvation rested not on God's promise, but on the strength of one's inner feelings.

From the earliest days, there were voices in the Reformed churches who reacted against academic theology. They longed for a simpler, more practical faith that shaped everyday life. Thinkers like **Peter Ramus** called theology "the doctrine of living well," urging believers to pursue a life of godliness over theoretical knowledge.

This practical emphasis influenced many throughout Europe—**Perkins** in England, **Ames** in the Netherlands, and others who described theology as the pursuit of a life lived unto God. Out of this movement arose a form of **Pietism**, rich in devotion but sometimes veering into introspection. Leaders like **Witsius**, **Brakel**, and **Schortinghuis** called people to genuine conversion, warning that being raised in a Christian home, baptized, and even doctrinally sound was not enough. True faith, they insisted, must arise from deep conviction of sin, fear of judgment, and heartfelt trust in Christ.

But here is where caution is needed: many began to teach that before a person could believe, they must pass through a certain sequence—first terror under the law, then conviction, then a "refuge-taking" faith. Full assurance, they claimed, might come much later, even through visions or supernatural impressions. While they rightly urged self-examination (2 Cor. 13:5), they often portrayed salvation as a narrow road filled with conditions few could meet. The result? Many were left paralyzed with doubt, fearing their faith was false.

They taught that the gospel was not for everyone—only for those who were already convicted and prepared by grace. Faith, they said, was only

possible for those the Spirit had first made bold enough to take the leap. This emphasis made the simple act of trusting Christ seem rare and unreachable.

Yet Scripture tells us the gospel is a **free invitation** to all who hear it: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matt. 11:28). Christ is not distant or hard to reach. Salvation is not reserved for the spiritually elite—it is for sinners who come empty and trust in Christ’s righteousness alone.

### **The Rise of Lutheran Pietism**

In Germany, a similar movement took shape. **Philipp Spener**, deeply troubled by cold orthodoxy, called people back to heartfelt religion. He emphasized the need for inner rebirth, not just church membership. Faith, he said, must arise through deep sorrow over sin, through intense struggle with Satan and the flesh, before peace could be found. This “struggle of repentance” was seen as the true path to saving faith.

For Spener, faith was not just belief—it was **trust born out of spiritual battle**. Such faith, once obtained, would then lead to a holy and separated life. But this again introduced a heavy burden: people sought signs, emotions, or extraordinary experiences to confirm their salvation. Only after long struggle did some feel assured.

One of Spener’s followers, **Count Zinzendorf**, pushed back. He believed that constant self-examination and sorrow risked replacing the joy of the gospel with fear. True repentance, he taught, flows not from the law, but from the **love of Christ**—his wounds, his suffering, his blood. Faith, in this view, was more a matter of **heartfelt affection** than rational conviction. He emphasized union with Christ, not through analysis or effort, but through a **sense of being loved and embraced by Him**.

### **Summary: A Needed Correction, But a Cautionary Path**

These movements rightly grieved over lifeless religion and nominal Christianity. They rekindled the call to live holy lives and trust Christ personally. But in doing so, they sometimes **confused the fruit of faith with its foundation**.

True faith is not measured by intensity of feeling or length of struggle. It is not earned through self-examination or sorrow. It is a gift from God, resting on His promise, received by empty hands. As Paul says, *“To the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”* (Rom. 4:5).

Let us examine ourselves, yes—but not endlessly. Let us come to Christ as we are—needy, weary, sinful—and believe that He is enough. For the gospel is not a maze for the spiritually elite; it is the open door for **all who believe** (John 6:37).

## METHODISM AND ITS MARK ON MODERN CHRISTIANITY

What **Pietism** was for the Lutheran churches, **Methodism**—especially through the ministries of **John Wesley** (1703–91) and **George Whitefield** (1714–71)—became for many within the Reformed tradition. Its original purpose was noble: to awaken a sleeping church and breathe life back into the truths of biblical Christianity.

Methodism sought to confront people with the reality of God’s holiness and human sin. Through powerful preaching on righteousness, judgment, and eternity, people were pressed to face their lost condition. But unlike earlier movements that emphasized a slow, painful road to conversion, Methodism insisted on urgency: *now is the time*. Listeners were called not only to repent but also to believe in Christ **immediately**, be assured of salvation, and then begin a transformed life of active service to God—often in missions, mercy work, and personal holiness.

This was one of Methodism’s key distinctions from traditional Pietism. It rejected the idea of gradual conversion marked by prolonged inner struggle, waiting for signs or sealing. Instead, it pressed everything into the moment.

Conversion had to be **clear, conscious, and complete**—a marked turning point in one’s life. And when someone professed faith, Methodism didn’t encourage withdrawal into private devotion or quiet circles of introspection. It mobilized the converted into action—into evangelism, social reform, and bold Christian living. Its rallying cry was “**blood and fire**”—redemption and sanctification—and it organized believers like an army, marching into the world to win it for Christ.

The impact of this movement on the broader Christian landscape cannot be overstated. Methodism didn’t just birth new denominations—it shaped the spiritual life of **all** Protestant churches. It gave rise to what some have called a “second Reformation” in England and America. Whereas the Reformation of the sixteenth century emphasized the renewal of doctrine and church order according to Scripture, Methodism prioritized **practical action**, personal holiness, and global outreach. It de-emphasized doctrinal precision and traditional church structures in favor of **direct engagement** with the world.

Fueled by this spirit, Methodism gave new energy to missions—whether among Jews, Muslims, or non-Christian peoples. One of its bold goals was “*the evangelization of the world in this generation.*” At home, it pioneered inner-city outreach, Sunday schools, Bible distribution, street preaching, and ministries to the poor, imprisoned, and disabled. Under its influence, Christianity took on a new public face—as the **religion of compassion and active love**.

This shift affected not only the church’s outreach but its **inner life** as well. Previously, many believers sought assurance only after years of struggle and careful self-examination. But under the influence of Methodism, salvation and sanctification were offered *now*. The genuineness of faith was

no longer proven by inward agony, but by **outward service** and joyful confidence in God's promises.

John Wesley repeated this theme again and again: *salvation and holiness are not distant hopes but present realities, given by grace to all who believe*. He would say:

“Christ is ready now; He is waiting for you. Believe in Him, and it will all be granted to you in this very hour. Why not this moment? If you expect sanctification through your own efforts, you are still seeking by works. But if by faith—then expect it now, just as you are. Faith expects, as you are, now. Deny one of these, and you deny them all.”

This was the tone and urgency that shaped Methodist preaching. Salvation, it proclaimed, is not a gradual process or something that develops slowly through life. It is immediate and complete—available now to every sinner who comes to Christ in faith.

This emphasis—though it sometimes led to emotional excess and theological imbalance—was also its strength. It rekindled a living awareness of God's power to save, awakened moral conscience in the culture, and brought renewed spiritual vigor to countless lives.

## THE RISE OF SUBJECTIVISM: KANT AND THE TURN INWARD

Although the various religious and philosophical movements of modern times differ in many ways, they share a common trait: they shift the focus of salvation away from God’s objective work—Christ, the church, the Word, the sacraments—and place the emphasis on the individual. Whether they elevate the intellect (like rationalism), the will (as in Methodism), or the emotions (as in Pietism), they make the **inner life** of the person the center of religious experience.

This inward turn began with thinkers like **Descartes**, who believed that the starting point of all knowledge was one’s own self-awareness—“I think, therefore I am.” He taught that the only truth we can trust is what we perceive clearly and distinctly in our minds. External reality, including the senses, was viewed as unreliable. Truth, therefore, came from within.

**Spinoza** built on this idea. He claimed that the emotions (what he called “affects”) control the natural person. People call something “good” or “evil” simply based on how it makes them feel or whether it enhances their lives. In Spinoza’s view, good and evil don’t exist in any objective sense—

they are just mental labels. True freedom, he argued, is achieved when we gain a higher, intuitive knowledge that sees everything as necessary, as flowing from God. This higher perspective brings peace, teaches us to see all things under the lens of eternity, and helps us transcend negative emotions like fear, sadness, guilt, or even repentance. Salvation, then, is not forgiveness through Christ, but the calming insight that comes from seeing things as they truly are.

This way of thinking deeply influenced the **Enlightenment**. Reason was king. Revelation and grace were accepted only if they could be rationally defended. Religion was reduced to moral improvement. Grace, if mentioned at all, was granted only to those who did their best. And in full-blown rationalism, divine grace was discarded entirely. People were told to follow their own reason, to trust their own will, and to live without dependence on any external authority. Human effort—not divine grace—was the supposed road to happiness and salvation.

Then came **Immanuel Kant**. He challenged this overly confident rationalism, especially its claim to know everything through the senses and reason. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant limited human knowledge to what we can observe in the physical world. We cannot, he said, know ultimate things—God, the soul, or eternity—through reason alone.

But Kant didn't stop there. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, he introduced the idea of **moral reason**—the sense of inner duty and obligation we all feel. He argued that, even though we can't *know* God through reason, we are **morally bound** to act as though He exists. For Kant, **freedom**—the ability to choose the good out of a sense of duty—is the foundation of both morality and religion. This freedom is not proven; it is

simply assumed whenever we obey the moral law. And in that obedience lies the path to redemption.

According to Kant, human beings are not neutral between good and evil. Deep down, all people have a bent toward evil. He acknowledged what Scripture and experience teach: that no one is naturally good. All are sinners. In fact, he described human nature as “**radically evil.**” So evil is not just something we do—it’s something in us, a core corruption of the will. What we need, Kant admitted, is nothing less than a **new creation**, a kind of **rebirth**.

Yet here, Kant could not accept the Christian doctrine of grace. Though he acknowledged the depth of human sin, he refused to embrace salvation as a gift of God through Christ. Instead, he returned to the **autonomy of the will**. If the moral law says we must do good, then—Kant insisted—we *must* be able to do it. Like the ancient Pelagians, he reasoned from "you must" to "you can."

Kant allowed that there is still within every person a **predisposition toward the good**—a moral seed that can, by one’s own free will, grow and bring about self-renewal. Just as one freely became a sinner, so too can one freely become good again. For Kant, this **rebirth** is not a gradual process but an **instant moral revolution**—a decisive inner change, the laying aside of the old self and putting on the new.

To be fair, Kant did not deny the possibility of divine help. He even encouraged people to hope for "cooperation from above." But in the end, he refused to ground salvation in grace. For if grace were the decisive cause, then the good would no longer be our own doing. That, to Kant, would violate the principle of moral autonomy.

### **Can We Save Ourselves? Modern Thinkers on Redemption**

In Kant's system, salvation depends not on divine grace but on **human freedom**. He believed people could and must redeem themselves by their own will. The person of Christ served not as a Savior who atones for sin, but as an **ideal model**—a picture of moral perfection. Christ, in this view, shows us how to overcome sin and temptation through discipline and self-control.

According to Kant, once a person experiences this moral “rebirth” through a free act of will, they begin the slow journey of sanctification. Those who are truly “born again,” he believed, would never fall back into their former state. And though perfection is not reached quickly, moral progress assures us that it will be reached—if not in this life, then in the next. Feelings of guilt and fear of punishment eventually fade. A person pays for past sins not by receiving divine pardon, but by enduring the consequences and learning from them. In time, suffering becomes not punishment, but discipline—a way to become worthy of forgiveness. God, Kant claimed, sees the sincere intention to do good and counts it as righteousness.

In this framework, **grace becomes unnecessary**. The gospel is replaced by the moral law. Redemption is not received but earned—slowly, through personal growth.

### **Schopenhauer: The Despair of the Will**

Like Kant, the philosopher **Schopenhauer** believed that human nature is profoundly corrupt. He agreed that mere education or enlightenment couldn't fix us. What we do flows from what we are, and what we are is twisted. He rejected the shallow optimism of his age, but unlike Kant, Schopenhauer had **no hope for salvation**.

Instead, he believed the only escape from life's misery was to extinguish the desire to live. True deliverance, he said, comes not through redemption but through **resignation**—a renouncing of all desire, even consciousness itself. In this view, salvation is found not in renewal but in **extinction**, much like the Buddhist idea of **nirvana**. Art and philosophy might ease our pain, but they cannot save. The ultimate goal is to be rid of the self entirely.

### **Von Hartmann: Salvation as Self-Improvement through Suffering**

**Eduard von Hartmann** offered a more complex and mystical take. He too started with the brokenness of humanity—our self-centeredness, which he attributed to both evolution and history. Like his predecessors, he saw people as deeply flawed. But he believed this very brokenness was **intended by God**—not as a final purpose, but as a necessary means. God allows evil so that people will long for goodness and salvation.

In Hartmann's view, every person has a hidden moral potential, a faint echo of the divine will. This capacity for good—what he calls “grace”—is not a gift that comes from outside, but something built into us. It's passed down through history and nurtured by environment. Every person has a share in it. No one is entirely lost; no one is entirely chosen. All have been given **some measure of grace**, and all must develop it through effort.

Salvation, then, is part divine and part human. God gives grace, but we must make use of it. From our side, grace looks like **faith**—and faith is just our effort to cooperate with the divine moral order.

### **Hartmann's Gospel Without Christ**

Hartmann's view of salvation is a long, gradual journey. It begins with **moral awareness**, grows into **repentance**, and then matures into a **faithful pursuit of holiness**. This leads to reconciliation with God and a lifelong process of sanctification.

Yet all of this is ultimately just a step toward something greater: not the salvation of individual souls, but the **redemption of humanity as a whole**. This “redemption” is not found in the kingdom of God or the return of Christ, but in the final triumph of a moral idea. It ends not in glory, but in collapse—the destruction of the universe and the return of all things into a formless, impersonal “being.” According to Hartmann, even God is redeemed through this process, as He draws back from reality into potentiality.

### **Fichte and the Reimagining of Human Destiny**

For the German philosopher **Fichte**, the purpose of human life once centered on moral action and freedom. But as his thinking evolved, he came to believe that **faith**—not reason or intellect—is the foundation of all certainty, including our knowledge of the moral world and the physical world. According to Fichte, all truth begins in the heart, in the conscience, in a posture of faith. As he put it, “We are all born in faith.”

Through this lens, Fichte concluded that the God we often discover last in our reasoning is, in fact, first of all. God is both the **source** and the **goal** of all things. Humanity and God are eternally one in essence. But this unity is disrupted by self-consciousness—our awareness of ourselves as distinct from others and from God. This separation is not accidental; it’s necessary. It creates the longing to return to what was once whole.

So, the story of human life becomes a journey: from union with God, into separation, and then—through struggle and self-denial—**back into communion**. The ultimate purpose of human life, then, is not action, not personal freedom or moral effort, but **resting in God**, delighting in His presence. As Spinoza once described it, it is an “intellectual love” of God—the highest, most blessed form of life.

Fichte believed this idea wasn't opposed to Christianity, but rather its **deepest truth**—especially as revealed in the **Gospel of John**. For him, the eternal unity between God and humanity was fully expressed in the person of **Jesus Christ**. Christ, Fichte argued, wasn't just a historical figure but the visible expression of what is eternally true: the union of the divine and the human.

Jesus shows us what we are called to become—not by nature, but by **freedom and rebirth**. He was by nature the Son of God. We are to become children of God by **dying to ourselves** and following His example. This inner transformation—the death of selfishness and the birth of a new self—is the only true path to salvation.

Fichte rejected the idea that historical facts or dogmatic propositions could save. He insisted that salvation must be **metaphysical**—concerned with eternal realities, not merely events in time. Yet he still affirmed that the story of Christ holds eternal significance. In this view, the Holy Spirit doesn't just help us understand doctrine, but leads us into ever-deepening **union with God**, building a kingdom that is both divine and rational.

### **Schelling: From Nature to Revelation**

**Schelling**, another major German thinker, took a similar path. Early in life, he paid little attention to religion. But through his study of nature, he developed a philosophy centered on the idea of **unity**—between God and the world, spirit and nature, the eternal and the finite. He called this the **philosophy of identity**.

For Schelling, the highest truths—whether in religion, morality, or art—cannot be discovered through logic or argument. They must be grasped through an inner vision, a kind of spiritual perception. True knowledge, in his view, comes from the **heart**, not the head. This leads to a kind of

mysticism in which **philosophy and religion converge**, both revealing the same reality: the unity of the finite with the eternal.

In paganism, Schelling said, the eternal is pulled down into the finite. But in Christianity, the finite is **lifted up** into the eternal. That's why **history**, not nature, is the heart of Christian faith—and at the center of that history stands **Jesus Christ**.

These themes, which emerged in Schelling's early work, became even more prominent in his later philosophy of **revelation**. There, he explored how the eternal God reveals Himself in time, especially through Christ—the one in whom heaven and earth, time and eternity, fully meet.

### **Christ and the Redemption of All Things**

According to some modern philosophies, the story of humanity is not simply about individual sin and salvation, but a cosmic drama—a journey of the finite returning to the infinite. These systems taught that sin began, not with a specific act of rebellion, but with the creation itself, where the finite (created things) gained an apparent independence from the infinite (God). Sin deepened as human beings used their created nature to serve themselves instead of God.

But this estrangement, they said, was met by God's response in history—in the person of **Jesus Christ**. Christ, who existed eternally, humbled Himself, becoming the Son of Man. This act of humility did not begin at His incarnation, but from the moment of humanity's fall. Even before being born into the world, Christ was at work, even mysteriously through the movements of paganism and myth. This long period—until His resurrection—was seen as His suffering and humiliation.

With His resurrection, however, everything changed. The old world came to an end. The powers of paganism and darkness were broken. Humanity, in

a real sense, was **justified**—declared right before God (cf. *Romans 4:25*). This justification, according to these thinkers, had to come before any true good works. Only when people know they are accepted by God can they be free to live joyfully and courageously in His service. Otherwise, they live in fear, trying to earn what God has already given.

Christ's resurrection, then, becomes the foundation of human reconciliation with God. It means that Christ didn't just come and go—He remains human forever, and by His ongoing life, we are declared righteous (*Romans 5:17*). That righteousness isn't based on our works, since our entire being stands guilty before God. Only Christ—who made our whole existence right—can justify us. And because of Him, we can now live in peace with God, far from a gloomy, self-condemning religion that ignores the grace Christ accomplished.

This emphasis highlights a central truth: **the person of Christ is the heart of Christianity**, and Christianity is a thoroughly **historical faith**. But Christ's work didn't end at the resurrection. After ascending into heaven, He continues His mission. First, He restored human nature to favor with God. Then, He sent the **Holy Spirit**, who brings the fullness of God's life into us.

In this way, a new kind of spiritual life began—a life marked by **freedom, fellowship with Christ**, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Some thinkers imagined this as a process unfolding through the institutional church—moving from the hierarchical Roman church (Petrine), to the gospel-centered Reformation (Pauline), and ultimately to a future spiritual maturity (Johannine). In that vision, all things are being reconciled to God through Christ. **History itself becomes the story of God restoring what is broken.**

**Hegel and the Cosmic Story of Redemption**

Among these post-Enlightenment philosophers, **Hegel** also sought to make room for Christianity within his worldview. But his version was radically different from biblical teaching. For Hegel, God was not a fixed, eternal being but a **process**—a self-developing spirit, unfolding throughout history. He believed that the divine “emptied” itself into creation, and through the course of time, sought to return to unity with itself. This movement—from unity to separation and back again—was how he explained sin and redemption.

Humanity, in this view, began in childlike innocence, but as self-awareness grew, people became proud and self-centered. Sin, then, was not merely disobedience but the result of this growing self-consciousness and self-assertion. Yet this also gave rise to the awareness that something was broken—and so began the longing for reconciliation with God.

But Hegel argued that reconciliation couldn’t be produced by humanity. It had to exist first in God. And it did—eternally—in the idea of God, where the infinite and the finite are already one. But that truth had to become visible and personal. So in Christ, Hegel claimed, this reconciliation was shown. Christ was not merely a moral teacher or martyr; He was the embodiment of this divine idea—the union of God and man. His death, then, was the turning point: the destruction of sin, the gateway to resurrection, and the start of a new world.

According to Hegel, in Jesus, God entered into human finiteness—even into death itself—to overcome it from within. The cross, then, was the death of death, and the resurrection was the dawn of a new reality.

This, Hegel said, is the foundation of the church. Believers know by **faith**—not by reasoning or miracles—that God and man are united in Christ. The

Spirit gives this assurance internally. The presence of God in His people means that love must mark their lives, for “God is love.”

In this scheme, the **church’s mission** is to help believers grow into this truth. This is symbolized in **infant baptism**, which assumes the child belongs to the covenant community and will mature into a faith that claims God’s promise. The **Lord’s Supper**, likewise, becomes a visible sign of reconciliation with God and the Spirit’s presence within the heart.

### **A Philosophy of Redemption?**

What is striking about these post-Enlightenment philosophies—from Kant to Hegel, from Schelling to Schopenhauer—is that they **turned again to Christianity**. Rationalism had dismissed the need for grace, teaching that enlightenment and moral effort were enough. But these later thinkers saw the deep brokenness of human nature and acknowledged that **redemption had to come from beyond ourselves**.

However, they still resisted the gospel of grace. They tried to explain redemption as part of a **cosmic process**, where evil is not a tragic rebellion but a necessary stage in the world’s development. And salvation, in their view, was not the gracious gift of a Savior, but the slow unfolding of divine reason or spirit through history.

### **The Limits of Post-Kantian Philosophy**

Although philosophers after **Kant** made a sincere effort to take the core truths of Christianity seriously again, they ultimately fell short. Their failure lies in this: while they distanced themselves from the rationalism of the Enlightenment in appearance, they didn’t fully abandon its underlying assumptions.

Take **Hegel**, for example. He criticized the arrogance of Enlightenment thinking and wanted to show how reason was present within Christianity.

Yet, at the same time, he put Christianity on trial—not before Scripture, but before his own reason. He claimed that philosophy did not stand above Christianity’s content, only above the way it expressed that content. But even that claim is undermined by his deeper assertion: **“Thought is the absolute judge before which all content must prove itself.”**

In other words, Christianity might offer a rich message of reconciliation, but its true meaning can only be unlocked through philosophy. It is not **faith** that brings reconciliation with God, but **philosophy**—which, in Hegel’s system, claims to reveal that even nature and opposition itself are divine, and that the human spirit gradually rises into union with the Absolute.

So while Hegel tried to unite reason and religion, what actually happened was a deep split between the **truth of the gospel** and the **speculative ideas of philosophy**. The end result? The substance of Christianity—its heart—was lost. In trying to reshape the faith to fit philosophical categories, the message of grace and redemption was drained of power.

Once Hegel’s lofty language was stripped away, all that remained was the idea that human beings, caught between conflicting desires and reason, must slowly climb toward a higher spiritual unity. Whether by intellect or by will, the burden of salvation fell squarely on the shoulders of the individual.

### **Reflection: God’s Truth Cannot Be Judged by Human Reason**

This is the danger of exalting human wisdom above God’s Word. Even well-meaning efforts to engage Christianity philosophically can, if not grounded in Scripture, subtly replace the gospel with a **human-centered process of self-improvement**.

But God's truth does not need to justify itself before human reason. Rather, human reason must bow before the Word of God. As Paul writes, *"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ... We preach Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:20, 23–24).

True reconciliation is not discovered by philosophical speculation, but **given by grace** through faith in Jesus Christ—crucified, risen, and reigning. It is not a process we control, but a gift we receive.

### **The Gospel Is Not a Process but a Person**

While these philosophies tried to recover the idea of redemption, they missed its heart: the **grace of God in Jesus Christ**. Evil is not a necessary part of progress—it is sin against a holy God. And salvation is not found in our journey toward the divine, but in **God's coming down to us in Christ**.

The gospel does not say we redeem ourselves by mystical insight, rational thought, or moral effort. It declares that God, in love, sent His Son to bear our sin and rise again, so that we might be **justified freely by His grace**.

"But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Let every philosophy bow before the cross. Let every theory of progress fall silent before the empty tomb. In Christ, history finds its meaning—not in an idea, but in a **Savior**.

### **Modern Theology and the Shift Away from Grace**

Modern theology, especially as it developed after **Hegel** and through thinkers like **Schleiermacher** and **Ritschl**, continued to use Christian language—but gave it a different meaning. Terms like grace, conversion,

and justification were redefined to fit a more human-centered and less supernatural system.

In this new theology, **conversion** is no longer a radical change worked by God alone but a cooperative effort between God and man. Grace is no longer the power of God rescuing sinners from spiritual death, but more like **divine encouragement**—God guiding and shaping people through education and culture. Everyone, it is believed, will eventually respond to this process. Under this view, **regeneration isn't necessary**, and **conversion** is simply a person feeling regret over sin and choosing to live a better life, trusting in God's kindness.

**Justification**, then, is not God declaring a sinner righteous based on the righteousness of Christ. Instead, it is reduced to a **change in how a person feels** about their relationship with God—a clearing of the conscience. Once a person feels they are “at peace” with God, they are considered justified. This modern view focuses almost entirely on a person's inner state or attitude. Sin is seen as ignorance more than guilt, and righteousness is seen as a personal potential that slowly unfolds, like a seed growing into a tree.

### **Schleiermacher: Faith as Feeling, Not Atonement**

**Friedrich Schleiermacher**, often called the father of modern liberal theology, tried to bring Christianity back to the center—but only by radically redefining it. He emphasized the person of **Jesus Christ**, not primarily as Redeemer but as the one who awakens in us a deep sense of God. Jesus, he said, entered our condition of sin and suffering in order to draw us into his condition of holiness and blessedness.

For Schleiermacher, **conversion and justification are really the same thing**, just looked at from different angles—human and divine. And in this model, people are not active or passive, but **receptive**—they have the

ability to accept grace when it's offered. Justification, then, becomes the moment when someone is brought into fellowship with Christ—not because Christ's righteousness is imputed to them, but because they are morally and spiritually renewed.

Even later theologians who tried to stay more faithful to Christian doctrine often held that **justification happens not through a legal declaration but through an inner transformation**—by an infusion of righteousness, not its imputation. So while they emphasized the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit, they still saw grace as something that works **within**, not something that stands **outside** the person as a completed work of God.

### **Ritschl: Justification as Moral Confidence**

**Albrecht Ritschl** took a slightly different approach. He focused on **Jesus' life and teachings**, claiming that in Christ we see the **love of God** clearly revealed. But for Ritschl, this love of God had no place for wrath or justice. There was no need for atonement. Sin, to him, was not deep guilt before a holy God, but more like **human misunderstanding**—a gap in our awareness, not an offense against divine righteousness.

Christ, in his unwavering commitment to God's will, showed us that God is loving and forgiving. This message, not his death as a substitutionary atonement, is the heart of salvation. **Justification**, then, is simply the awareness that we are loved and accepted by God. It belongs to the **church as a whole**, not to the individual believer. Individuals only experience this justification by **joining the church** and sharing in its moral vision.

**Faith**, for Ritschl, is not a miracle of grace but a natural response, developed through education and culture. It's more about recognizing the **moral greatness of Jesus** than trusting in his finished work. Justification,

reconciliation, and even regeneration are not supernatural acts of God but **changes in attitude**—where people stop fearing God as judge and start living as confident, moral beings under God’s fatherly love.

### **A Shift in the Spirit of the Age**

In his time, Ritschl responded to an optimistic culture that believed in the power of science, progress, and education. He **separated theology from philosophy**, gave science free reign, and assigned religion a **secondary role**, mostly to inspire people to be good citizens and build a better society—the “kingdom of God on earth.”

But as time went on, people began to feel the emptiness of this vision. **Technological progress did not bring peace**, and the human soul remained restless. With that growing discontent, there came a renewed interest in **spiritual depth, personal faith, and the mystical aspects of religion**. People saw that **cultural Christianity**—one that merely teaches ethics and optimism—couldn’t deal with the deeper problems of guilt, suffering, and death.

Ritschl’s theology began to fade because it **neglected the personal, spiritual life of the believer**. He gave little attention to the experience of grace, the reality of regeneration, or the deep inner communion with God that Scripture describes. His system saw people mainly as **members of a moral community**, not as **sinners in need of a Savior**.

As the spiritual hunger of the age returned, **new philosophies and mysticisms rose up**, some rooted in psychology, others in metaphysical speculation. But the core problem remained: **the gospel had been redefined**. What God declares about us in Christ was replaced with what we feel about ourselves. Salvation was no longer a gift of grace, but a process of moral uplift and emotional reassurance.

## **Reflection: The Glory of True Justification**

Against this backdrop, the biblical gospel shines all the more clearly:

“God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”—2 Corinthians 5:21

True **justification** is not about human feeling or gradual self-improvement. It is **God’s act of grace**, where He declares guilty sinners righteous **because of Christ alone**. This righteousness is not infused into us, but **imputed** to us—credited to our account—through faith. And this faith itself is a gift, not a natural response.

The Reformation recovered this gospel. Modern theology, for all its eloquence, **traded assurance for uncertainty**, and divine grace for human effort. But the gospel remains the power of God unto salvation, not because it stirs our hearts, but because it **rests entirely on Christ’s finished work**.

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION: A SHIFT FROM GOD TO SELF

In recent centuries, especially through movements like **Pietism** in Germany and **Methodism** in England and America, there's been a significant shift in how people think about faith. Instead of focusing on **God as the object** of worship and trust, attention has increasingly turned to the **religious experiences of the individual**.

This shift influenced not only popular religion but also **academic theology**, especially through thinkers like **Kant** and **Schleiermacher**, who emphasized feeling, conscience, and moral awareness. Over time, **biblical criticism**, **agnosticism**, and **experimental psychology** added fuel to this focus on human subjectivity. Even **revival reports**, which described dramatic conversions, helped give birth to the **psychology of religion**, especially in the work of scholars like **G. Stanley Hall**, who sought to study religious experiences using surveys and observation.

The psychology of religion, as a modern academic discipline, does not concern itself with **doctrine** or **worship**—these are left to theology and philosophy. Instead, it focuses on the **inner life of the individual**,

especially the **emotions and feelings** tied to religious belief: awe, guilt, fear, joy, peace, and so on. Researchers gather stories from biographies, interviews, and surveys, then sort and study the data to uncover patterns in how people "develop" religiously.

### **A Naturalistic View of Religious Development**

From this research, some psychologists have created a kind of **spiritual growth timeline** that begins in childhood:

- In **early childhood**, they say, a child has no independent religious life. Just as the human embryo goes through stages that resemble earlier forms of life, a child is seen as recapping early human history. Because of this view, childhood is thought to reflect something primitive or undeveloped in religious terms.
- Children are described as **self-centered and instinct-driven**, concerned mostly with their own needs and survival. Their early grasp of religion is shaped entirely by **external authority**—parents, church, or the Bible. They believe what they are told but do not yet understand it deeply. Religion, for them, is **rule-based** and **outside of them**. God is someone “up there,” distant and beyond reach.

### **The Crisis and Awakening of Adolescence**

Then comes **adolescence**—around 14 for girls and 16 for boys. In this stage, **dramatic physical, emotional, and spiritual changes** occur. This period has been studied extensively by psychologists like Stanley Hall, who wrote over 1,300 pages on the subject. He observed that puberty affects nearly every part of life—body, mind, relationships, and even beliefs.

In adolescence, there's often a season of “**storm and stress**”, echoing the turmoil of earlier stages in human history. The changes are not only physical—like a deeper voice or increased strength—but also mental and emotional. Teens begin to ask bigger questions: *Who am I? What is my purpose? What does God want from me?* They may start to feel distant from the faith they were taught as children and experience a new desire to make it their own.

This awakening can be a powerful time when young people either **turn toward God in a new and deeper way** or drift into confusion and rebellion. Their religious beliefs may now involve more internal reflection and personal conviction. The heart begins to hunger for meaning, truth, and a sense of connection with God—not just rules or routines.

### **A Pastoral Response: Rooted in Grace, Not Psychology Alone**

While psychology may offer helpful insights into how people experience and express faith, it often stops short of recognizing what Scripture clearly teaches: that the **human heart is not just immature but sinful**, and that true conversion is not just emotional growth but a **work of God's grace**.

“You must be born again.”—John 3:7

The child's instincts and the adolescent's struggles point to a deeper reality: **we need a new heart** (Ezek. 36:26), not just new feelings or development. Though psychology may describe the *how* of religious change, it cannot explain the *why* behind true spiritual transformation—because only the **Holy Spirit** can bring life from death (Titus 3:5).

Faith is not a product of biology or culture. It is a **gift of God**, given through His Word and Spirit, and centered not on ourselves but on **Christ alone**. Emotional experiences may accompany that work, but they are not the foundation of it.

Adolescence is a time of profound change. As boys and girls grow into young men and women, their minds and bodies are reshaped in striking ways. Physically, their senses sharpen, and emotionally, their hearts awaken to new desires and deeper longings. Intellectually, they begin to reflect, reason, and think more abstractly. They move from imitating others to forming their own identity. They begin to feel and act as distinct, personal beings—with their own thoughts, convictions, and ideals.

This transformation is not just physical or emotional—it is profoundly spiritual. The awakening of sexual maturity is part of it, but it is not the whole story. At its core, adolescence is a kind of **second birth**—not the spiritual rebirth that comes by the Holy Spirit, but a natural reawakening of the self. It brings with it the sense that life must now be lived **not only for oneself but with and for others**. The young person steps out of the narrow circle of childhood and into the vast and complex world of adulthood, where new responsibilities, relationships, and questions await.

### **The Storm and Stress of Growth**

But just as natural birth comes with pain, so too does this second birth. Adolescence is often a time of **inner conflict** and **emotional turbulence**. Young people feel pulled in many directions. Their bodies change rapidly, and they often feel awkward or restless. New emotions and powerful instincts stir within them—some they do not fully understand. At the same time, they begin to think deeply about life, truth, purpose, and identity. It is as if two selves are locked in struggle within them—one still bound to childish ways, the other straining toward independence and maturity.

This tension gives rise to **both noble aspirations and deep struggles**. On one hand, adolescents hunger for freedom, long to change the world, and are captivated by great ideas and heroic figures. They dream big, believe in

the future, and often show great generosity. On the other hand, they may fall into doubt, despair, pride, or selfishness. Their zeal may be inconsistent. They can swing between devotion and rebellion, idealism and apathy, courage and fear. Their spiritual path zigzags between wisdom and folly.

“The boy is father to the man.” The direction a young person takes in these formative years often sets the course for life.

But we must not despise this period. These **growing pains** are part of how God matures a soul. Through difficulty and discovery, He stretches and deepens the young person’s character, training them for the joys and trials of adult life.

### **The Role of Religion in the Adolescent Soul**

In this time of transition, **religious awakening** often occurs. As the body matures and the mind awakens, many young people begin to seek God in a deeper, more personal way. Some psychologists, in observing the overlap between sexual and spiritual development, have wrongly concluded that religion is simply a product of sexuality—a form of “misdirected desire.” But this view, often called **medical materialism**, is both narrow and false.

While it is true that sexual maturity and religious awakening often happen at the same time, that **does not mean one causes the other**. As one scholar put it, **sex may be a condition for religious awakening, but it is not its cause**. The two processes may run side by side for a time, but they are not the same. If everything that develops in adolescence could be explained by sexuality, then we would have to say that science, art, and every noble pursuit is merely a distorted expression of desire—which is clearly absurd.

Religious development draws on more than physical maturity. It is also shaped by moral awareness, spiritual questions, and ethical ideals. The soul, though linked to the body, is not explained by it. The deepest longings for

God—longings for forgiveness, for truth, for eternal life—cannot be reduced to physical instincts.

As Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16). The worth of a spiritual experience is not determined by where it begins, but by what it produces.

True religion is not about a passing emotional experience, but about a life that bears the **fruit of the Spirit**—love, joy, peace, holiness, and faithfulness (Gal. 5:22–23). Its value lies not in its emotional root but in its eternal fruit.

### **Religious Experience and the Adolescent Soul**

Though many psychologists reject the idea that religion can be reduced to mere biology or instinct, most agree there is a deep connection between religious experience and the human capacity for love. Adolescence, in particular, is a season in life when this connection becomes vivid. As young people mature, they often undergo a natural spiritual awakening—a process shaped by personality, upbringing, environment, gender, and temperament.

Not everyone experiences this awakening the same way. Some, often called the “healthy-minded,” grow up in a religious home and remain settled in the faith of their childhood. They may never go through a dramatic crisis or feel the weight of guilt and judgment. They live with a cheerful, optimistic spirit, believing in the goodness of life and humanity. Their path to faith seems smooth and untroubled.

Even so, such individuals often still need a moment when faith becomes **personal**—not just something learned from parents or taught at church, but something embraced with conviction and joy. This often happens during the same period when their personal identity begins to emerge. Faith becomes more than habit; it becomes **heartfelt**.

Others, however, take a different path. These are the so-called “sick souls”—those who are more deeply aware of the brokenness of the world and the burden of sin. They wrestle inwardly with guilt, fear, and a longing for peace. For them, faith comes through struggle. They need a gospel that doesn’t just inspire but **redeems**. For these deeper souls, conversion is a crisis—a moment of spiritual upheaval that leads to grace and renewal.

## CONVERSION: A CRISIS AND A NEW CREATION

Christianity has always understood true conversion to be a work of God, something supernatural. Yet the **psychology of religion** seeks to explain this crisis in natural terms. While it doesn't deny the reality of religious change, it views conversion as part of human development—especially in adolescence.

Studies show that spiritual awakening tends to occur between the ages of ten and twenty-five. It may begin as early as seven or eight, peak around the mid-teens, and then decline after twenty. Girls often experience it earlier than boys. For many, these years mark the time when questions of sin, guilt, purpose, and God become intensely personal.

The inner turmoil of adolescence—feelings of confusion, unrest, sadness, or conviction—often mirrors the classic signs of spiritual conversion: repentance, guilt, sorrow over sin, and a longing for forgiveness. Young people often describe this experience as a battle between darkness and light, sin and grace, self and Christ. They may feel as if they are not fighting the battle, but **being fought over**—caught in a struggle for their soul.

Eventually, that spiritual tension gives way—sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly—to peace, joy, and the assurance of God’s grace. It is as though the storm clears, and the sun breaks through. This is what Scripture calls **new birth**, the entrance into a life of reconciliation with God through Christ.

### **Is Conversion Unique to Christianity?**

Some psychologists argue that such religious experiences are not unique to Christianity. They point out that similar crises of awakening and transformation appear in other religions too—among Muslims, Buddhists, and others. Ceremonies that mark the transition from childhood to adult religious life—like confirmation, bar or bat mitzvahs, or other rites of passage—exist in nearly every culture and faith.

But the **form** of such experiences does not determine their **truth**. That other religions mimic conversion should not surprise us, for all humans are made in God's image and wired for worship. What matters is not just the experience, but what lies at the heart of it: **Is it the grace of the living God through Christ**, or something else? True conversion is not measured by emotion alone but by the lasting fruit it produces—repentance, faith, holiness, and love for Christ.

### **The Mystery of the Subconscious**

Modern psychology also notes that much of what we think, feel, and desire happens beneath the surface. Our minds store countless impressions, desires, and ideas—many of which we are not fully aware of. At any given moment, some of these can rise to the surface and shape how we think or act. A memory, a word, a song, or a moment of reflection can suddenly bring clarity or conviction.

These "shifts of consciousness" are part of everyday life. One moment, we are full of zeal for something; the next, it leaves us cold. A problem that seems impossible one evening becomes clear the next morning. Our mood changes when we step from a place of leisure into one of responsibility. This is part of the mystery of how the human soul functions.

Yet even here, we must be cautious. **Conversion is not just a psychological event.** It is not simply a rearranging of thoughts or a shift in mood. It is **a work of the Holy Spirit**, bringing a dead heart to life, turning a sinner from darkness to light, and placing him or her into fellowship with the living God.

### **Conversion and the Awakening of the Soul**

Conversion—what we often call being "born again"—is a deep change in a person's inner life. It's not just a sudden emotional experience, though it can feel that way. At its heart, conversion is when **God becomes central** to a person's thoughts, desires, and direction in life. What was once at the edges of a person's consciousness—truths about God, sin, grace, and eternal life—suddenly move to the center and begin to shape everything.

This change may seem immediate, but in reality, it is often the **fruit of seeds planted long ago**—truths heard in childhood, a verse remembered, a moment of quiet conviction, a sermon that lingered. These impressions may lie dormant in the heart for years, but when God stirs the soul—through a word, a moment, a crisis—they rise to the surface. And in that moment, the person is no longer the same. Their desires, thoughts, and goals are reoriented. A new spiritual life begins.

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." —2 Corinthians 5:17

### **Not All Conversions Look the Same**

The dramatic nature of some conversions doesn't make them more genuine than slower, quieter spiritual awakenings. The **real question is not how conversion happens**, but whether it bears lasting fruit: repentance, faith in Christ, love for God, and obedience from the heart. Some people come to faith through a crisis. Others grow into it gradually. Both are real if the Spirit has brought about new life.

Later in life, many Christians look back and realize that **true sanctification**—the lifelong growth in holiness—does not depend on whether they had a dramatic conversion. Some who never recall a crisis display deep, steady faith. Others, once spiritually zealous, may drift into a dull or weary season. Revival is real, but so is spiritual fatigue. “Every flow has its ebb.”

Still, God often brings believers through these seasons and restores their joy. As people mature—marry, raise families, face hardship—they often find themselves **returning to the faith** of their youth or rebuilding their convictions in deeper ways. God uses life itself—joy and sorrow, success and suffering—to draw His children into a more stable and settled faith.

### **A Common Path of Spiritual Growth**

Despite the many different journeys, a pattern often emerges. Over time, people grow in three key ways:

1. **Belief in a personal God** becomes more common and heartfelt.

Many—regardless of background—come to believe in the soul, in life after death, and in the importance of Jesus, whether as Savior or moral guide.

2. **Religious feeling** begins to matter more than external forms.

People increasingly value heartfelt sincerity over ritual or rigid

dogma. Faith becomes more about a living relationship with God than about rules alone.

3. **Motives and love** grow stronger than mere beliefs. True religion moves people to live for others. Selfishness gives way to service, and life becomes increasingly centered on God, others, and the good of the world.

### **The Long View of Human Spirituality**

Looking at this process, some modern thinkers argue that human spiritual development mirrors the slow unfolding of civilization itself. As individuals move from self-awareness to social belonging to spiritual maturity, so humanity as a whole moves toward deeper moral and religious insight. One writer, Stanley Hall, likened our time not to the world's old age but to its **adolescence**—not sunset, but sunrise.

While this perspective may be too optimistic in its view of human nature, it rightly reminds us that **people are in process**. There are depths within the human soul that only God can awaken. The Bible says that God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). And He is still at work—calling, convicting, and converting—so that His kingdom might come, and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

### **Theological Anchor**

Though psychology may trace patterns, only the **Spirit of God gives life** (John 3:6). True conversion is not merely a psychological shift but a spiritual resurrection. And while human development has its place, **salvation is of the Lord** (Jonah 2:9). Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Romans 10:17). What ultimately matters is not

the timing or shape of conversion, but that it leads to union with Christ, growth in holiness, and perseverance to the end.

### **The Way of Salvation: Key Paths and Pitfalls**

Throughout history, the doctrine of salvation—how sinners are brought into fellowship with God—has been one of the most vital topics in theology. But it is more than a matter of study; it is deeply personal. Every human heart, in one way or another, asks the same basic question: **How can I find peace with God?** Or, as Martin Luther once put it, *How can I find a gracious God?*

The answer to that question is found in what Scripture calls the **way of salvation**—the path by which God applies the blessings of Christ’s work to sinners. In theological terms, this is called the *ordo salutis*, or the “order of salvation.” It is the unfolding of grace in the life of the believer: how God calls, regenerates, justifies, sanctifies, and ultimately glorifies His people. This isn’t a manmade system, but God’s own gracious design revealed in His Word.

Though the church came to articulate this more clearly over time, it always flows from one source: **the Scriptures alone**. Theology must not invent new ways to be saved or draw from philosophy, culture, or human reason. The only valid answer to the question, “What must I do to be saved?” is the answer God gives in His Word. Christ alone is the way, and the Spirit leads His people along that path from beginning to end (Hebrews 10:20; Psalm 73:24; Romans 8:14).

But here’s where we face a real challenge: On the one hand, Scripture teaches that **everything necessary for salvation has already been accomplished** in Christ. Sin has been paid for. Death is defeated. Eternal life has been won. And yet, the believer still must experience faith,

repentance, justification, sanctification—and walk through suffering on the way to glory. Why is that?

If Christ has done it all, why is there still so much left to be done in us?

This tension has led to confusion in many hearts. Some emphasize God's work so strongly that they fall into **antinomianism**—the belief that nothing is required of us at all. Others go the opposite direction, stressing human effort so much that they fall into **legalism** or **moralism**—the idea that we are saved by our obedience. These are two dangerous extremes, and both miss the true gospel.

## THE ERROR OF LEGALISM (NOMISM)

Legalism—or *nomism*—comes in many forms, but its essence is this: it places part (or all) of the responsibility for salvation on human shoulders. Whether subtly or openly, it teaches that **we must contribute to our salvation**—whether by our will, our faith, our repentance, or our perseverance. In this view, Christ opens the door, but we must walk through it and keep ourselves in.

But this idea weakens the finished work of Christ. If salvation ultimately depends on us, then Christ has not truly *accomplished* salvation, but merely *made it possible*. His work is reduced to one part of a larger process—alongside our own efforts. He is no longer our all-sufficient Redeemer, but simply a guide or helper along the way.

This view puts Christianity on the same level as every other human religion: a moral system that urges people to save themselves with God's help. It blurs the line between **grace and works, gospel and law**, and leaves the burden of salvation on the sinner's back.

### Why This Undermines Assurance

Legalism also destroys the **certainty and comfort** of faith. If my salvation depends on my performance—on my faith, obedience, or perseverance—how can I ever be sure? Even my best works are stained with sin. And if grace is something I can resist or lose, I am left with constant fear and insecurity. At any moment, I could fall away.

This leaves people relying not on Christ, but on the church, on religious leaders, or on their own works—none of which can give true assurance. Without the clear teaching that **salvation is of the Lord**, the Christian life becomes uncertain, unstable, and anxious. There is no confident resting in God's promises. Even the outcome of history becomes uncertain, as the kingdom of God is made to depend on the fragile will of man.

### **What the Gospel Really Offers**

In contrast, Scripture proclaims a gospel of **sovereign grace**. Christ did not merely make salvation possible; He accomplished it. He didn't die to give us a chance to be saved, but to actually **save His people** (Matthew 1:21). The Spirit doesn't merely offer help; He gives new birth, grants faith, and preserves us to the end.

Yes, we are called to believe and repent. But even these responses are the result of God's work in us. As Paul says, "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). And we are called to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (v.12)—not because salvation depends on us, but because it is so holy and glorious a gift that it humbles us deeply.

In the true order of salvation, Christ is everything. From election to glorification, **God is the author and finisher** of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). And because our salvation rests on Christ and not ourselves, we can have true assurance, lasting peace, and joyful obedience.

## Two Dangerous Errors in the Way of Salvation

The errors of a works-based religion—or *rationalistic nomism*—are easy enough to spot. But these same errors can also wear religious clothing. Even within movements like **Pietism** and **Methodism**, which began as efforts to revive spiritual life, similar problems can emerge.

At first, these movements sought not to change the doctrine of the Reformation but to **awaken people to live it out**. Their intent was good: to shake off a lifeless orthodoxy and call believers to a vibrant walk with God. But in their zeal, they often **swung too far**, focusing not on what Christ had done *for us*, but on what we must *feel* and *experience*.

In these circles, salvation was still by grace—but the spotlight shifted from **Christ's finished work** to the believer's own inner journey. Instead of urging people to trust in Christ, they were often encouraged to look inward: to examine their feelings, measure their repentance, and test the genuineness of their conversion. For many, the Christian life became a long and difficult road of self-examination before they could dare to believe they were truly saved.

Methodism tried to compress this process—conversion, faith, and assurance—into one powerful moment. But it still treated salvation as something to be proven in the heart before it could be received by faith.

In both cases, the role of **the Holy Spirit** was largely misunderstood or neglected. There was little appreciation for how God, through His Spirit, prepares hearts by grace, works regeneration, and unites creation and re-creation. The Christian life became disconnected from everyday life—either retreating from the world in pious separation or entering the world in activism, yet without grounding in the full work of redemption. Faith became more about emotional experience than rooted trust in Christ.

Instead of transforming every part of life—family, society, work, art, culture—the Christian was seen as someone who lived **outside the world**, not in it. The great Reformation truth of grace overcoming sin was replaced by a Catholic-like division between the “natural” and the “spiritual.” The vibrant, grateful obedience of Puritanism was replaced by **religious withdrawal or rule-based asceticism**, where holiness was measured by what one avoided rather than by joyful service to God in every sphere of life.

## THE ERROR OF ANTINOMIANISM

**A**t the opposite extreme stands **antinomianism**—the belief that because Christ has done everything, there's nothing left for us to do. On the surface, this seems to uphold the truth that **salvation is by grace alone**, but it does so in a way that ends up denying the very heart of the gospel.

Yes, Christ has fully accomplished redemption by His life, death, and resurrection. But His work is not finished. He is now **exalted and reigning**, actively applying the benefits of His saving work to His people through the Holy Spirit. Antinomianism ignores this. It treats salvation as a past event only and forgets that Christ is also the **Risen Lord who sanctifies, leads, and teaches His church**.

In practice, this view dismisses the role of the Holy Spirit and the process of salvation as it unfolds in the believer's life. It may speak much of grace but ultimately empties grace of power. And like all false teaching, it ends up resembling the very error it opposes. Just as nomism elevates human effort,

antinomianism denies God's ongoing work and drifts into **mysticism or spiritual elitism**.

Some forms of antinomianism go so far as to deny that Christ's death accomplished atonement at all. They say Jesus didn't bear God's wrath or satisfy divine justice, but only came to **reveal God's love**. In this view, there's no such thing as God's anger against sin. Humans simply misunderstood God, projected their fear onto Him, and imagined a need for judgment. Redemption, then, is not about forgiveness but about **enlightenment**—realizing that we were never really separated from God in the first place.

According to this teaching, salvation requires **no repentance, no sorrow for sin, no fear of hell, no pursuit of holiness**—just the “right” kind of understanding. But this is not the gospel of Scripture. It's a recycled form of **Gnosticism** and **pantheism**, where God is essentially one with humanity, and the work of Christ becomes nothing more than moral teaching or spiritual insight. God becomes a vague life-force, not the holy Triune God of the Bible. Grace is redefined as self-discovery. Salvation becomes an inner awakening, not the supernatural work of God in Christ.

### **The Common Ground of Error**

Though they seem opposed, **nomism and antinomianism ultimately meet in the same place**: they both **deny the true power and purpose of the gospel**. One does it by loading salvation onto human shoulders; the other by hollowing out the work of Christ. One demands law-keeping, the other discards the law altogether. But both reduce Christianity to **something we do**, either through effort or through insight.

In both cases, Christ is no longer the perfect Savior. He becomes merely a teacher, a guide, or a symbol. The cross is stripped of its meaning, the Holy

Spirit's role is minimized, and the glory of God's grace is lost.

### **What We Must Hold Fast**

True Christian faith confesses that:

- Christ has done everything **for our salvation**—nothing more is needed to earn favor with God (Hebrews 10:14).
- The Holy Spirit applies this salvation to our lives through regeneration, faith, and sanctification (Titus 3:5).
- We are saved **by grace**, and that grace **leads us into obedience**, not away from it (Ephesians 2:8–10).
- The Christian life is not withdrawal from the world, nor lawless freedom, but **grateful service in every sphere of life** to the glory of God.

Christ is both **Savior and Lord**, and the gospel is not just forgiveness, but **new life**—a life of faith, repentance, holiness, and hope. To stray from that balance is to either fall into self-righteous effort or self-deceiving complacency.

## THE TRINITARIAN WAY OF SALVATION

**W**e can only understand the order of salvation rightly when we begin with the **Triune God**—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's from this foundation that we recognize a vital truth: the *application* of salvation to our lives is not the same as its *accomplishment*.

### **Christ Accomplished Redemption—The Spirit Applies It**

The Father sent the Son into the world to accomplish redemption, and the Son completed that work through His life, death, and resurrection. Yet even after Jesus declared, “It is finished,” the story of our salvation wasn’t over. Christ did not simply live, teach, and die like other historical figures whose influence continues through memory or inspiration. **He rose again, ascended into heaven, and now reigns as the living Lord.**

From heaven, Jesus continues to carry out His work. He now applies the benefits of His finished work by the **power of the Holy Spirit**. This is why the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost—not because redemption hadn’t yet happened, but because the *application* of that redemption was now beginning in full.

The Spirit, though one in being with the Father and the Son, carries out His work in a distinct way. While the Father is especially associated with creation and the Son with redemption, the Spirit is the one who **brings salvation home to our hearts**—working in us what Christ accomplished for us.

### **The Difference Between Ownership and Possession**

Think of it this way: a child may inherit an estate from their father but doesn't immediately enjoy all its benefits. In the same way, **those who belong to Christ are given every spiritual blessing**, but these blessings are received and enjoyed through faith, as the Spirit applies them over time.

So, while salvation has been fully earned by Christ, it must also be applied to us. **We are justified**—declared righteous through Christ—and **sanctified**—made holy as His Spirit transforms us. Christ doesn't just take away our guilt; He also breaks sin's power in our lives. Salvation is not partial but complete: a full **re-creation** of what was broken by sin.

The Spirit brings this new life. He gives us faith, assures us that we are God's children (Romans 8:16), and shapes us to be more like Christ. His work is just as divine and necessary as the Father's work in creation or the Son's in redemption.

### **One Work, One God**

Even though the Father, Son, and Spirit have distinct roles, **they are never divided**. The Spirit doesn't act independently, but in perfect unity with the Father and the Son. There is no tension or contradiction within the Godhead. The same God who created the world and sent His Son also sends His Spirit to apply salvation to His people.

This also means that **nature and grace are not enemies**. Some theological systems, especially Roman Catholic and some Protestant

traditions, have wrongly set them against each other—as though God’s natural world must be rejected in favor of a purely “spiritual” life. But Scripture teaches a better way.

All of creation is God’s handiwork, and He continues to guide it through His providence. Nature, then, has a place in God’s redemptive plan. **The Holy Spirit works in and through the natural order**, preparing hearts over time, often through family lines, through culture, and through the ordinary experiences of life. He restores—not erases—what was broken, making it holy for God’s glory.

Because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in essence, we can be confident that their work in salvation is united and harmonious. The Spirit does not apply salvation to some while the Son earns it for all. Their purposes are never in conflict. **They work together in perfect unity.**

By His death and resurrection, **Jesus became the life-giving Spirit** (1 Cor. 15:45). He now lives in the power of an indestructible life (Rom. 6:10). Nothing perishable or mortal remains in Him. He was anointed by the Holy Spirit during His earthly ministry without measure, and now that He is glorified, He reigns with that same Spirit. The Spirit is now called the **Spirit of Christ** because He has been given to Christ in fullness as His possession and gift to bestow.

On the day of **Pentecost**, the risen Christ sent His Spirit to apply the benefits of redemption to His people. The Spirit doesn't earn or add to what Christ has done. He applies it. Christ alone accomplished our salvation, perfectly and completely. Nothing more is needed. All the treasures of grace are in Him, and the Spirit’s task is to make them ours.

Just as the Son came to glorify the Father, **the Spirit glorifies the Son**. He takes what belongs to Christ and gives it to us—grace upon grace. He

leads us to Christ, and through Christ to the Father. He works in each believer according to God's perfect timing and plan, and He will not rest until the fullness of Christ is formed in His church (Eph. 4:13).

This is the Spirit's unique role: **to apply salvation**. The order of salvation—what theologians call the *ordo salutis*—is the Spirit's gracious work in bringing us into all that Christ has won. So the question is not, “What must I do to be saved?” but rather, **“What is God doing in His grace to make us share in Christ's salvation?”**

Salvation is God's work from start to finish. It must be understood **theologically**, not merely **anthropologically**—not from the viewpoint of man's effort, but from the truth of God's activity. The Spirit works gently and powerfully, not by force, but by transforming hearts. He enlightens our minds, persuades our wills, and draws us to Christ with cords of love. His work does not violate our humanity but restores it.

When grace triumphs, sin loses its power. The Spirit does not treat us like robots or blocks of wood; He deals with us as people made in God's image. He causes our hearts to see the beauty of Christ and leads us freely to trust in Him. As the Apostle Paul says, **“The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God”** (Rom. 8:16). And again: **“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”** (Gal. 2:20). God Himself is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). And therefore we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, knowing it is His Spirit who enables us (Phil. 2:12).

### **Grace Does Not Deny Responsibility—It Establishes It**

Critics—especially from Pelagian traditions—often object that this view denies human responsibility, stifles moral effort, and leads to complacency. But that criticism misunderstands both grace and human nature. Scripture

clearly teaches that **no one is justified by works of the law** (Rom. 3:20). To insist otherwise is to abandon the gospel.

Still, Reformed theology does not deny the reality or value of moral influence, human reason, or conscience. These are part of God's good providence. God showers His kindness on all people (Acts 14:17), and even before someone is saved, the Spirit can be at work preparing the heart. But these things, though valuable, are **not sufficient for salvation**. They may point us toward God, but only **grace can bring us to Him**.

Pelagianism is content with the natural moral influence of truth. But the gospel tells us we need more—we need **new life**, not just moral improvement. And yet, when the Spirit gives life, He does so in a way that respects and restores our humanity. He doesn't coerce us but wins us. He heals our broken wills and makes us freely willing. His grace is stronger than our sin, yet never harsh. It is the power of love that melts rebellion and awakens joy.

### **The Glory of God and the Good of Man**

Only this view—that salvation is God's work from beginning to end—**can assure us of real transformation, certain hope, and the sure victory of God's kingdom**. Pelagianism leaves us with no guarantees. Everything is left hanging on the frailty and unpredictability of human choice. It claims to defend our freedom, but it offers no real security. In trying to protect the rights of man, **it tramples on the rights of God**—and in the end leaves both insecure.

But the Reformation showed that when we **honor God's sovereignty**, we also **recover the dignity of human responsibility**. For only those who begin with God can truly understand and value humanity rightly. As Scripture says, **"Those who honor me I will honor"** (1 Sam. 2:30).



## WHAT IS GRACE?

**A**ll the blessings God gives us in Christ—the benefits Jesus purchased and the Holy Spirit applies—can be summed up in one word: **grace**. But this word can mean different things, so it's important to be clear.

First, **grace** refers to **God's undeserved favor**, especially shown to sinners. It's the kindness He freely gives—not because we've earned it, but because He is merciful. This is the heart of the gospel.

Grace can also describe the many blessings—both physical and spiritual—that come from God's hand. These are often called “gifts of grace” (see Rom. 5:20; Eph. 2:5, 8). In another sense, “grace” can refer to a person's inner beauty or charm. And finally, in some languages, the word also means **thankfulness**—as in giving thanks for a gift.

But here, when we talk about grace in salvation, we're focusing on something specific: **the inner, spiritual gifts** the Holy Spirit gives to sinners to bring them into fellowship with God. We're not talking about God's general kindness to all people (like sunshine and rain), or the

miraculous gifts He gives for serving others. We're talking about the **saving grace** that is offered in the gospel and powerfully applied to God's elect.

### **Grace According to Rome vs. the Reformation**

At this point, it's helpful to understand a key difference between Roman Catholic teaching and the view held by the Reformers—especially in the Reformed tradition.

In Catholic theology, grace is seen as something that **makes people pleasing to God**. It is categorized in two ways:

1. **Actual grace** – Help God gives to move someone toward salvation.
2. **Habitual (or sanctifying) grace** – A lasting state in which a person is made holy and acceptable to God.

In their view, people—though still capable of doing good in a natural sense—**cannot do anything truly pleasing to God or worthy of eternal life** unless they first receive this supernatural grace. In other words, they must be lifted beyond their natural state by an extra spiritual gift to even begin walking toward salvation. For Catholics, grace is not primarily a remedy for sin but a necessary addition to our nature to raise us to a supernatural level.

To their credit, Rome does reject Pelagianism—the idea that people can save themselves without divine help. But the way they define grace makes it **something everyone receives**, even those who ultimately reject it. They say that actual grace is given to all people: to infants who die unbaptized, to non-Christians, to hardened sinners, to everyone. However, since not all are

saved, they conclude that **grace is always resistible**—God offers, but it's up to us to accept or reject it.

In this view, grace is seen as sufficient, but whether it works depends on **the human will**. Some Catholic thinkers, like the Molinists and Congruists, have tried to explain this mystery in detail. But even they eventually admit it remains a profound paradox.

Yet, at the same time, many Catholic theologians—especially those influenced by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas—still affirm that God ultimately **predestines some to grace and glory apart from any foreseen merit**. This shows how deep the tension is in their system: grace is both a gift from God and something that depends on us.

A key difference between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation lies in how they understand the very nature of grace.

### **Rome's View: Grace Elevates Nature**

In Catholic theology, grace is not thought of as a substance, but rather as a **quality**—a kind of spiritual enhancement that God gives to people. It doesn't mean God and humanity are mingled into one (as in pantheism), but grace is still seen as something that lifts human beings above their natural limits.

Catholic theologians describe **actual grace** as God's help that enables people to perform good works, and **habitual grace** as an ongoing quality that makes people pleasing to God. This habitual grace, they say, transforms the soul by giving it a divine brightness or beauty, almost like light shining from within. It's more than just an improvement of behavior; it's seen as a change in the soul's very essence, allowing people to enter into a higher, supernatural order.

At its core, this grace makes a person a “**partaker of the divine nature**” (2 Pet. 1:4). It’s believed to lift humans not just above human nature, but even beyond angels—above all created things, actual or possible. Though it doesn’t make someone divine, it brings them as close as possible to the divine realm. According to this view, grace serves two purposes: it **elevates** and it **heals**, but the focus is clearly on the elevation—on raising human beings above their natural state into union with God. Forgiveness of sin, faith, and healing are treated as secondary. The main goal is to climb up into the divine.

### **The Reformation’s View: Grace Restores, Not Elevates**

The Reformers firmly rejected this mystical, Neoplatonic view. They returned to the plain teaching of Scripture and came to a very different conclusion: **grace does not elevate us beyond our nature—it restores us to what we were created to be**. Grace is not given to raise us into a new supernatural order, but to free us from the guilt and power of sin. Grace is opposed not to nature, but to sin.

Adam, before the fall, didn’t need this kind of grace to be righteous. Grace became necessary only because of sin. So grace isn’t something added to our human nature—it is God’s mercy acting to forgive, cleanse, and renew what sin has broken. Once sin is removed, we naturally become what we were meant to be—God’s image-bearers. The image of God isn’t something extra added to us; it’s part of who we are.

Of course, the grace we receive in Christ **restores more than what we lost in Adam**. Christ didn’t just give us the chance to obey and live; he obeyed perfectly in our place. He not only secured the possibility of life but the guarantee of **eternal life that cannot be lost**. Adam could fall, but Christ gives his people a salvation that cannot be taken away.

So, even though grace does lift us to eternal life, it doesn't do so by giving us something foreign to our nature. It brings us to the very end that God originally intended for Adam. The **covenant of grace** and the **covenant of works** share the same final goal: life with God. The difference is not the destination, but the road—Adam's road was obedience; ours is grace through Christ.

### **Grace: Not a Substance, But the Power of God to Restore**

In Reformation theology, grace is never understood as a *substance*—something you can possess or absorb like a spiritual fluid. While the Reformers did affirm that grace works deeply within us—not just externally but also internally—they gave the word a very different meaning than the Roman Catholic Church.

Rome teaches that grace must elevate human nature into a supernatural realm, giving people new powers they otherwise don't have. That's why, in their view, grace must be more than moral influence—it must be a “physical” or essential power added to human nature. But this assumes that humanity's greatest problem is a lack of supernatural ability, rather than the guilt and corruption of sin.

The Reformation takes a different path. Sin, according to Scripture, is not just a weakness—it's spiritual death. It's not simply that we lack power, but that our minds are darkened, and our wills are turned away from God. Because of this, grace must do more than instruct; it must awaken, enlighten, and transform. But unlike Rome, the Reformers didn't see this work as “physical” in the sense of adding a new kind of power. Instead, they saw it as **spiritual and moral**—grace works in the heart and mind to restore what sin destroyed.

When the Reformers described this as “supernatural,” they meant that grace comes from above, from God, not that it adds something foreign to our nature. Grace restores the original power to love and obey God that humanity lost through the fall. It does not add something completely new to our being. The problem is not that we’re missing some divine layer—we are sinners in need of forgiveness and renewal.

Rome views grace as giving people the ability to reach beyond themselves—to do things they were never meant to do by nature, like earning eternal life. But in the Reformed view, grace is not about *elevating* us beyond our nature; it’s about *restoring* us to what we were created to be: holy, upright, and in communion with God.

### **Grace Is a Re-Forming, Not a Re-Creation**

Grace, then, is not a new creation, nor does it introduce anything foreign to us. It’s not a substance added to the soul like a divine vitamin. Rather, it is God’s power to **re-form** us—to reshape us according to the image in which we were originally made. Sin has polluted every part of who we are—our minds, our hearts, our wills. And so grace must reach into every part as well, bringing new life, cleansing, and renewal.

This is where Reformed theology finds its strength: **grace does not depend on us**. Rome insists grace is necessary, but in the end, it says that grace can do nothing unless our will agrees. And even then, grace mostly serves to give us the power to earn the next grace, and eventually, eternal life. Grace becomes a helper on the road to self-earned godliness.

But the Reformation declares something much more freeing: **grace is all from God—beginning to end**. It is God who calls, God who regenerates, God who justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies. Grace doesn’t aid us in saving ourselves; grace *saves us*. It’s not our ladder to climb into heaven—it’s

God's hand reaching down into our spiritual death, raising us up to life in Christ.

As Scripture says, "*From him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen*" (Romans 11:36).

### **The Benefits of Grace**

Grace is a rich and all-encompassing gift. Under this single word, Scripture gathers countless blessings—blessings Christ secured through His death and resurrection, and which the Holy Spirit now applies to His people. The Bible speaks of these benefits in many ways, overflowing with promises of forgiveness, renewal, and eternal life.

Because the blessings of grace are so abundant, theologians throughout history have wrestled with how to organize and explain them clearly. In Roman Catholic theology, grace is often categorized under three types: *actual grace* (God's help in specific moments), *habitual grace* (a kind of spiritual quality or disposition), and the *fruits of grace* (the outcomes seen in a person's life). In that system, grace flows primarily through the church's sacraments, administered by priests. The church is seen as the channel of grace, and the sacraments as its delivery method.

But the Reformation took a different approach.

Rather than beginning with the institutional church and the sacraments, the Reformers started with the *work of the Holy Spirit* in the heart of the believer. The focus shifted from the external structure of the church to the *internal renewal* of the sinner. Grace was no longer viewed as a substance dispensed by the church but as the personal, powerful action of the Holy Spirit applying the finished work of Christ to His people.

The Reformers saw grace not as something stored in the church, but as God's active presence—regenerating the heart, drawing sinners to faith, and shaping them in holiness. So instead of dividing grace into categories tied to sacramental acts, they spoke of grace in terms of the believer's experience of salvation: repentance, faith, and good works. Over time, especially in Reformed theology, this view developed further into what we now call the *order of salvation* (*ordo salutis*)—the sequence of how God applies the benefits of redemption to His elect.

### **The Role of the Word and Spirit**

Within this order of salvation, one theme stands out: everything begins with God's call. Just as God created the world by His Word, so too He re-creates fallen sinners by that same Word. God calls people out of darkness into light through the preaching of the gospel.

This divine calling has two sides. There is the *external call*—the outward proclamation of the Word. But there is also the *internal call*—the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, who awakens the heart and causes a person to respond in faith. While both are essential, it is the inward call of the Spirit that brings about true transformation.

Reformed theology insists that the Spirit works through the Word, but also that He does more than simply inform the mind. He directly enters the soul, regenerates the will, and makes the sinner willing and able to believe. This regeneration is not a cooperative act; it is God's sovereign work. The Spirit does not wait for human permission. He moves in power, bringing life where there was only death.

This view stood firmly against both the *Anabaptists*, who separated the Spirit's work from the Word altogether, and the *Remonstrants* (or Arminians), who claimed the Spirit only offered grace but did not ensure

salvation unless the person accepted it. Reformed theology teaches that the Holy Spirit's work is *irresistible* and *effective*—He does not merely offer new life; He *gives* it.

### **A Work of God from Start to Finish**

So, from the very first moment of spiritual awakening to the final breath of faithfulness, the benefits of grace are all the work of God. They are rooted in Christ, applied by the Spirit, and received through faith. God's grace is not an abstract power or religious tool—it is His love in action, reaching sinners, reviving them, and leading them home.

The Reformed tradition teaches that this work begins not with the church or the sacraments, but with God Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who in mercy planned, accomplished, and now applies salvation to His people. And this salvation is not offered randomly, but is given effectually to the elect, as part of the unbreakable covenant of grace that spans generations.

### **The Beginning of Salvation: Regeneration and Faith**

Theologians have long debated how to describe the first work of the Holy Spirit in a sinner's heart. Influenced by Martin Luther's experience, many initially spoke of *repentance* as the beginning of salvation, followed by *faith* and *good works*. But they soon realized that not every believer goes through the same emotional experience of repentance—especially not covenant children, who grow up in the faith.

Furthermore, as both Luther and Calvin pointed out, there's a difference between *worldly sorrow*, which can be felt by anyone (even the unconverted), and *godly sorrow*, which comes from true faith and new life in Christ. Because of the misunderstandings tied to the word *repentance*—which in Roman Catholicism had come to imply a punishment paid through

penance—the Reformed began using a different term: **resipiscentia**, which literally means “coming to one’s senses.” This shift led to two important changes:

**REGENERATION BEFORE FAITH**

1. The earliest work of grace needed a better name than “penitence.”
2. The nature and place of conversion (*resipiscentia*) in the order of salvation had to be reconsidered.

Calvin taught that *faith* is the first fruit of grace, while *regeneration* refers broadly to being made new in God’s image. Other theologians used terms like *conversion*, *renewal*, or *resuscitation* to describe this first act of grace, often giving these terms a more specific meaning than before.

Reformed theology came to understand that something had to happen *before* a person could believe. Faith and repentance are not human accomplishments but the result of a prior work of God. Scripture teaches that we are spiritually dead in sin—completely unable to believe on our own. Therefore, the Holy Spirit must act first, planting the seed of new life in the heart.

This had practical implications. For instance, against the Anabaptists—who denied baptism to infants because they could not yet believe—the Reformers insisted that the children of believers were included in the covenant of grace. Even if they could not express faith yet, they could still possess the *principle* of faith by the Spirit’s work. Therefore, they too should be baptized, and if they died in infancy, they were saved.

Likewise, adults can go through seasons when they struggle to actively exercise faith, yet still *possess* the gift of faith within. All of this points to the need for a distinction between the Spirit’s inner work and the fruit it produces. In this view, regeneration comes first—it is the new birth itself—and faith flows from it. As one Reformed theologian said, “Regeneration happens before faith, which is the result of it.”

### **Gradual and Gentle Grace**

Reformed theology also recognized that conversion doesn’t always happen suddenly or dramatically. While some believers are converted later in life through powerful experiences, many covenant children are quietly regenerated at a young age. For them, coming to faith and turning from sin is often a *gradual and gentle* process, unfolding as they grow.

This means true conversion doesn’t always involve a specific moment or emotional crisis. It can be “like the dawn,” slowly bringing light. Believers don’t need to pinpoint the exact moment they were born again. Instead, the evidence is seen in a life of growing repentance and faith—a daily dying to sin and rising to new life. That’s why Reformed theology places conversion not at the start of the Christian life but within the lifelong process of sanctification, as an ongoing renewal of the heart.

### **Justification and Faith: The Right Order**

Some Reformed theologians also wrestled with the proper order of *faith* and *justification*. When some teachers (especially the Neonomians) began to treat faith as a condition humans must fulfill to be justified, others pushed back. If faith is something we must contribute before we are accepted by God, they argued, then salvation is no longer a free gift.

Instead, they said, *faith itself is a gift of God*, the result of His grace—not something we offer in exchange for forgiveness. Therefore, justification—being declared righteous by God—must in some sense *precede* faith. We are justified because of Christ, and because of that justification, we receive faith. Justification flows not from what we do but from our union with Christ.

Some even spoke of an “eternal justification,” pointing to God’s eternal decree to unite believers to Christ and count His righteousness as theirs. But Reformed theology, while recognizing this as a theological truth, avoided placing justification entirely within God’s eternal counsel. To protect the gospel from antinomian abuse (which rejected the need for repentance or obedience), justification was firmly tied to the believer’s union with Christ through faith—realized in time, though rooted in eternity.

### **The Need for Real Conversion**

Finally, Bavinck notes that in a healthy church, it’s reasonable to expect many covenant children to be regenerated young and grow in grace gradually. But in times when the church is worldly and shallow, and when many professing Christians live without fruit, it’s essential to call people to *true conversion*—to a heart changed by God, not just outward conformity or historical knowledge of Christian truth.

Movements like Pietism and Methodism, with their emphasis on personal renewal and heartfelt faith, have their place—especially when the church

becomes cold or complacent. In every age, what matters most is not merely being part of the church externally, but being united to Christ by faith and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Religious Experience and the Question of Truth**

The spiritual awakenings brought about by various revivals gave rise to a new area of study known as the *psychology of religion*. Some even hoped it could replace theology and philosophy of religion altogether. But while it is entirely appropriate to study religious experience from a psychological perspective—as long as it's done with care and reverence—this approach has limits.

While there's more to reality than just our perception of it, our understanding of the world comes through our consciousness. So it's valid to study religious experience subjectively—what people think and feel—just as we study art, morality, or community. This kind of study can offer helpful insights for pastors, teachers, missionaries, and caregivers. It can explore, for example, how religious experiences differ across age groups, how conversion relates to life stages like puberty, or how the hidden workings of the soul might influence spiritual awakening.

However, the psychology of religion is still in its early stages. And sometimes, it reaches conclusions too quickly. Studies are often based on small samples—just dozens or hundreds of people. But what about the millions who aren't studied, whose stories might challenge the idea that religious experience naturally follows certain psychological patterns? Also, even the most honest personal testimonies—like journals, conversion stories, or spiritual autobiographies—must be treated with caution. People

often misunderstand themselves, and the line between what we feel and what's truly happening in our souls is not always clear.

In addition, these personal accounts often use the same words to mean very different things. Trying to reduce such varied experiences to simple patterns or fixed laws is difficult—perhaps impossible. That's why, in the broader study of religion, as in history or sociology, attempts to discover universal laws have often failed.

For example, while there may be a link between spiritual awakening and adolescence, we don't really know the nature of that link. And while many conversions do happen during puberty, plenty happen earlier or later. Sudden conversions might be more common in some church traditions, but they're not the norm everywhere. Some denominations, in fact, don't emphasize sudden conversions at all.

Moreover, many adults who look back on their childhood faith speak not of spiritual gain but of loss. And the same developmental window in which some experience religious awakening is also when others fall into addiction or criminal behavior. If we insist that all conversion is simply a psychological shift tied to adolescence, then we lose the meaning of true spiritual change and end up calling any shift in consciousness "conversion"—even if it moves someone away from God rather than toward Him.

Psychology can help us understand *how* conversion sometimes happens, under what conditions, and what forms it might take. But it cannot tell us what *true* conversion actually is—or distinguish it from a false one. It cannot explain why two people raised in the same godly home have different outcomes: one is transformed by God's grace, and the other walks

away. It has no standard for what is real or counterfeit, no ability to measure the difference between worldly sorrow and godly repentance.

Only God's Word can reveal the true nature of conversion.

That's why it's misguided—indeed, arrogant—for some psychologists to claim that conversion is purely a natural process, with no divine element involved. Psychology can observe the surface of religious behavior, but it cannot reach into the heart, where God's Spirit works. It cannot detect the point where the finite soul meets the infinite God.

What happens deep within the human soul—beyond our consciousness, beyond even our will—is a mystery. Sometimes, people experience sudden conversions, but psychology itself admits these are often tied to earlier, unnoticed spiritual impressions. In doing so, it actually affirms what the church has long taught: there is a difference between *regeneration* (God's secret work in the heart) and *conversion* (the outward turning to God in response).

In the end, only God—by His revelation—can define and accomplish true conversion. And the church must never surrender that truth to psychology, no matter how useful its tools may be.

### **Religious Experience and the Question of Truth**

When the psychology of religion insists that all religious experience must be explained purely in psychological terms, it risks distorting—and even destroying—the very thing it's trying to understand. Take prayer, for example. At its heart, prayer is based on a deep conviction that God exists, that He is personal, and that He hears and answers us. But if the psychologist insists on explaining prayer without acknowledging that reality—reducing it to a mere mental or emotional process—they strip

prayer of its true meaning. It would be like trying to study music without sound or love without relationship.

In doing so, this approach becomes self-defeating. Just as extreme idealism, which doubts the reality of the world we see and touch, ends up undermining all knowledge, so too does a purely psychological view of religion reduce it to illusion—something less than what it is.

This also explains why psychology, by itself, can never determine whether religion is actually true. Religious experience, like morality or beauty, includes both what is genuine and what is misguided or even unhealthy. So how can we tell the difference? Either we must bring in a standard from outside of psychology, or we must try to find one within religious experience itself.

That's where *pragmatism* steps in, especially in the thinking of William James. For pragmatism, truth is judged not by its origins, but by its effects. James says we should measure religion by its fruit, by what it produces in life. He describes religion as one of the great biological powers of the human race—a force that energizes us, not because of who God is, but because of how we "use" God to improve life. In this view, God isn't someone to know, but a tool to help us live more fully.

But this is a troubling position. It reverses the focus from God to ourselves. It no longer asks what is true but what is useful. And even then, it fails to solve the problem. If we judge religion by how much "life" it brings, how do we measure that? Is Christianity more life-giving than Islam? Does superstition count, since it thrives in many cultures? If "value" proves "truth," how do we define that value? What if people disagree on what is good or meaningful? Unless there is an objective standard, we end

up going in circles. Pragmatism collapses into itself unless it admits that something more than usefulness must determine what is true.

Even James, toward the end of his life, realized this limitation. He acknowledged that neither theology nor philosophy could fully prove God's existence. But he suggested that while our intellect can only know appearances, our heart—our inner sense of desire, love, and will—can bring us into contact with deeper reality. “The heart has its reasons,” he said, “which reason does not know.”

Yet in making this claim, James turned back to the very mysticism he once rejected. He divided human nature between intellect and emotion, and divided the world between what appears and what truly is. He tried to reach God by feelings alone—through the hidden movements of the soul—and said that God’s grace might slip quietly into our lives “through the subliminal door.” In this, he saw himself as a kind of supernaturalist, though in a very soft, modern sense.

Still, what James discovered through this emotional route was minimal. He concluded only that there is *something more* beyond science—a deeper spiritual reality behind the surface of life. But what that “something more” is, no one agrees. Everyone interprets it differently, forming their own ideas of God and religion. James called these personal interpretations “overbeliefs”—deeply held convictions that are necessary for living but cannot claim to be objectively true.

In the end, this leaves us with a view of religion where each person must create their own version of God, shaped by personal feeling and usefulness. And even then, it’s not clear that such religious experience points to one true God at all. Perhaps, James suggests, the diversity of human experience

is better explained by many gods. In this light, polytheism seems more honest, more suited to the wide variety of human religious feeling.

But this is where Christian faith must take a different path. The God of Scripture is not one option among many, not a feeling or a force we invent or use. He is the living and true God—independent, eternal, personal, holy, and gracious. Our hearts may feel after Him, but only His Word tells us who He truly is. And only by His Spirit can we know Him as He is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The difference between subjective religious experience and true religion is this: one is shaped from below by human imagination; the other descends from above by divine revelation.

Even William James, after his wide-ranging study of religious psychology, showed that while this field can offer real insight into the shape and development of religious life, it cannot replace theology. Psychology can help us understand *how* religion works in human experience—how it relates to our minds, emotions, and development—but it cannot tell us *whether it is true*. It does not give us the content of faith or the certainty of its validity. In the end, James himself returned to metaphysics—to the idea that there must be some kind of mystery or reality behind religious experience, even if it cannot be fully explained.

This is where a decision must be made. Either religious experience is entirely a psychological illusion, as Feuerbach claimed—just human wishes projected onto the sky—or it is rooted in something real, something beyond us. Some modern thinkers, including philosophers and theologians of James's time, still affirmed the existence of a deeper reality—an "infinite" presence that somehow lives within us and expresses itself through us. But because they denied a real, historical revelation of God, they also denied

that we can actually know this God in any specific or personal way. At best, they believed we can *feel* something divine in our hearts. But what we feel, we then interpret in symbolic terms—religious language that points to something beyond but cannot truly describe it.

They might admit that the *idea* of revelation is a natural outcome of religion, but they do not believe that God has actually revealed Himself in time, through word and deed. As a result, all religious expressions—our beliefs, our feelings, even our prayers—remain subjective. They carry meaning only in a psychological sense, not in the sense of objective truth. Religion becomes little more than a noble sentiment, rooted in the human heart, but with no firm foundation outside of us.

But that is not enough. Religion only holds real value if it is built on *revelation*—God speaking and acting in history. Without this, we are left to wander in a fog of feelings and symbols, unable to know whether anything we believe is actually true. Revelation is essential, because it gives us a *standard*—a way to evaluate religious experience. Only by God revealing Himself can we truly know what faith is, what conversion means, whether prayer reaches God, and how grace actually works in the human soul.

Without revelation, religion becomes a mirror reflecting back our own emotions. With revelation, it becomes a window through which we see the living God.

### **Only Revelation Gives Us the Truth**

Unlike the psychology of religion—which can only explore personal religious experiences—*dogmatics* aims to declare what salvation truly is, according to God's Word and mind. While insights from religious experience may help us better understand Scripture, they cannot replace the clear and objective teaching of God. A theologian must be spiritually

discerning (1 Cor. 2:15), but the task is not to recount one's own spiritual journey or to trace the emotions of believers. Rather, it is to unfold the riches of salvation that God has secured in Christ and now applies to His people through the Holy Spirit.

Scripture describes these blessings in many ways—sometimes with overlapping language or vivid imagery. Jesus says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17), “Repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15), and also speaks of being “born again” as the only way to enter God’s kingdom (John 3:3, 5). Other times, He refers to entering through the “narrow gate” (Matt. 7:13), or to forsaking everything to follow Him (Matt. 10:37ff). The Old Testament speaks of the “circumcision of the heart,” which the New Testament parallels with “regeneration.” While Paul uses that specific term only once (Titus 3:5), Jesus uses it frequently.

These terms—“regeneration,” “faith,” “conversion,” “renewal,” and others—do not always describe distinct stages in salvation, but often summarize the entire transformation of the believer. They are like collective names for the whole miracle of new life. Theologians have often tried to simplify this order, but with mixed results. Pietism focused on inner struggle and spiritual breakthrough. Methodism emphasized conversion and sanctification. Others stressed justification, reconciliation, or rebirth. Some even moved certain doctrines—like regeneration or election—into the realm of ethics or the work of Christ, leaving only faith to be discussed under salvation.

But true simplification cannot come at the cost of losing the richness and detail of God’s redemptive work. Just as with doctrines like the Trinity or the person of Christ, theology must sometimes use terms not found in Scripture, or define biblical terms more precisely. The goal is not to merely

quote Scripture word-for-word, but to explain the truths it teaches and the way those truths relate. Scripture speaks in many images and metaphors to reveal the fullness of God's grace from every angle.

At the heart of all these benefits is the *covenant of grace*. Though revealed in time, it is rooted in eternity, grounded in God's eternal will and love. Christ was chosen before the world began to be the Mediator of this covenant, and in that eternal plan, He took His people's guilt and gave them His righteousness. A union between Christ and His people was formed that would be revealed and realized in history. Because of this, some Reformed theologians spoke of "eternal justification." While this phrase raised concerns, the underlying truth was affirmed by all: from eternity, Christ pledged Himself as surety for His people and secured their salvation.

Still, theologians wisely distinguished between God's eternal decree and its historical fulfillment. Even if justification is planned in eternity, it unfolds in time: in Christ's resurrection, in the gospel, in the believer's calling and faith, and ultimately in the final judgment. Justification is never complete until it is worked out in these stages.

Yet it remains vital to affirm: all of salvation flows from the Father's eternal love. Every benefit of the covenant of grace is secured in His will, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Spirit. Our salvation begins in God's heart and reaches us through His Word and Spirit—revealed, not invented; eternal, not fleeting; true, not imagined.

### **The Blessings of Salvation Come Fully Through Christ, By the Spirit**

First, in the Christian faith, there's no question that *all* the blessings of salvation have been fully and completely earned by Christ. Nothing needs to be added to his finished work. These blessings belong to Christ and are available to his people through him alone. Since they are covenant blessings

—given through the covenant of grace—we can only share in them by being united to Christ, who is the Mediator of that covenant.

This covenantal reality begins in eternity. The mystical union between Christ and his church, and the exchange of our sin for his righteousness, was established in God's eternal plan. But it was accomplished in time: Christ was crucified, buried, raised, and glorified—for and with his people. So, Christ is given to us *before* we ever come to him in faith. Indeed, we *cannot* believe unless Christ first sends his Spirit to give us new life. Regeneration, faith, and every other grace are all Christ's gifts—flowing from his fullness to us.

This means we don't first repent, get reborn, and then choose Christ. Rather, it is because Christ has already accomplished redemption and gives us his Spirit that we come to believe. As the Father's love initiated our salvation, so the Son's fullness supplies every grace.

Yet, just as we distinguish between God's eternal plan and its unfolding in history, we must also distinguish between *what Christ accomplished* (the *acquisition* of salvation) and *how it is given to us* (the *application* of salvation). Some, like Kaftan, reject this distinction. They argue that salvation is already fully realized in the death and resurrection of Christ, and that we simply receive it by faith when we hear the gospel. In their view, justification and regeneration aren't events applied to us personally, but truths that are already objectively present in Christ.

But this view misses something crucial. There is a real difference between what Christ did *for* us at the cross and what he now does *in* us through his Spirit. His finished work—what he did in his humility—is not the same as the ongoing work he performs from his exalted throne. Justification,

regeneration, sanctification—these are not merely truths in Christ; they are living experiences given to believers in time.

Second, this brings us to the vital role of the Holy Spirit. In many modern views, the Spirit is barely mentioned. For some, he is merely a moral influence or the lingering spirit of Jesus' example. Others reduce him to the church's shared love or sense of community. But Scripture—and the entire Christian tradition—teaches us that the Holy Spirit is *God himself*, the third person of the Trinity, consubstantial with the Father and the Son.

He is not just a power or influence. He is *the Spirit of Christ* who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and who applies all the blessings of salvation to God's people. He inspired the Scriptures, accompanies the preaching of the Word, and—since Pentecost—dwells personally in the church and in each believer. It is by the Spirit that Christ makes us part of himself, drawing us into fellowship with God.

This work is not mechanical. While the Spirit ordinarily works through the Word, he also works in a direct and personal way, entering the heart, giving new life, and producing faith, love, and holiness. Debates have arisen throughout history: Does the Spirit work only through the Word? Only through the sacraments? Or directly and immediately in the soul? The Reformed tradition affirms that while the Spirit binds himself to the Word, he is never limited by it. He works through the means of grace, but also directly, sovereignly, and personally.

So, when we speak of salvation, we must not lose sight of this great truth: everything the Father planned, and the Son accomplished, is applied by the Holy Spirit. From start to finish, salvation is God's work. And it is through the Spirit that the Father and the Son bring us into the deepest, most joyful communion with themselves.

## **The Spirit Applies Christ's Blessings in Order and Fullness**

### **1. The Spirit's Order in Salvation**

All of the blessings Christ gives us are not randomly scattered—they are connected like links in a chain. The Holy Spirit applies them in a meaningful and purposeful sequence. Scripture makes this clear: “Everyone who believes will be saved,” “You must be born again to enter the kingdom of God,” “Without faith it is impossible to please God,” and “Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

You cannot receive the later blessings without first receiving the earlier ones. That's why the call of the gospel—the preaching of God's Word—comes first. The Spirit normally works through this Word. But this calling doesn't just happen once. It continues through our whole lives, teaching us, encouraging us, and warning us. It leads us to daily repentance and growth in holiness.

The way God's Word is applied will vary depending on the person and the situation. Peter preached differently on Pentecost than Paul did in Athens. There's a difference between preaching the gospel to the lost and preaching to a gathered church. Even within the church, the Word sometimes comforts and sometimes confronts. It may console or challenge, encourage or rebuke. But in every case, it's the same living Word that the Spirit uses to grow the church in grace and in the knowledge of Christ.

This calling, both outward (through preaching) and inward (through the Spirit), produces faith and repentance in the heart—both of which flow from being made alive by the Spirit. These are the first signs that someone is being drawn into the blessings of salvation.

### **2. Three Categories of Christ's Saving Work**

Sin affects us in three ways: it makes us guilty before God, corrupt in nature, and subject to misery and death. But Christ redeems us from all three.

So the blessings of salvation can be grouped like this:

1. **Restoring Our Standing with God** This includes forgiveness, justification, peace with God, adoption, and freedom from guilt. These benefits are accepted by faith, change our standing before God, and give peace to our conscience.
2. **Renewing Our Nature** This is the inward work of the Spirit: regeneration, sanctification, and being made new in Christ. These change our hearts, reshape our lives, and free us from the power of sin.
3. **Preserving Us for Glory** This includes our perseverance through trials and our future glorification. It looks ahead to the day when we will be free from all suffering and death, and enter eternal joy.

These blessings come from the Spirit's varied work:

- He **illuminates** us so we can receive justification by faith.
- He **regenerates** and renews our hearts, freeing us from sin's grip.
- He **preserves** and seals us for our final redemption, body and soul.

These blessings also reflect Christ's threefold office:

- As **Prophet**, he gives us light and truth.
- As **Priest**, he intercedes and purifies us.
- As **King**, he reigns and will bring us into eternal glory.

We look to the **past**—to Christ’s death on the cross for forgiveness. We look **upward**—to our risen Lord who intercedes for us. And we look **forward**—to his return, when he will make all things new. These are not isolated gifts, but deeply united, like faith, hope, and love. Together, they form the unbreakable cord of salvation.

### **3. Four Key Stages in the Order of Salvation**

To summarize, the order of salvation (ordo salutis) can be described in four main stages:

1. **Calling** – which includes the Spirit’s work of opening hearts through the Word, giving birth to faith and repentance.
2. **Justification** – in which God declares us righteous through faith in Christ.
3. **Sanctification** – the lifelong process of being made holy.
4. **Glorification** – the final stage, which begins now and is completed in eternity.

Though glorification is often discussed under the topic of last things, it actually begins in this life through the renewing work of the Spirit and will be fully realized when Christ returns.

Paul captures this beautifully in 1 Corinthians 1:30: “*Christ became for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.*” Romans 8:30 also outlines this progression: those whom God called, he also justified, and glorified.

The Spirit applies each of these blessings uniquely:

- In **calling**, he convicts and awakens.
- In **justification**, he comforts and enlightens.
- In **sanctification**, he renews us daily.
- In **glorification**, he seals and perfects us, restoring us fully in Christ’s image.

This is how God fulfills his plan—to make Christ the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.