MAGNALIA DEI

HERMAN BAVINCK

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Magnalia Dei

Instruction in the Christian Religion

- after Reformed Confession -

BY

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by Herman Bavinck

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.

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Table of Contents

Foreword

Preface

1. The Highest Good

2. The Knowledge of God

3. General Revelation

4. The Value of General Revelation

5. Special Revelation. (The manner of Revelation).

6. Special Revelation II. (The Content of Revelation)

7. The Holy Scriptures

8. Scripture and Confession

9. The Being of God

10. The Trinity of God

11. Creation and Providence

12. Origin, Being, and Destiny of Mankind

13. Sin and Death

14. The Covenant of Grace

15. The Mediator of the Covenant

16. The Divine and Human Nature of Christ

17. The Work of Christ in His Humiliation

18. The Work of Christ in His Exaltation

19. The Gift of the Holy Spirit.

20. The Calling.

21. Justification.

22. Sanctification.

23. The Church of Christ

24. Eternal Life.

Foreword

Magnalia Dei: The Great Works of God

In this modest volume, I seek to provide a clear exposition of the Christian faith as professed by Reformed Churches across all lands and ages.

The title, "Magnalia Dei," is drawn from Acts 2:11. There, we are told that the disciples of Jesus, upon receiving the Holy Spirit, began to proclaim the great works of God in languages understood by all. These great works of God do not refer solely to specific events, such as the resurrection of Christ, but rather encompass the entirety of the salvation history wrought by God through Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured out so that the congregation might come to know, glorify, and offer thanks and praise to God for these works.

This conveys the idea that the Christian religion is not merely a collection of words or doctrines, but is in essence a divine work, achieved in the past, unfolding in the present, and destined for completion in the future. The substance of the Christian faith is neither a scientific theory nor a philosophical formula explaining the world, but rather an acknowledgment and confession of the great works of God, which span the ages, encompass the entire world, and will find fulfillment in the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness dwells.

Such understanding is no longer widely grasped or appreciated. The knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, is steadily declining. Interest in the mysteries of the kingdom of God diminishes daily, not only outside but also within Christian circles. Fewer and fewer live by the truth with their whole heart and soul, nourishing themselves with it daily. Those who still accept it often see it merely as a set of teachings, perhaps worthy of belief, but disconnected from life and irrelevant to the present.

Several reasons account for this lamentable state of affairs.

The demands placed on those preparing for or engaged in various professions are so heavy that there is neither pleasure nor time left for other pursuits. Life has become so rich and complex that obtaining an overview requires great effort. Political, social, and philanthropic interests increasingly claim our time and strength. The reading of daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, and brochures consumes our free moments. There is neither the desire nor the opportunity to study the Scriptures or the old theological works.

Moreover, those old works are no longer in tune with our times. Differences in language, style, thought, and expression make them feel foreign to us. Issues once deemed paramount have lost much, if not all, of their significance. New interests, not addressed by these works, now dominate our attention. Enemies they once fought no longer exist, have been replaced, or engage us in entirely different ways.

We are children of a new era, living in a different century. Clinging to old forms merely because they are old is futile and contradicts our own confession. Precisely because the Christian faith is the recognition of a divine work spanning from the beginning of time to our present day, its essence is timeless, but its form must be contemporary. No matter the good that works like Frank's "Kern," Marck's "Merg," and Brakel's "Redeemer's Religion" did in their time, they cannot be revived today. They no longer resonate with the younger generation and inadvertently suggest that Christianity is outdated. Hence, there is a pressing need for a work that can stand in place of the fathers' writings, presenting the old truth in a form that meets contemporary demands.

Much progress has been made in this direction. Since the Reformed faith and theology saw revival and growth in the last century, numerous attempts have been made to adapt the old confession to modern understanding. The contributions of Dr. Kuyper, especially through his rich catechetical expositions, cannot be overstated. Yet, there remains a lack of a work that explains the Christian faith's content in an accessible manner for the broader populace, kept within reach by its modest size and price.

This book aims to fill that gap, offering instruction in the Christian religion to the congregation. While the author of this handbook on Reformed doctrine is aware of his limitations, this awareness should not lead to despair and inactivity but should instead drive one to exert all effort and rely on the help of Him who perfects His strength in our weakness.

I do not envisage scholars as the primary readers of this work, those well-versed in the rich and profound thoughts of Scripture as formulated in Reformed theology. Instead, I have in mind ordinary church members, those preparing through catechism for admission to Holy Communion, or those maintaining an interest in the truth's knowledge. I particularly consider the young men and women, often already training for their future professions in workplaces, factories, stores, offices, higher education institutions, or grammar schools, where they frequently encounter objections to the Christian faith.

Many among them still desire to believe but find it exceedingly difficult due to their environment and the objections they hear. Their confession often lacks joy and enthusiasm. Yet, if the truth is rightly understood, joy and enthusiasm will return. When the works of God

are seen in their true light, they naturally inspire admiration and worship. We then perceive that the Christian faith not only deserves belief but also possesses an intrinsic beauty, grounded in its inner truth and glory, appealing to the conscience. We then thank God, not because we must, but because we may believe. We come to realize the relevance of our faith to our thoughts and lives. Each in our own language, we begin anew to proclaim the great works of God.

H. Bavinck. Amsterdam, May 1907

MAGNALIA DEI

Preface

Magnalia Dei by Herman Bavinck is a profound exploration of the manifold works of God as revealed in Scripture and experienced in the lives of believers. This book aims to bridge the rich theological heritage of Reformed thought with the practical, lived experience of faith. Rooted in the biblical testimony and illuminated by the insights of Reformed theology, Bavinck's work invites readers to deeply explore the knowledge of God, the nature of His creation, the reality of sin and grace, and the ultimate hope of eternal life.

Throughout the chapters of this book, Bavinck carefully examines the intricate tapestry of God's interaction with humanity, from the creation narrative to the promise of the New Jerusalem. He explores fundamental doctrines such as the nature of God, the person and

work of Christ, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the significance of the Church. Each doctrine is presented not merely as an abstract concept but as a lived reality, deeply relevant to the believer's journey of faith.

Key themes such as the highest good, the divine and human nature of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the eternal calling of God are meticulously unpacked. Bavinck shows how these doctrines are interwoven with the everyday life of believers, providing a comprehensive understanding of what it means to live in the presence of God. His treatment of these topics is both scholarly and pastoral, making profound theological truths accessible and applicable to all readers.

To facilitate deeper engagement with the material, study questions for reflection have been added to the end of each chapter. These questions are designed to help readers not only grasp the theological content but also to reflect on its significance in their own lives. They encourage personal contemplation and group discussion, fostering a richer and more transformative reading experience.

As you embark on this journey through **Magnalia Dei**, may you be inspired and challenged to grow in your knowledge of God, deepen your love for Him, and live more fully in the light of His truth. Herman Bavinck's thoughtful exposition and the added study questions are meant to guide you towards a fuller understanding and appreciation of the wondrous works of God.

Soli Deo Gloria - To God Alone Be the Glory.

1. The Highest Good

Man's supreme good is God alone

In a broad sense, we acknowledge that God is the ultimate good for all creation, being the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the source from which all life and goodness flow. Every creature owes its existence to Him, the one eternal and omnipresent Being.

Yet, when we speak of the highest good, we imply that it is recognized and enjoyed as such by the creatures. This recognition is not found among lifeless or senseless beings. Some creatures exist without participating in life, like inanimate objects; others, like plants, have life but lack perception; still others, like animals, possess consciousness but are limited to the material and sensory world. They understand earthly realities, the pleasant and the useful, but remain ignorant of the true, the good, and the beautiful; their desires are sensual, not spiritual.

Humankind stands apart. Created in the image and likeness of God, man retains a divine origin and kinship that cannot be erased. Even though sin has marred the image of God within us, remnants of His gifts remain, sufficient to remind us of our lost innocence and to testify to our former greatness and divine calling.

In all human endeavors, a restless striving reveals that we are not content with the earthly realm; our desires reach beyond this world. While we are citizens of the temporal order, our hearts are drawn to

the eternal. With feet on earth, our gaze lifts to heaven. We comprehend both the visible and the eternal, the perishable and the imperishable. Our longing encompasses earthly goods but also yearns for heavenly treasures.

Humans share sensory perception with animals but are endowed with reason and intellect, enabling us to transcend sensory experiences and contemplate immaterial truths. Our intellect, though connected to the brain, is inherently spiritual, allowing us to engage with a reality unseen and untouched, yet more substantial than the physical world. This pursuit of spiritual truth, one that is eternal and immutable, is where our mind finds true rest.

Thus, man's quest is not for tangible reality, but for divine truth, which alone can satisfy our deepest longings. This truth is singular, eternal, and imperishable, and in it, our minds find peace.

Likewise, mankind shares with animals a sensual desire. He requires food and drink, light and air, labor and repose, relying on the earth for his physical sustenance. Yet above this sensual desire, he possesses a will that, guided by reason and conscience, aspires to higher and nobler goods. Pleasant and useful things, though valuable in their proper place and time, do not satisfy him; he seeks a good that is inherently good, unchanging, spiritual, and eternal. His will finds rest only in the supreme, absolute goodness of God.

Both mind and will are deeply rooted in the heart of man, as interpreted by Holy Scripture. Proverbs declares that the heart must be guarded above all else, for out of it flow the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23). Just as the heart is, in a natural sense, the fountainhead and driving force of the circulatory system and thus the principal organ

of physical life, so it is spiritually and morally the source of higher life in man. It is the seat of our self-awareness, our relationship to God, our subjection to His law, and our entire spiritual and moral nature. Consequently, our rational and volitional life originates from and is directed by the heart.

In that heart, God has placed eternity, as Ecclesiastes 3:11 states. God ordains everything in its time, ensuring that history, in its entirety and in every detail, aligns with His counsel and manifests the glory of His decrees. God has situated man within the temporal order and instilled eternity in his heart, so that he might not remain engrossed in the external, visible phenomena, but might discern and comprehend God's eternal purposes in the transient course of nature and history.

This "desiderium aeternitatis," this longing for eternity that God has implanted in man's heart, in the innermost part of his being, the core of his personality, causes him to be dissatisfied with anything temporal. Though he is a sensible, earthly, finite being, he is also prepared and destined for eternity. It profits a man nothing to gain wife and children, houses and fields, treasures and goods, even the whole world, if his soul suffers damage (Matthew 16:26). For the entire world holds no value for a man. No wealthy man can offer God a ransom for his brother to save him from death; the price of a soul is beyond the capacity of any creature (Psalm 49:8-9).

Many may agree with this sentiment when it concerns sensual pleasures and earthly treasures. They fully acknowledge that such things are incapable of satisfying mankind and do not align with his lofty destiny.

Yet, their judgment shifts when considering so-called ideal goods: science, art, civilization, the service of the true, the good, and the beautiful, a life dedicated to others, and the pursuit of humanity. These, too, belong to the world, which Scripture declares will pass away with all its desires (1 John 2:17).

Science, indeed, is a noble gift, descending from the Father of lights, and as such, it is to be esteemed highly.

When Paul refers to the wisdom of this world as foolishness before God (1 Corinthians 3:19; 2:18) and elsewhere warns against philosophy (Colossians 2:8), he speaks of that false, imaginary wisdom which does not recognize God's wisdom as revealed in His general and special revelation (1 Corinthians 1:21) and is frustrated in all its deliberations (Romans 1:21). However, throughout Paul's writings and all of Scripture, knowledge and wisdom are held in the highest regard. This is consistent with the Scripture's assumption that God alone is wise, fully knowing Himself and all things, having founded the world through wisdom, revealing His manifold wisdom in the church, securing all treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ, and being the Spirit of wisdom and knowledge who searches the depths of God (Proverbs 3:19; Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 2:10; Ephesians 3:10; Colossians 2:3). A book derived from such thoughts cannot slight knowledge nor despise science. On the contrary, wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing one desires can compare with it (Proverbs 8:11); it is a gift from Him who is the God of knowledge (Proverbs 2:6; 1 Samuel 2:3).

However, Scripture demands a science that begins with the fear of the Lord as its principle (Proverbs 1:7). Without this foundation, it

may still bear the name of science, but it degenerates into worldly wisdom, which is foolishness in God's sight. A science that believes it can suffice on its own, apart from God, becomes its own antithesis and disappoints those who place their hopes upon it.

This is easily understood. Firstly, science always has a specialized nature and can only be pursued by a select few; these individuals, who can devote their entire lives to its pursuit, only conquer a small part of its territory and remain strangers and exiles in the broader context; whatever satisfaction it may provide, it can never satisfy those profound, universal needs innate to human nature and present in every person.

Secondly, whenever science experiences a revival after a period of decline, it begins with extraordinary, exaggerated expectations; it thrives on the hope that persistent research will unravel the mysteries of the world and life. But just as surely, disappointment follows this initial exuberance; as research continues, problems do not diminish but increase; what seemed self-evident reveals itself as a new enigma, and the end of all science is often the sorrowful, sometimes even desperate confession that man walks the earth amidst riddles, and that life and destiny remain mysteries.

Thirdly, let us consider that even if science could attain more certainty than it currently does, it would still leave the heart of man unsatisfied. For knowledge devoid of virtue and a moral foundation becomes an instrument of sin, employed for the contemplation and execution of more refined evils. The mind filled with science thus serves the corruption of the heart. Therefore, the Apostle Paul declares, even if one possesses the gift of prophecy and understands

all mysteries and all knowledge, but lacks love, such a one is nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Similarly, art, too, is a gift from God. Just as the Lord is not only truth and holiness but also glory, extending His glory over all His works, so He bestows wisdom, understanding, and knowledge upon artists through His Spirit (Exodus 31:3; 35:31). Art, therefore, serves as a testament to man's spiritual capacity, revealing his deepest desires, lofty ideals, and thirst for harmony. Through its creations, art presents an ideal world where the discord of earthly existence is resolved into harmony, unveiling a beauty often hidden from the perceptive but revealed to the discerning eye of the artist. This portrayal of a higher reality comforts us, lifts our spirits, and fills our hearts with hope and joy.

Yet, art, despite its allure, can only offer enjoyment through its depictions of beauty; it cannot bridge the gap between the ideal and the real. It shows us the glory of the Promised Land from afar but does not grant us entry or citizenship. Art is many things, but it is not everything. It is not, despite what some may claim, the ultimate religion or salvation of mankind. It does not atone for our guilt, cleanse us from our wickedness, nor can it dry our tears in times of sorrow.

Lastly, the pursuit of humanity, civilization, and communal life cannot be considered the highest good for mankind. While we can acknowledge progress in humanitarian efforts and the development of philanthropy—evidenced by improved care for the poor, the sick, the needy, widows, orphans, the insane, and prisoners compared to previous centuries—there remains much to be wary of.

Contemporary society is still plagued by dreadful iniquities such as prostitution, alcoholism, and other abominations, leaving us uncertain whether we are advancing or regressing, oscillating between optimism and pessimism.

Regardless, if life for the community and love for one's neighbor are not grounded in the commandment of God, they will lack substance and stability. Love for one's neighbor is not a natural or spontaneous impulse of the human heart. It is a feeling, an act, a commitment that requires immense willpower and constant effort against the overwhelming forces of selfishness and self-interest. Furthermore, this love often finds no encouragement in others, as people are not naturally so lovable that we can love them as ourselves without struggle. Love for one's neighbor can only endure if it is founded upon and commanded by God, and if God instills within us the desire to walk sincerely in accordance with all His commandments.

Thus, the words of Augustine remain ever true: the heart of man was created for God and finds no rest until it rests in Him. Augustine further testifies that all people seek God, but they do so incorrectly, not in the right way, nor in the right place. They seek Him below, while He is above. They seek Him on earth, whereas He resides in heaven. They seek Him afar, yet He is near. They seek Him in wealth, goods, glory, power, and lust; yet He dwells on high, in the holy place, with those of a contrite and humble spirit (Isaiah 57:15). Despite this misdirection, they still seek Him, hoping to find Him (Acts 17:27). They seek Him even as they flee from Him, unwilling to know His ways, yet unable to live without Him. They feel both drawn to God and repelled by Him.

Herein lies the profound insight of Pascal: the greatness and the misery of mankind. Man thirsts for truth, yet is a liar by nature. He longs for peace but plunges himself into distractions. He hungers for lasting, eternal happiness, yet grasps at fleeting pleasures. He seeks God but loses himself in the creature. Though born to the house, he feeds on swine's husks in a distant land. He is like a hungry man who dreams he eats, but awakens to find his soul empty; or like a thirsty man who dreams he drinks, but upon waking, finds himself parched and his soul unsatisfied (Isaiah 29:8).

Science cannot unravel this contradiction within man. It considers only his greatness or his misery, never both in their true light. It either exalts him too highly or casts him down too low, for it knows nothing of his divine origin or his profound fall. But Scripture comprehends both, shedding light upon man and humanity, resolving contradictions, dispelling mists, and uncovering hidden truths. Man is a riddle that only finds its solution in God.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the chapter define the highest good, and why is God alone considered the supreme good for humanity?

- Reflect on the reasons given for why God, as the Creator and Sustainer, is the ultimate source of all goodness and fulfillment.

2. What distinguishes humans from other creatures in their ability to recognize and seek the highest good?

- Consider the unique attributes of humans, such as reason and intellect, that enable them to perceive and desire spiritual truths beyond mere sensory experiences.

3. In what ways does the concept of being created in the image of God influence humanity's longing for something beyond the earthly realm?

- Reflect on the implications of being made in God's likeness and how this divine origin shapes human aspirations and desires.

4. How does the chapter explain the role of intellect and reason in transcending sensory experiences to seek immaterial truths?

- Discuss the connection between the human mind and its capacity to engage with eternal and immutable truths, as described in the chapter.

5. What does the chapter suggest about the limitations of earthly goods and pleasures in satisfying the human heart?

- Reflect on why temporary and material satisfactions fall short of fulfilling the deeper, spiritual longings of humans.

6. How does the chapter describe the importance of guarding the heart, as highlighted in Proverbs 4:23?

- Consider the metaphor of the heart as the source of life and its significance in guiding one's rational and volitional pursuits towards the highest good.

7. What is the meaning of "desiderium aeternitatis" (longing for eternity) mentioned in the chapter, and how does it affect human behavior?

- Reflect on how the innate desire for eternity, placed in the human heart by God, influences one's dissatisfaction with temporal realities.

8. How does the pursuit of ideal goods such as science, art, and civilization relate to the highest good, according to the chapter?

- Discuss the value and limitations of these pursuits in light of their transient nature and the ultimate satisfaction found only in God.

9. What does the chapter say about the relationship between love for one's neighbor and the commandment of God?

- Reflect on the necessity of divine command and empowerment for genuine love and altruism towards others.

10. How does Augustine's insight about the restless human heart finding rest only in God resonate with the overall message of the chapter?

- Consider Augustine's statement and how it encapsulates the chapter's teaching on the human quest for the highest good and the fulfillment found in God alone.

2. The Knowledge of God

God as the highest good for mankind is the testimony of all Scripture.

The sacred narrative begins with the account of God creating man in His own image and likeness, that man might know his Creator, love Him with all his heart, and live in eternal communion with Him. It culminates in the vision of the New Jerusalem, where the redeemed will see God's face, and His name will be upon their foreheads.

Between these bookends lies the grand revelation of God, spanning its length and breadth, encapsulated in the all-encompassing promise of the covenant of grace: "I will be your God, and you shall be My people." This promise reaches its zenith in Emmanuel, "God with us." In the interplay of promise and fulfillment, the Word of God serves as the concept, the seed, and the germ of action, coming to fruition in the fullness of time. Just as God brought creation into being through His Word, so through the Word of promise, He will bring forth a new heaven and a new earth, where God will dwell with mankind.

Thus, Christ, in whom the Word became flesh, is described by John as "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Christ is the Word, who was with God in the beginning and was God Himself, the life and light of men. In Him, the Father imparts His life and reveals His thoughts, manifesting the full essence of God. Christ not only declares the Father and reveals His name, but He also embodies and imparts the Father to us. He is God given and God

revealed, full of grace and truth. From the first utterance of the promise, "I will be your God," it is fulfilled as "I am your God." God gives Himself to His people, that they may wholly belong to Him.

Scripture continually reaffirms this: "I am your God." From the mother promise in Genesis 3:15, through the lives of the patriarchs, the history of Israel, and the New Testament church, this rich promise is reiterated. Throughout the ages, the congregation responds with faith's grateful praise: "You are our God, and we are Your people, the sheep of Your pasture."

This declaration is not a mere rational doctrine or an imitated unity but the confession of a deeply felt reality, experienced in the fabric of life itself. The prophets, apostles, and the faithful depicted in the Old and New Testaments, and later in the Church of Christ, did not theorize about God in abstract terms. They confessed what God meant to them and their lived experiences with Him in all life's circumstances. For them, God was not a cold concept to be dissected intellectually but a living, personal reality, infinitely more essential than the world around them—the one, eternal, and adorable Being. They lived in His presence, walked before Him, served in His courts, and worshipped in His sanctuary.

The authenticity and depth of their experience are manifest in the language they employ to articulate what God is to them. Their words flow effortlessly, for their mouths overflow with what fills their hearts, and the world and nature furnish them with images for their thoughts. To them, God is a King, a Lord, a Hero, a Guide, a Shepherd, a Savior, a Redeemer, a Helper, a Physician, a Husbandman, a Father. All their salvation and bliss, truth and

righteousness, life and mercy, strength and power, peace and rest are found in Him. He is to them a sun and a shield, a compass and a buckler, a light and a fire, a fountain and a spring, a rock and a shelter, a high tower, a reward and a shadow, a city and a temple. All that the world contains, scattered and divided, is but a parable of the unsearchable fullness of salvation found in God for His people. This is why David in Psalm 16:2 (in a more accurate translation) declares to Jehovah: "You are my Lord, I have no higher good than You," and Asaph in Psalm 73 sings: "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." For the pious, heaven with all its bliss and glory is empty and desolate without God; and if they live in fellowship with God, they desire nothing else on earth, for the love of God surpasses all other goods.

This is the experience of God's children, made real to them because God Himself has given Himself to them to enjoy in the Son of His love. Christ declares that eternal life, the entirety of salvation, consists in knowing the one and only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent.

It was a solemn hour when Christ spoke these words. He was about to enter the Garden of Gethsemane, crossing the Kidron Valley, to engage in the final battle of His soul. Before doing so, He, as our High Priest, prepared Himself for His suffering and death, and prayed to the Father that He might be glorified through and after His suffering, so that the Son might glorify the Father in the distribution of all the benefits He was about to acquire through His obedience unto death. When the Son prays in this manner, He desires nothing

other than the Father's own will and pleasure. The Father has granted Him authority over all flesh, that He might give eternal life to all whom the Father has given Him. And that eternal life consists of knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ, the Sent One (John 17:1-3).

The knowledge to which Jesus refers here bears a unique character. It differs from all other knowledge that man can acquire, not in degree, but in principle and essence. This is clearly evident when we compare the two types of knowledge. The knowledge of God, as mentioned by Jesus, differs from the knowledge of created things in origin and object, in essence and fruit.

It differs first of all in origin, for it is due to Christ alone. All other knowledge we acquire through our own understanding and judgment, through our own efforts and research. But the knowledge of the one true God is imparted to us by Christ, and we must receive it as children. It is found nowhere else, neither in any academic institution nor among any renowned philosopher. Christ alone knows the Father. He was with God in the beginning, lying in His bosom and seeing Him face to face. He is God Himself, the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His being, the Father's own, only begotten, beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased (Matthew 3:17; John 1:14; Romans 8:12; Hebrews 1:3). Nothing in the nature of the Father is hidden from the Son, for He shares the same nature, attributes, and knowledge. No one knows the Father except the Son (Matthew 11:27).

And this Son has come unto us and declared unto us the Father. He has revealed the name of His Father to man; therefore He became

flesh and appeared on earth, that He might make known to us the Truthful One (1 John 5:20). We did not know God, nor did we delight in the knowledge of His ways. But Christ has made the Father known to us. He was not a philosopher, a scientist, or an artisan; His mission was to reveal the Father's name to us. And this He accomplished fully, through His words, works, life, death, person, and entire being.

In His every act, He never spoke or did anything except what He saw the Father doing. His sustenance was to accomplish His Father's will. Whoever saw Him, saw the Father (John 4:34; 8:26, 28; 12:50; 14:9).

He received the name Jesus from God Himself, for He was to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). He is called Christ, the Anointed One, chosen and appointed by God Himself to fulfill all His offices (Isaiah 42:1; Matthew 3:16). And He is the Anointed One because He did not come in His own name like so many false prophets and priests. He did not exalt Himself or seek honor for Himself; rather, the Father, in His great love for the world, gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Those who accept Him are given the right and authority to be called children of God (John 1:12). They are born of God, partakers of the divine nature, and know God in the face of Christ, His Son. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son wills to reveal Him (Matthew 11:27).

The knowledge of God also differs from all other knowledge in its object. While human knowledge, especially in recent times, may have

expanded, it remains confined to the creature and does not touch the infinite. There is indeed a revelation of God's eternal power and divinity in the works of nature. Yet, the knowledge of God derived from nature is limited, obscured, mixed with error, and often unappreciated. For though men knew God by nature, they neither glorified Him nor gave thanks to Him as God, but became futile in their thinking and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images resembling the creature (Romans 1:20-23).

But here, in the high-priestly prayer, stands One who transcends all finite things and speaks of the knowledge of God! God as the object of human knowledge—who can fathom that? God, the Infinite and Incomprehensible One, who is beyond the measure of time or eternity, before whom angels veil their faces, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see! He, the object of human knowledge, for man, whose breath is in his nostrils, who is less than nothing and more than vanity! He would know God, whose entire knowledge is fragmentary! For all his knowledge, what does he truly understand? What does he grasp in his ear, in his being, in his purpose? Is he not perpetually surrounded by mystery? Does he not always stand at the edge of the unknown? And this man, a frail, weak, wandering, and darkened creature, would know God, the high, holy, only, omnipotent God!

It surpasses our understanding, but Christ, who has seen the Father and revealed Him to us, speaks of it. We can trust Him, for His testimony is true and worthy of all acceptance. If you desire to know who God is, do not seek out the wise, the scholars, or the researchers of this age. Instead, look to Christ and listen to His word. Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" or "Who will descend

into the abyss?" For the word that Christ preaches is near you. He Himself is the Word, the perfect revelation of the Father. As He is, so is the Father—equally just and holy, yet also full of grace and truth. At His cross, the fullness of the faith of the Old Covenant is revealed: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will He keep His anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear Him" (Psalm 103:8-13). Beholding the glory of Christ in the mirror of His word, we joyfully exclaim: "We know Him because we are known by Him; we love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Furthermore, the origin and content determine the essence of the knowledge of God in its uniqueness.

In the High Priestly Prayer, Jesus speaks not merely of knowing, but of knowing God. The distinction between these two is profound. To know much about a creature, plant, animal, human being, country, or people from books is entirely different from knowing it through personal observation. To know involves descriptions provided by others; to know involves the object itself. Knowing is an intellectual activity; knowing involves personal interest and the engagement of the heart.

Because the knowledge of God given by Christ is described in His Word, it is possible to have a type of knowledge that differs

essentially from the knowledge intended by Jesus. There is a knowing of the Lord's will without a willingness of the heart to do that will (Luke 12:47-48). There is a calling of "Lord, Lord" that does not open the entrance to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 7:21). There is a faith, like that of the devils, which produces not love, but fear and trembling (James 2:19). There are hearers of the word who do not wish to be doers and therefore will face greater judgment (James 1:23).

When Jesus speaks of knowing God, He refers to a knowledge akin to His own. He was not a theologian by profession, nor a doctor or professor of divinity. He saw the Father everywhere—in nature, in His word, in His service. He loved Him above all things and obeyed Him in everything, even unto death on the cross. His knowledge of the truth was united with His doing of the truth. His knowledge was inseparable from love.

It is this type of knowledge that Jesus refers to when He connects it to life. To know God does not consist in knowing much about Him but lies in having seen Him in the face of Christ, having encountered Him on our life's path, and having personally become acquainted with His virtues, righteousness, holiness, mercy, and grace in the experience of our souls.

That is why this knowledge, as opposed to other sciences, is called the knowledge of faith. It is not the fruit of intellectual investigation and reflection but of childlike and simple faith, of that faith which is not only a sure knowledge but also a firm trust that not only others, but also I, have been granted forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation by God, through pure grace, solely for

the merit of Christ's will. Only those who become like children will enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). Only the pure in heart will see the face of God (Matthew 5:8). Only those born again of water and the Spirit can see God's kingdom (John 3:5). If any man wills to do the will of God, he shall know the doctrine of Christ, whether it is of God or whether it speaks of Himself (John 7:17). They that know His name shall put their trust in Him (Psalm 9:10); and to the same degree that God is known, He is loved.

If we understand the knowledge of God in this way, it is no wonder that its effect and fruit is no less than eternal life. Between knowledge and life, there seems to be little connection. Does not Ecclesiastes truthfully say, "In much wisdom is much sorrow; he who increases knowledge increases sorrow; of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Ecclesiastes 1:18, 12:12)?

Knowledge is power—we grasp this to some extent. He who knows, rules. All knowledge is a triumph of the spirit over matter, a subjection of the earth to human dominion. But knowledge as life—who can understand that? And yet, even in the natural realm, knowledge enriches the depth and richness of life. The more comprehensive the consciousness, the more intense the life. Inanimate creatures do not know, and they do not live. When consciousness is awakened in animals, their lives gain in content and extent. Among humans, the richest life is that of the one who knows the most. What is the life of the ignorant, the simple, the undeveloped, compared to that of the thinker and poet? But however great the difference, it is only a difference of degree; the life itself

does not change and ultimately ends in death, for it is sustained only by the finite sources of this world.

But here we speak of knowledge not of any creature, but of the one true God.

If the knowledge of visible things enriches life, how much more will the knowledge of God bring life to the dead? For God is not a God of the dead but of the living. All those whom He created in His image and restored to His fellowship are thereby raised above death and mortality. "He that believeth in me," saith Jesus, "though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). Knowing God in the face of Christ brings eternal life, immeasurable joy, and heavenly bliss. Not only does it result in these, but knowing God is itself life—new, eternal, and blissful life.

According to this teaching of Holy Scripture, the Christian Church has defined the character of that science which from time immemorial has borne the name of Theology or Divinity. It is the science that derives the knowledge of God from His revelation, contemplates it under the guidance of His Spirit, and seeks to describe it to His glory. A theologian, a true scholar of God, is one who speaks from God, through God, and about God, to His glory. Between scholars and the simple-minded, there is only a difference in degree. They share one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all (Ephesians 4:5-6). But to each one of us, grace is given according to the measure of the gift of Christ (Ephesians 4:7).

In this spirit, Calvin introduced his Geneva Catechism with the question: What is the chief end of human life? And the answer was clear and powerful: That men may know the God by whom they were created. Similarly, the Westminster Catechism began its teaching with the question: What is the chief end of man? and provided this concise and profound answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the creation of man in God's image and likeness relate to the purpose of knowing, loving, and living in communion with God?

- Reflect on how being made in God's image is foundational to our capacity and calling to know and love Him.

2. What is the significance of the covenant promise "I will be your God, and you shall be My people" throughout Scripture?

- Consider how this promise underscores the relationship between God and His people from Genesis to Revelation.

3. How does Christ embody and fulfill the covenant promise, "I am your God"?

- Reflect on the ways Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection manifest God's commitment to His people.

4. In what ways do the experiences of the prophets, apostles, and faithful believers demonstrate the reality of God's presence in their lives?

- Discuss how their personal testimonies and lived experiences reveal God as a living and personal reality.

5. What are the various metaphors and images used in Scripture to describe God, and how do they enhance our understanding of His character?

- Reflect on the significance of descriptions such as King, Shepherd, Savior, Rock, and others in conveying aspects of God's nature.

6. How does the knowledge of God differ from other forms of knowledge in terms of origin, essence, and fruit?

- Consider how the knowledge of God, imparted through Christ, transcends intellectual understanding and leads to spiritual transformation.

7. What role does childlike faith play in receiving the knowledge of God, according to the chapter?

- Reflect on the importance of humility and trust in approaching the knowledge of God, as emphasized by Jesus.

8. How does the knowledge of God lead to eternal life, and what is the connection between knowing God and experiencing new, eternal, and blissful life?

- Discuss how the relationship with God, fostered through Christ, results in eternal life and deep spiritual fulfillment.

9. What does the chapter suggest about the limitations of human knowledge and the unique character of the knowledge of God?

- Reflect on the contrast between human intellectual efforts and the divine revelation of God's nature and will.

10. How do the catechisms of Geneva and Westminster encapsulate the purpose of human life in relation to the knowledge of God?

- Consider the profound answers given in these catechisms and how they align with the chapter's teachings on the ultimate goal of knowing and glorifying God.

3. General Revelation

If there be any genuine knowledge of God among men, it presupposes that God Himself has condescended to reveal Himself to them.

We do not derive the knowledge of God from our own inventions, inquiries, or reflections. If such knowledge is not freely granted by God's unbounded goodness, it is beyond our reach through the mere exertion of our natural faculties.

While the knowledge of created things differs slightly in its acquisition, for although we are entirely dependent on God for this knowledge, He has endowed mankind with the task of subduing and

exercising dominion over the earth, imbuing them with both the desire and the capacity to do so. Man, being placed above nature, has the ability to observe, investigate, and even manipulate natural phenomena to some extent, compelling nature to reveal its secrets.

However, this power is significantly limited in numerous ways. The deeper science delves into the phenomena, the more it encounters the inexplicable, surrounded on all sides by the unknowable. Many are so convinced of the limits of human knowledge that they not only acknowledge their ignorance but also prophesy that mankind will never attain full understanding.

This limitation is even more pronounced when studying living, animate, and rational beings. For here, we confront phenomena that we cannot manipulate at will but must accept as they are, respecting their inherent mystery. Life, consciousness, sensation, perception, reason, and will cannot be deconstructed or reassembled; they are organic and must be taken in their entirety. Attempting to dissect life only results in its destruction.

This principle applies even more to humanity. While man is a physical being observable by our senses, his outward form merely hints at a deeper, hidden life. This life, imperfectly revealed through physical appearance, can be partially concealed by man himself. He can control his facial expressions to mask inner thoughts, use language to obscure intentions, and behave in ways contrary to his true self. Even an honest man, who shuns deceit, must still voluntarily reveal his inner life for others to truly know him. Though he may inadvertently disclose aspects of his nature, truthful

knowledge of a person requires his conscious and willing self-disclosure.

This holds true for the knowledge of God. It can only be attained if God, through His own will and pleasure, chooses to reveal Himself to us.

This consideration leads us to a clear understanding of the conditions under which there can be talk of the knowledge of God among men. God is utterly free and independent; He is in no way dependent on us, whereas we are entirely dependent on Him, not only naturally, but also intellectually and morally. We possess no power or control over Him; we cannot make Him the object of our inquiry or contemplation. If He does not reveal Himself, we cannot find Him; if He does not offer Himself, we cannot receive Him. Moreover, God is invisible, dwelling in unapproachable light, so that no man has seen Him or can see Him. If He hides Himself, we cannot bring Him within the scope of our physical or spiritual perception; and without perception, no knowledge is possible.

Lastly, God is almighty; not only does He govern all creatures, but He also possesses complete control over Himself. While humans may reveal themselves involuntarily, God discloses Himself only by His own will. There can be no involuntary manifestation of God; He reveals Himself solely as He wills.

Thus, the knowledge of God is only possible through a revelation from His side. Man can only gain knowledge of God when He, and to the extent that He, freely makes Himself known to man.

This self-disclosure of God is commonly referred to as revelation. The Scriptures use various terms for it, speaking of God's appearing, speaking, ruling, working, making Himself known, and so forth. These terms indicate God's intention to reveal Himself to man, and they show that revelation occurs in diverse forms. Indeed, all of God's outward works, whether in word or deed, are elements of the one, great, all-encompassing, and continuous revelation of God. The creation, maintenance, and governance of all things, the calling and guidance of Israel, the sending of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the recording of the Word of God, the preservation and propagation of the Church—these are all means and forms through which God's revelation comes to us. They all disclose something of God. Everything that is and happens should lead us to the knowledge of Him, whose knowledge is eternal life.

This revelation, whether general or particular, always bears the following characteristics:

First, it proceeds freely from God Himself. He is the sole agent in revelation, acting with complete consciousness and freedom. Those who reject the confession of a personal, self-conscious God may still speak of a revelation of God, but this usage contradicts the true meaning of the term. For those who believe only in an impersonal, unconscious force, one might speak of an unconscious, involuntary manifestation of that force, but not of revelation, which presupposes the complete consciousness and freedom of God. All true revelation is based on the understanding that God is a personal being, conscious of Himself, capable of making Himself known to His creatures. The knowledge of God among men is grounded in and begins with God's self-knowledge. Without God's self-consciousness,

there can be no knowledge of God among men. To deny this is to entertain the irrational notion that either there is no knowledge of God at all, or that God first becomes self-conscious in mankind, effectively placing man in the position of God.

Scripture teaches quite differently. Though God dwells in unapproachable light, He is nevertheless light, knowing Himself perfectly and thus able to make Himself known to us. "No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27).

In the second place, all revelation that proceeds from God is a self-revelation. God is both the origin and the content of His revelation. This is especially true of the highest revelation given to us in Christ, for Jesus Himself declares that He has made known the name of the Father to men (John 17:6); the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has revealed God to us (John 1:18). This principle applies to all forms of revelation issued from God. All of God's works in nature and grace, in creation and re-creation, in the world and in history, disclose aspects of the incomprehensible and adorable being of God. These revelations vary in manner and degree; one work may emphasize God's justice, another His goodness; here His omnipotence is manifest, and there His wisdom shines forth.

Yet, collectively and individually, these works proclaim the mighty acts of God, acquainting us with His virtues and perfections, His essence and distinctions, His thoughts and words, His will and pleasure.

However, we must never lose sight of the fact that God's revelation, regardless of its richness, never equates to God's self-knowledge. God's self-knowledge or self-consciousness is as infinite as His essence, and thus, it cannot be fully communicated to any creature. The revelation of God in His creatures, both objectively in the works of His hands and subjectively in the consciousness of His rational creatures, encompasses but a small fraction of the infinite knowledge that God has of Himself. Not only mankind on earth but also the blessed and the angels in heaven, and even the Son of God according to His human nature, possess a knowledge of God distinct in principle and essence from God's self-knowledge. Nevertheless, the knowledge imparted by God through His revelation and which can be acquired by rational creatures, though limited and finite and remaining so throughout eternity, is true and pure knowledge. God reveals Himself in His works as He is, and through His revelation, we come to know Him truly. Therefore, there is no rest for man until he ascends from the creature to God Himself. Revelation concerns God Himself, leading us through creatures to the Creator and bringing us to rest at His Fatherly heart.

Thirdly, revelation, which proceeds from God and has God as its content, also has God Himself as its goal. It is of Him, through Him, and to Him; "the LORD has made all things for Himself" (Proverbs 16:4), "for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things" (Romans 11:36). Although the knowledge of God communicated in His revelation remains essentially distinct from His self-knowledge, it is so rich, broad, and deep that it can never be fully comprehended by any rational creature. The angels, far superior in intellect to man, daily behold the face of the Father in heaven (Matthew 18:10), yet they long to look into the things revealed to us by the preachers of

the Gospel (1 Peter 1:12). The more deeply people contemplate God's revelation, the more they are compelled to exclaim with Paul, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!" (Romans 11:33). Therefore, revelation cannot find its ultimate end in man but transcends and surpasses him.

Indeed, man occupies a significant place in this revelation. It is addressed to mankind that they may seek the Lord, and in seeking, find Him (Acts 17:27). The Gospel must be preached to all creation so that those who believe may receive eternal life (Mark 16:15-16, John 3:16, 36). Yet, this is not, nor can it be, the ultimate and highest goal of revelation. God does not find His rest in mankind; rather, mankind must know and serve God so that, with and at the head of all creation, they may bring glory to God for all His works. In revelation, whether through or by man, God prepares His own praise, glorifies His own name, and manifests His virtues and perfections in the world of His creatures. Since revelation is from God and through God, it also has its destination and goal in His glorification.

This entire revelation, which is from, through, and to God, finds its center in the person of Christ and reaches its climax in Him. It is not the resplendent firmament, nor the majestic eagle, nor a prince or great man of the earth, nor a philosopher or artist, but the Son of Man who is the highest revelation of God. Christ is the incarnate Word, who was with God in the beginning and was God Himself, the Only-begotten of the Father, the Image of God, the radiance of His glory, and the exact representation of His being. He who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9). The Christian stands firm in

this faith, having come to know God in the face of Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. It is God Himself, who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6).

From this lofty vantage point, the Christian surveys all around, backward and forward, and to all sides. In the light of the knowledge of God, which he owes to Christ, he perceives traces of the same God everywhere in nature and history, heaven and earth, whom he has learned to know and call upon as his Father in Christ. The Sun of Righteousness illuminates a marvelous panorama that extends to the ends of the earth. By its light, he sees into the night of past ages and penetrates the future of all things; the horizon is bright in every direction, even though the sky may often be shrouded in dark clouds.

The Christian, who views all things by the light of God's Word, is not narrow-minded; he is broad of heart and mind, encompassing the whole earth, counting all as his own, because he is Christ's and Christ is God's (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). He cannot forsake the faith that the revelation of God in Christ, which is the source of his life and salvation, possesses a unique character. Yet, this faith does not isolate him from the world but rather enables him to perceive the revelation of God in nature and history, recognizing the true, the good, and the beautiful, and distinguishing them from all falsehood and sin.

Thus, he discerns between general and special revelation. In general revelation, God utilizes the ordinary course of events; in special revelation, He often employs extraordinary means—apparition,

prophecy, and miracle—to make Himself known to people. The first is addressed to all men and, by general grace, restrains the outbreak of sin; the second is addressed only to those who live under the Gospel and, by special grace, glorifies God in the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life.

However distinct general and special revelation may be, they are nevertheless closely intertwined. Both have their origin in God, in His free goodness and favor. General revelation arises from the Word, which was with God in the beginning, through whom all things were made, who has shone as a light in the darkness and enlightens every man coming into the world (John 1:1-9). Both forms of revelation have grace as their content—general in one, particular in the other—yet each is indispensable to the other.

General grace makes special grace possible, prepares it, and sustains it; special grace, in turn, elevates general grace and employs it continually. Both revelations aim at the preservation of men, the first by protecting and sustaining them, and second by saving them, ultimately leading to the glorification of all God's virtues.

The content of both general and special revelation is encompassed within the Holy Scriptures. Though general revelation derives from nature, it is included in Scripture because, due to the darkness of our understanding, we could never deduce it purely from nature. Now, Scripture illuminates our path through the world and provides us with the true conception of nature and history. It enables us to perceive God where we would not otherwise see Him, and, enlightened by Scripture, we behold the virtues of God displayed in all the works of His hands.

Creation itself, as taught by Scripture, attests to the revelation of God in nature. Creation is an act of revelation, the foundation and principle of all subsequent revelation. If the world had existed eternally apart from God, it could not serve as a revelation of God; in such a case, it would hinder God from revealing Himself through it. But by upholding the creation of the world as described in Scripture, we simultaneously affirm that God reveals Himself throughout the world. Every work bears witness to its Maker, and the more truly it reflects its Maker, the more it testifies to Him.

Since the world is God's work in the fullest sense, owing not only its origin but its continual existence to Him, something of God's virtues and perfections is expressed in every creature. Conversely, denying the revelation of God in nature, confining it solely to the mind or feelings of man, risks denying the creation of God, suggesting nature is governed by a power other than that which reigns in the human mind, and thereby subtly reintroducing polytheism. Scripture, by teaching creation, also upholds God's revelation, and thereby the unity of God and the unity of the world.

Moreover, Scripture teaches that the world was not only created by God in the beginning but is constantly maintained and governed by the same God from moment to moment. He is not only infinitely superior to the world but also dwells with His omnipotent and omnipresent power in all His creatures. He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:27-28). The revelation that comes to us from the world is therefore not merely a reminder of a work of God in the distant past but also a testimony of what God is, wills, and does in the present.

When we lift up our eyes, we behold not only the One who created all these things and brought forth their host in number, but also the One who calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, so that not one is missing (Isaiah 40:25). He covers Himself with light as with a garment; He stretches out the heavens like a curtain; He lays the beams of His chambers on the waters, makes the clouds His chariot, and walks upon the wings of the wind (Psalm 104:2-3). He sustains the earth with the fruit of His labors, causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for the service of man, bringing forth bread from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man (Psalm 104:13-15). He establishes the mountains by His strength and stills the roaring of the seas (Psalm 65:7-8), makes the outgoings of the morning and evening to rejoice, visits and enriches the earth, blesses its growth, and crowns the year with His goodness (Psalm 65:9ff). He feeds the birds of the air, clothes the grass of the field with glory (Matthew 6:26-30), makes His sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45). He made man a little lower than the angels, crowned him with glory and honor, and gave him dominion over the works of His hands. Glorious is His name in all the earth! (Psalm 8).

Not only in nature but also in history, God carries out His counsel and brings about His work. He made from one blood all nations of men to dwell on the face of the earth (Acts 17:26). He destroyed the first human race in the flood and at the same time preserved it in the household of Noah (Genesis 6-9). He confounded the language of mankind at the Tower of Babel and scattered them over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:7-8). When the Most High apportioned the nations their inheritance and divided the children of Adam, He fixed

the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:8; Acts 17:26). Though He chose Israel to be the bearer of His special revelation, allowing the Gentiles to walk in their own ways (Acts 14:16), He did not leave Himself without witness among them, doing good, giving rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying their hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:17). What can be known about God was manifest in them, for God showed it to them (Romans 1:19), that they might seek the Lord, in the hope that they might feel after Him and find Him (Acts 17:27).

Through this general revelation, God has preserved the nations and guided them to the dispensation of the fullness of time, in which He is pleased to gather all things together in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth (Ephesians 1:10). From every tribe and tongue and people and nation, He is forming His church (Romans 11:25; Ephesians 2:14ff; Revelation 7:9), preparing for that end of the world in which the saved will walk in the light of the City of God, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory and honor into it (Revelation 21:24, 26).

In theological discourse, efforts have been made to categorize these testimonies, which attest to the existence and nature of God in creation and history, dividing them into a number of groups. Thus, over time, we have come to speak of various proofs for the existence of God.

Firstly, the world, however vast and mighty it may be, continually bears witness to its existence within the confines of space and time. It possesses a finite, contingent, dependent nature, which invariably

points beyond itself to an eternal, necessarily existing, independent Being, who is the ultimate cause of all things (cosmological proof).

Secondly, throughout the world, in its laws and orders, in its unity and harmony, and in the organization of all its creatures, a discernible purpose mocks all explanations based on chance. This leads us to acknowledge an all-wise and all-powerful Being who has established this purpose with infinite intellect and pursues and accomplishes it through omnipotent and omnipresent power (teleological evidence).

Thirdly, the consciousness of all people contains the awareness of a supreme Being, above whom nothing higher can be conceived, and who is universally regarded as necessarily existing. If such a Being did not exist, the highest, most perfect, and necessary thought would be an illusion, and man would lose faith in the testimony of his consciousness (ontological proof).

This leads directly to the fourth proof: man is not only a rational but also a moral being. In his conscience, he feels bound by a law that stands above him and demands his unconditional obedience. This law points back to a holy and just Legislator, who can save and destroy (moral proof).

To these four proofs are added two more, derived from the consensus of the nations and the history of mankind. It is a remarkable phenomenon that there are no nations devoid of divine worship. Some have claimed otherwise, but historical research increasingly disproves them; there are no atheistic tribes or peoples. This phenomenon is significant; its universality demonstrates its necessity, confronting us with one of two conclusions: either all

mankind suffers from a foolish imagination on this point, or the knowledge and worship of God, existing in corrupted forms among all peoples, are based on His existence.

Likewise, the history of mankind, considered in the light of Scripture, reveals a plan and course that point to the governance of all things by a supreme Being. It is true that in the lives of individuals and nations, various objections and difficulties arise from this consideration. Yet, it is striking that everyone who studies history, consciously or unconsciously, starts from the premise that it is guided by thought and plan, and seeks to discover this thought to set their goals. History and its interpretation are based on faith in God's providence.

All these so-called proofs lack the power to compel belief. Few proofs in science possess such power. In the formal sciences, such as mathematics and logic, this may be the case; but when we engage with real phenomena in nature and especially in history, various objections can often be raised against the reasoning and conclusions. In religion and morality, in law and aesthetics, whether one yields depends much more on one's state of mind. Despite all testimonies, the fool can persist in saying in his heart, "There is no God" (Psalm 14:1), and the Gentiles, though knowing God, did not honor Him as God or give thanks (Romans 1:21). The aforementioned proofs for the existence of God do not address man merely as an intellectual being; they address him as a rational and moral being. They appeal not only to man's analytical and reasoning faculties but also to his heart and mind, his reason and conscience. Thus, they have value, strengthening faith and confirming the bond between God's external revelation and His revelation within mankind.

The revelation of God, which comes to man through nature and history, would have no effect upon him if there were not something in man himself that corresponded to it. The beauty in nature and art would be unbearable to man if he did not have a sense of beauty within his soul. The law of morality would not resonate with him unless he heard the voice of conscience within. The thoughts that God has embodied in the world through His Word would be incomprehensible to him if he were not a thinking being. Similarly, the revelation of God in all the works of His hands would be utterly incomprehensible to man if God had not implanted in his soul an inextinguishable awareness of His existence. But it is an undeniable fact that God has complemented the external revelation in nature with an internal revelation within man himself. The historical and spiritual studies of religion continually affirm that religion cannot be explained without such an inborn awareness; always they return to the often rejected proposition that man is inherently a religious being.

Scripture affirms this beyond all doubt. After God created all things, He made man in His own image and likeness (Genesis 1:26). Man is of God's offspring (Acts 17:28). Although he, like the prodigal son in the parable, has left his Father's house, he still retains the memory of his origin and destination even in his farthest errors; in his deepest fall, he retains remnants of the image of God in which he was created. God reveals Himself externally in creation and internally within man's heart and conscience.

This revelation of God within man, however, is not a second, entirely new revelation added to the first, nor is it an independent source of knowledge. Rather, it is a capacity, a susceptibility, an inclination to

notice God in His works and to understand His revelation. It is an awareness of the Divine within us, which enables us to perceive the Divine outside us, just as the eye enables us to see light and colors and the ear enables us to hear sounds. It is, as Calvin called it, a *sensus divinitatis*, or as Paul described it, an ability to perceive from among creatures the unseen things of God, namely His eternal power and divinity.

When we analyze this innate sense of divinity, it appears to contain two elements. First, it contains a sense of absolute dependence. Before all reasoning and action, there exists within us a self-consciousness, intimately woven together with our very being. Before all thinking and acting, we exist; we exist in a certain way, and we have a consciousness of our existence that is inseparably connected with it. The core of this sense of self is a sense of dependence. In our innermost being, we are immediately aware of being creatures, limited and dependent. Dependent on everything around us, on the entire spiritual and material world; man is dependent on the universe. Furthermore, he is dependent in the fullest sense on God, the one, eternal, and true being.

But this *sensus divinitatis* contains a second component. If it were merely a feeling of complete dependence, leaving the essence of that power undefined, it would lead to powerless rebellion or mute, passive resignation. But this sense of divinity implies an awareness of the Being upon whom man depends; it is a consciousness of a higher, absolute power, not of a blind, unreasonable, immovable force equivalent to fate, but of a supreme power that is perfectly just, wise, and good. It is an awareness of the "Eternal Power," but also of the "Godhead," that is, of the absolute perfection of God. Hence, this

feeling of dependence does not lead to despondency and despair, but rather encourages religion, urging us to serve and honor the Divine. The dependence of which man is conscious in relation to the Divine essence is unique; it implies freedom and urges us to act freely. It is the dependence not of a slave, but of a son, even a prodigal son. The *sensus divinitatis* is thus, according to Calvin's description, also the "seed of religion."

Study Questions for Reflection

1. What is the significance of the knowledge of God being revealed to mankind rather than discovered by human efforts?

- Reflect on the implications of God's revelation being an act of His grace and sovereignty. How does this shape your understanding of theology and your relationship with God?

2. How do the works of creation and providence reveal God's attributes?

- Consider specific examples from nature and history that demonstrate God's justice, goodness, omnipotence, and wisdom. How do these revelations influence your faith?

3. What is the relationship between general revelation and special revelation, and how do they complement each other?

- Reflect on how general revelation (through nature) and special revelation (through Scripture) work together to provide a fuller understanding of God. How does this duality affect your approach to studying the Bible?

4. In what ways is Christ the ultimate revelation of God?

- Explore how Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection serve as the clearest and most complete revelation of God's nature. How does this centrality of Christ shape your worship and theology?

5. How does the concept of God's self-revelation challenge or affirm your current understanding of God's nature?

- Reflect on the idea that God's self-revelation is both a voluntary and gracious act. How does this understanding deepen your appreciation for God's interaction with humanity?

6. What are the limitations of human understanding in comprehending the full knowledge of God?

- Consider the infinite nature of God's self-knowledge compared to the finite revelation given to humans. How does this impact your humility and reliance on God's wisdom?

7. Why is it important to interpret Scripture in the light of the harmony and proportion of faith as taught by St. Paul?

- Discuss the importance of maintaining consistency with the core teachings of faith when interpreting the Bible. How does this principle guard against doctrinal errors?

8. How does the dual role of God's revelation (through creation and Scripture) influence your daily walk with Christ?

Reflect on practical ways you can be more attentive to God's presence in both His creation and His Word. How does this awareness enhance your spiritual life?

9. What role does human free will play in the acceptance and understanding of God's revelation?

- Explore God's sovereignty in revealing Himself and human responsibility in seeking and responding to His revelation. How does this affect your view of salvation and grace?

10. In what ways can the church today better reflect the order and purpose of God's revelation in its teachings and practices?

- Consider the current challenges facing the church and how a return to a biblically grounded understanding of God's revelation can address these issues. What practical steps can be taken to align church practices with divine revelation?

4. The Value of General Revelation

In determining the value to be assigned to general revelation, there lies a great danger of either underestimation or overestimation. When we draw attention to the rich grace that God has bestowed in His special revelation, we can become so absorbed in it that general revelation loses all meaning and value for us. Conversely, when we become acquainted with the true, the good, and the beautiful found

in nature and the world of man through God's general revelation, we might inadvertently diminish the glory of the special grace manifested in the person and work of Christ.

This peril of veering to the right or to the left has always beset the Christian Church. Both in theory and in the practice of life, general revelation has been denied by some, while special revelation has been overlooked by others. Today, the temptation to disregard general revelation is not as prevalent as it once was. However, the temptation to reduce special revelation to merely the person of Christ, or to deny it altogether and equate it with general revelation, is all the more pressing.

We must be vigilant against both of these extreme tendencies. We will be safest when, in the light of Holy Scripture, we examine the history of mankind and allow it to reveal what humanity owes to general revelation. It will then become apparent that, in some respects, people have progressed remarkably far by its light, but in other respects, their knowledge and abilities have been confined by insurmountable boundaries.

When the first humans in paradise violated God's commandment, the punishment they had earned by their sin did not immediately and fully come into effect. They did not die on the same day they sinned but continued to live; they were not sent to hell but were entrusted with a task on earth; they did not perish without hope but received the promise of a woman's seed. They entered into a situation known and determined by God but unforeseen and incalculable by humans—a situation characterized by a peculiar mixture of wrath and mercy, punishment and blessing, judgment

and forbearance. This situation persists in nature and humanity, combining the sharpest contrasts.

We inhabit a world of wonders, a world that presents us with the greatest contrasts. The high and the low, the large and the small, the exalted and the ridiculous, the tragic and the comic, the beautiful and the ugly, the good and the bad, truth and lies are intertwined in an incomprehensible manner. Life's seriousness and vanity alternate in their hold on us. Sometimes we incline towards pessimism, sometimes towards optimism; the man who weeps and the man who laughs exchange places every moment. The whole world is marked by humor, aptly described as a smile in a tear.

The deepest cause of this present state of the world lies in the fact that God continually manifests His wrath on account of man's sin, and yet, according to His own will, continually manifests His grace. We perish in His wrath, and yet in the morning we are satisfied with His mercy (Psalm 90:7, 14). There is a moment in His wrath, but a lifetime in His mercy; in the evening, weeping may endure, but in the morning, there is rejoicing (Psalm 30:5). Curse and blessing are so wonderfully intertwined that they often seem to merge into one another.

Labor in the sweat of the brow embodies both curse and blessing. Together, they point to the Cross, which represents the highest law and the richest grace. The Cross is thus the center of history and the reconciliation of all contradictions.

This duality commenced immediately after the Fall, and in the earliest times, until the calling of Abraham, it retained an individual character. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are of utmost

importance; they form the foundation and starting point of the entire history of the world.

From the outset, it is noteworthy that general and special revelation, though distinct, do not occur separately but are continually related and addressed to the same people, that is, to the whole of humanity existing at that time. Special revelation was not yet confined to a few individuals or a single nation but extended to all people living then. The creation of the world, the formation of mankind, the history of paradise and the Fall, the punishment for sin, and the first promise of God's grace (Genesis 3:15), the public practice of religion (Genesis 4:26), the beginnings of culture (Genesis 4:17ff), the Flood, and the building of the Tower of Babel all belong to the shared heritage of mankind. It is therefore unsurprising that vestiges of these events, though often distorted, appear among all peoples of the earth. The history of mankind has a common origin and beginning, built on a broad, shared foundation.

Nevertheless, despite this unity and communion, separation soon arose among people. This separation was rooted in religion, in the way individuals related themselves to God. The service of the Lord was very simple in those early days; there was no public worship service as we know it today, as humanity consisted of only a few families. Yet, from the beginning, God's service consisted of prayers and sacrifices, of bringing offerings, and dedicating to God the best one had (Genesis 4:3-4). The Scriptures do not detail how man came to offer such sacrifices, and scholars hold varied opinions on the origin of sacrifices. However, it is clear that the first sacrifices arose from a sense of dependence on and gratitude to God and were symbolic in nature. They expressed man's surrender and dedication

to God; what mattered was not the gift itself, but the spirit in which it was given. Abel brought both in disposition and in gift a greater and better offering than Cain (Hebrews 11:4), and was therefore accepted by the Lord in grace. Thus, from the beginning, there was already a separation between the children of Adam—a separation between the righteous and the godless, between martyrs and murderers, between the church and the world. Although God intervened in Cain's life, sought him out, admonished him to repentance, and even tempered justice with mercy (Genesis 4:9-16), the breach was never healed; the separation persisted and continued in the division of the Cainites from the Sethites.

In the circles of the Cainites, unbelief and apostasy increased with alarming rapidity from generation to generation. They did not fall into idolatry and iconoclasm; the Scriptures make no mention of these among mankind before the Flood. These forms of false religion are not original but the product of later development, evidence of a religious sense suppressed in their hearts by the Cainites. They surrendered not to superstition but to unbelief, arriving at a practical, if not theoretical, denial of the existence and revelation of God. They acted as though there were no God; they ate and drank, married and gave in marriage, just as it will be in the days of the Son of Man (Matthew 24:37-38). They threw themselves with all their might into culture and sought their salvation therein (Genesis 4:17-24). Rejoicing in long lives, sometimes spanning hundreds of years (Genesis 5:3ff), possessing rich gifts and titanic physical strength (Genesis 4:23; 6:4), and boasting of the power of their sword (Genesis 4:23-24), they imagined that their own arm could secure their salvation.

In the generations of Seth, the knowledge and service of God were preserved pure for a long time. In the days of Enosh, men began to call upon the name of the Lord (Genesis 4:26). This does not imply that they first began to honor God with prayers and sacrifices then, for such practices already existed before. Cain and Abel had already offered sacrifices, and although explicit mention of prayers is absent, they were undoubtedly part of God's service from the very beginning, as no religion is conceivable without prayer; the sacrifice itself is a prayer embodied in action, always accompanied by prayer. The expression in Genesis 4:26 does not mean that God was specifically called by the name "Lord" at that time, for apart from the question of whether the name Jehovah was known then, the essence of God expressed in that name was not fully revealed until much later to Moses (Exodus 3:14). It likely means that the Sethites separated themselves from the Cainites, held their own assemblies in the name of the Lord, and thus openly bore witness to their fidelity to God's service. They no longer prayed and offered sacrifices individually but gave a communal testimony. As the Cainites devoted themselves to worldly pursuits, the Sethites dedicated themselves to God and proclaimed His name in prayer, thanksgiving, preaching, and confession amidst an evil generation.

Through this public preaching, a constant call to repentance went out to the descendants of Cain. This call persisted even as religion and morals among the Sethites began to decline and they mingled with the world. Enosh's grandson was named Mahalalel, meaning "praise of God" (Genesis 5:15); Enoch walked with God (Genesis 5:22); Lamech, at the birth of his son Noah, expressed hope for comfort from the toil and labor of their hands due to the cursed ground (Genesis 5:29); and Noah himself, a son of the Sethites,

emerged as a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), proclaiming the gospel of salvation through the Spirit of Christ to his contemporaries (1 Peter 3:19-20).

But these pious individuals became increasingly exceptional. The Sethites and Cainites intermarried, producing offspring who surpassed previous generations in violence (Genesis 6:4). Human wickedness multiplied, every thought of their hearts was only evil continually, and the earth was filled with corruption and violence (Genesis 6:5, 12-13; 8:21). Although God, in His forbearance, granted a respite of one hundred and twenty years (Genesis 6:3; 1 Peter 3:20) and through Noah's preaching indicated a way of escape, mankind continued towards its doom, ultimately perishing in the waters of the Flood.

After this dreadful judgment, in which only Noah and his family—eight souls in total—were spared, a new dispensation began, differing in many respects from that which preceded the Flood. The Flood, according to Scripture, is a singular event in human history, comparable only to the fire of the last days (Genesis 8:21ff). It is likened to a baptism, condemning the world and preserving those who believe (1 Peter 3:19-20).

The new dispensation was inaugurated with a covenant. When Noah built an altar after the flood and offered sacrifices to God upon it, expressing the gratitude and supplication of his heart, the Lord resolved within Himself that He would no longer bring such a judgment upon the earth. Instead, He established a fixed order in nature. It is noteworthy that this resolution considers the evil inclination of man's heart from his youth (Genesis 8:21). These

words bear similarity to, yet differ significantly from, those in Genesis 6:5, where it is stated that every intention of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually. In Genesis 6:5, the words justify the destruction; in Genesis 8:21, they justify the preservation of the earth. The former emphasizes the wicked deeds through which the corrupt heart of mankind was manifested; the latter highlights the sinful nature that persists in man even after the flood.

It is as if the Lord declares through these words that He understands what would become of His creation if left to its own devices. Man's heart, remaining unchanged, would again erupt in all manner of grievous sins, provoking God's wrath repeatedly, leading to another catastrophic judgment. But God resolves not to let this happen. Therefore, He establishes mankind and nature in an immutable order, prescribing the paths they are to walk, thereby limiting and containing both. This is accomplished in the covenant that God establishes with creation after the flood, known as the covenant of nature.

Although this covenant arises from God's grace in a broader sense, it is fundamentally distinct from the covenant of grace established with the church in Christ. The natural covenant rests on the acknowledgment that man's heart is evil from his youth and will remain so (Genesis 8:21). Its content is the restoration of the creation blessing of fruitfulness and dominion over animals (Genesis 9:1-3, 7), and to this end, it includes the provision of capital punishment (Genesis 9:5-6). It is established with Noah, the progenitor of the post-diluvian human race, and through him, with all mankind and even all living creatures (Genesis 9:9ff). It is sealed with a natural phenomenon—the rainbow (Genesis 9:12ff)—and its

purpose is to prevent another flood and ensure the continued existence of mankind and the world (Genesis 8:21-22, 9:14-16).

Thus, the existence and life of mankind and the world rest on a new, more solid foundation. It is no longer based solely on the act of creation and God's creation ordinances, which man violated, but now receives its foundation in a special act of God's mercy and long-suffering. God is not obligated by virtue of His creation ordinances to grant man life and existence; rather, through this covenant, He binds Himself to preserve creation despite its fall and rebellion. Henceforth, the maintenance and governance of the world rest not merely on a divine will but on a covenantal obligation. Through this covenant, God obliges Himself to sustain the world in its existence. He has pledged His name, His honor, His truth, His faithfulness, His word, and His promise to the creature for its continued existence. Thus, the ordinances of mankind and the world are unshakably fixed within a covenant of grace with all of nature (Genesis 8:21-22; Job 14:5-6; 26:10; Psalm 119:90-91; 148:6; Isaiah 28:24ff; Jeremiah 5:24; 31:35-36; 33:20, 25).

This covenant introduces an entirely different order from that which existed before the flood. The mighty forces of nature that once wrought destruction have been subdued. The terrible monsters of the past have perished. The tremendous catastrophes that once affected the entire world have given way to a more regular progression of phenomena and events. Human lifespan has been shortened, their strength diminished, their nature softened. They have been organized into societies and placed under the control of governments. Nature and the world of mankind have been constrained by the covenant. Everywhere there are laws and orders.

Everywhere barriers have been established to stem the tide of iniquity. Order, measure, and number have become the hallmarks of creation. God restrains the wild animal within mankind, enabling him to develop his gifts and strengths in art and science, in society and state, in profession and business, thus fulfilling the conditions necessary for the unfolding of history.

But this history is interrupted once more by the profound act of the confusion of tongues. After the Flood, the people initially dwelt in the land of Ararat, in the Armenian highlands, where Noah became a farmer (Genesis 9:20). As they multiplied, they spread eastward along the rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates and came to the plain of Shinar, or Mesopotamia (Genesis 11:2). Here they settled, and as they increased in wealth and power, they hastened to make a name for themselves by building a tall tower to keep mankind from being scattered. Against God's command to fill and subdue the whole earth, they set forth the ideal of maintaining unity through an external center, binding all mankind together in an empire that finds its strength in power and the glorification of man as the goal of its efforts. For the first time in history, the idea of concentrating and organizing mankind with all its power and wisdom, with all its art and science, with all its culture, in defiance of God and His kingdom arises—an idea that has resurfaced time and again, to which many so-called great men have aspired through the centuries.

Thus, it becomes necessary for God to intervene and render this attempt to build an empire impossible. He does so by confusing their language, which until then had been one. How and when this confusion occurred is not specified. But in any case, it resulted in people becoming physiologically and psychologically distinct from

one another, beginning to see and name things differently, leading to their division into nations and peoples and their scattering to the ends of the earth. It should also be noted that this confusion of language was already foreshadowed by the descent of different sons of Noah (Genesis 10:1ff) and by the departure of Noah's descendants from Armenia to Shinar (Genesis 11:2). The idea of building Babel's tower would not have arisen if the very danger and fear of dispersion had not already been present and pressing.

In this way, Scripture explains the emergence of nations and peoples, of tongues and languages. Indeed, the immense diversity of mankind is a wondrous and inexplicable fact. People, who all descend from the same parents, share the same spirit and soul, the same flesh and blood, yet stand as strangers face to face. They do not understand each other. Moreover, they are divided into races that dispute each other's existence, bent on each other's destruction, living century after century in secret and open warfare with one another. Racial instincts, feelings of nationality, enmity, and hatred separate the peoples. All this is a dreadful punishment, a terrible judgment, which cannot be undone by cosmopolitanism and peace treaties, by universal languages or international organizations, by no empire or world culture.

If ever there shall be unity again among mankind, it cannot be achieved by an outward, mechanical connection around some tower of Babel. It can only be accomplished from within, by assembly under one and the same Head (Ephesians 1:10), by the peace-making creation of all nations into one new man (Ephesians 2:15), by the regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:6), by the walking of all nations in one light (Revelation 21:24).

The unity in mankind, which can only be restored from within, was therefore once disturbed centrally through the confusion of tongues. The false unity was violently broken, making room for true unity; the kingdom of the world was shattered, so that the Kingdom of God could be established on earth. Henceforth, the peoples were dispersed and scattered over the earth. Israel was chosen from among these peoples to be the bearer of God's revelation. General and special revelation, hitherto united, separated and remained apart for a time, only to converge again at the foot of the Cross. Israel was set apart to walk in the statutes and ordinances of the Lord, while the Lord allowed the other nations to walk in their own ways.

However, this should not be taken to mean that God had no involvement with these peoples and left them to their own devices. This notion is preposterous in itself, for God is the Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of all things, and nothing originates, occurs, or exists without His omnipotent and omnipresent power.

Scripture decisively pronounces the opposite. When the Most High distributed the inheritance to the nations, when He separated the children of Adam, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:8). When the earth was divided, God reckoned with Israel and appointed a land for His people according to their number. However, He also distributed to all peoples their inheritance and determined their borders. He made the whole human race from one blood, that they should dwell not in one place but across the entire earth; for He did not create the earth to be empty but formed it to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18). He established the times ordained for the nations' existence and the boundaries of their dwellings; the age and dwelling place of all

nations were determined by His counsel and appointed by His providence (Acts 17:26).

Moreover, although in times past He allowed all nations to walk in their own ways, He did not leave them indifferent, but did them good from heaven, giving them rain and fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:16-17). By His revelation in nature and history, He sent His call to all hearts and consciences (Psalm 19:1). From the creation of the world, God made His unseen attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, known through His works (Romans 1:19-20). Although the Gentiles received no law as the people of Israel did, and thus have no law in that sense, by doing what the law commands in specific instances, they show that they are a law to themselves, with the actions commanded by that law written in their hearts. This is further confirmed by the judgment of their conscience and the thoughts that either accuse or excuse them (Romans 2:14-15).

The religious and moral consciousness of the heathen thus proves that God engaged with them. Through the Word, who in the beginning was with God and was God Himself, all things were made, and in that Word was the life and light of men. Their being and consciousness, their existence and reason, are due to that Word. Not only in principle and origin but also in that it is sustained from moment to moment by the Word of God. For that Word is not only the author of all things but remains in the world as the sustainer and ruler of all things. As such, it gave life to all men and enlightened with consciousness, reason, and intelligence every man born into the world (John 1:3-10).

History imprints its seal upon this testimony of Scripture. For not only did various inventions and enterprises spring up soon after the fall among the descendants of Cain (Genesis 4:17ff), but also, when after the flood the people settled on the plain of Shinar, they rapidly achieved a high degree of culture. According to Genesis 10:8-12, Nimrod, a descendant of Cush, a son of Ham, was the founder of the kingdom of Babel. The Scriptures describe him as a mighty hunter before the Lord, for he drove away wild beasts by his extraordinary strength, made the plain of Shinar safe, and attracted and influenced people to settle there. Thus he founded several cities, including Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh in the plain of Shinar; and from there he ventured further into the land of Assyria, establishing the cities of Nineveh, Rehoboth, Ir, Calah, and Resen.

According to Scripture, the earliest inhabitants of Shinar were not Semites, but Hamites. This account is corroborated by the burgeoning field of Assyriology, which, through the translation and interpretation of cuneiform inscriptions unearthed in Assyria, reveals that Shinar was originally inhabited by a people known as the Sumerians, who cannot be classified as Semites. However, this ancient population of Shinar was later overrun by migrating Semites. These newcomers retained their own language but adopted the culture of the Sumerians, merging to form the later Chaldean people. The Semitic element gained prominence when Hammurabi, possibly the same as Amraphel in Genesis 14:1, made Babel his capital and subdued all of Shinar. Genesis 10 itself hints at this progression, for verse 11 states that Nimrod the Hamite went to the land of Assyria and founded cities there, while verse 22 identifies Asshur, the population of Assyria, as related to Elam, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram, and therefore as descendants of Shem.

The civilization that flourished in Shinar in terms of science and art, morals and law, trade and industry, reached such heights that, as we uncover more from the excavations, we are increasingly astonished. We do not know precisely how and when it came into being, but it utterly contradicts the common notion that the further back we go, the more primitive and uncivilized peoples become. As long as we do not indulge in fanciful notions about the primitive state of so-called natural peoples but endeavor to understand the past based on historical evidence, we are reinforced in the Scriptural view that the earliest period of post-Flood humanity, led by men like Nimrod, attained a high level of culture.

This civilization was not confined to the land of Shinar. As humanity expanded, it spread over the earth following the confusion of tongues. Naturally, it happened that tribes moved further and further from the center of civilization, seeking refuge in the wild and inhospitable regions of Asia, Europe, and Africa. It is not surprising that these tribes and peoples, in their isolated lives, cut off from all contact with others, struggling against the harshness of nature, remained at the level of civilization they had originally adopted or, in many cases, even declined below it. These peoples are nowadays often referred to as "natural peoples." But this designation is vague and misleading. For in all these peoples, we find all the traits and elements that are foundational to civilization. They are all human beings, not mere creatures of nature; they all possess consciousness and will, reason and intelligence, heart and conscience; they have language and religion, law and order, family and society, tools and adornments.

Among all peoples, there exists such a vast difference that the boundary between those deemed "natural" and those considered "cultured" cannot be clearly defined. There is a significant difference in civilization between the Bushmen of South Africa, the inhabitants of Polynesia, and the various Negro races. However distinct they may be, they share common ideas, traditions, and memories, such as those concerning the Flood, pointing to a common origin.

Even more so among the so-called cultured peoples, such as the Indians and Chinese, the Phoenicians and Egyptians. The foundational worldview, which we discover among all these peoples, aligns with what excavations in the land of Shinar have revealed. Here lies the origin of all culture, the cradle of humanity. From Central Asia, mankind spread over the entire earth, carrying with it elements of culture common to all civilized peoples, which each has further developed according to its own nature. The ancient culture of Babylonia, with its writing, astronomy, mathematics, and timekeeping, remains the foundation upon which our own is built.

Yet, when we view this entire history of civilization from a religious and moral perspective, it leaves us with a deep sense of dissatisfaction and disappointment. The Apostle Paul declared that the Gentiles, knowing God from His general revelation in nature, did not glorify or give thanks to Him as God. Instead, they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, birds, animals, and creeping things (Romans 1:21-23). Impartial historical research into the religions of the peoples leads to the same conclusion. One can attempt to obscure this result with a false philosophy that traces

different forms of religion back to an intangible essence within the human mind. Yet, the fact remains: mankind has not glorified God nor given thanks to Him throughout the long road of its civilization.

Even among the earliest inhabitants of Shinar, we find the worship of the creature rather than the Creator. Some argue that the religion of the Babylonians, like that of other peoples, began with the idea of the unity of God. Without a doubt, this idea of Godhead must have existed before it could be applied to creatures. However, the religion of the Babylonians from ancient times consisted of the worship of various creatures considered to be gods. How this transition occurred—from the worship of the one true God to the worship of creatures—is impossible to determine due to a lack of historical data.

It is an unproven and arbitrary assumption that religion evolved from polydaemonism (the worship of various souls and spirits, such as fetishism, animism, and totemism) through polytheism (the worship of various gods) to monotheism (the worship of one God). Nowhere do we see such a development, except in the history of Israel. But history repeatedly teaches that people can lapse from the confession of one God into the worship of many gods. This is evident in the history of Israel, in the history of many Christian churches, and even in our own time. When belief in the one true God is abandoned, various polytheistic ideas and superstitious practices inevitably arise.

Moreover, there is not such a stark difference between lower and higher religions, between the religions of so-called natural peoples and those of cultured peoples, as is often assumed. The same thoughts and practices recur, albeit in modified forms, among all

pagan peoples. These elements persist in various forms of superstition among Christian nations and are once again revered in modern circles as the Christian religion declines.

Firstly, idolatry and statuary are found among all peoples. Idolatry involves inventing something in place of the one true God or substituting Him with something upon which man places his trust. The creatures that are often substituted include the sky with its sun, moon, and stars, as seen in the Babylonian religion, aptly called an astral or star religion. Additionally, heroes, geniuses, and great men, regarded as intermediaries between gods and men, are worshiped in places like Greece. Ancestors, who after death are believed to enter a different and higher state, are the primary objects of worship in Chinese religion. Various animal figures, such as bulls and crocodiles, or saints and spirits believed to inhabit living and inanimate beings, temporarily or permanently, are also worshiped in the religions of both civilized and uncivilized peoples.

Regardless of its form, idolatry always constitutes the worship of the creature rather than the Creator. The distinction between God and the world is obliterated; the holiness, that is, the distinctness of God and His absolute elevation above all creatures, is completely lost in heathendom.

Secondly, alongside this idolatry come myriad false ideas about mankind and the world. Religion is never isolated but is closely interwoven with all aspects of life, including the state and society, art, and science. A religion that exists solely in emotions and moods is nowhere to be found. Religion, as man's relationship to God, also regulates all other relationships and therefore inherently includes a

particular view of mankind and the world, encompassing the origin, essence, and destiny of all things. Specifically, the religious ideas that accompany belief in the gods relate to both the past and the future. In all religions, there are memories of paradise and expectations for the future, thoughts about the origin and future of mankind and the world; about a golden age that existed at the beginning, followed by ages of silver, iron, and clay, and about man's survival after this life, a judgment that will be held at the end, and a different state that will then arise between the righteous and the wicked. In various religions, these ideas often occupy entirely different places. The Chinese religion looks back to the past and is absorbed in ancestor worship; the Egyptian religion extends into the future, is concerned with the dead, and is the religion of the kingdom of the dead. Nevertheless, all these elements are present in all religions to varying degrees.

In all these representations, truth is mixed with all kinds of error and foolishness. The boundary between Creator and creature is blurred, and thus the boundary between world and man, soul and body, life here on earth and life after death, heaven and hell, is nowhere clearly drawn. Everywhere, the physical and the ethical, the material and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly are confused and intermingled. The lack of awareness of the holiness of God corresponds to a lack of awareness of sin. The pagan world does not know God; it does not know the world and man; it does not know sin and misery.

Thirdly, the religions of the nations are all characterized by the attempt to attain salvation through their own exertions and human effort. Idolatry inevitably leads to self-willed religion. When the

service of the true God is abandoned, and thus there is no longer any objective, true-historical revelation, man endeavors to compel the gods or spirits he has imagined into revelation. Idolatry is always accompanied by superstition, divination, and magic. Divination is the attempt to discover the will of the gods, either by oneself or with the assistance of soothsayers, priests, oracles, and through methods such as astrology, dream interpretation, and augury. Magic, on the other hand, is the attempt to make the will of the gods subservient to oneself, to one's own happiness, through formalistic prayers, voluntary sacrifices, self-inflicted pain, and the like.

Here, too, there are various differences in forms. Divination and magic assume different characters and meanings across the different religions. Yet, they are ubiquitous and constitute an essential part of pagan religion.

Everywhere, it is man who takes the initiative and seeks his own salvation. Nowhere is the true meaning of redemption (reconciliation) and grace understood.

Nevertheless, although these characteristics have defined the general nature of pagan religions, some have undergone reforms worthy of our careful attention and a separate, albeit brief, discussion. When on the one hand religion degenerates into coarse and crude forms of superstition and magic, and on the other hand civilization advances, a conflict inevitably arises. Out of this conflict, undoubtedly under the guidance of God, emerge those men who strive for reconciliation and endeavor to elevate religion from its deep decay. Such reformers include Zarathustra, who probably lived in Persia before the seventh century B.C., Confucius in China in the sixth century B.C., Buddha in

India in the fifth century B.C., Muhammad in Arabia in the sixth century A.D., and many other known and unknown figures.

There can be no disagreement that the religions founded by these men are, in many respects, significantly elevated above the popular religions amidst which they lived. The hypotheses of development and dilution are both, in religion as in every other area of culture, highly one-sided and inadequate to encompass the wealth of phenomena occurring here in a single formula. Periods of prosperity and decline, of revival and depression, alternate in the history of all peoples and in every field.

These men were not deliberate impostors, instruments, or accomplices of Satan, but serious individuals who themselves wrestled with the conflict that arose between popular belief and their enlightened consciousness. They sought, by the light they were given, a better way of attaining true happiness.

However, despite this recognition, all these reforming deities differ not in essence but in degree from the idolatries of the people. They have pruned the wild branches of false religion, but they have not eradicated its root. Zarathustra preached the contradiction between good and evil but conceived this contradiction not only ethically but also and primarily physically. Thus, he was compelled to distinguish between a good and an evil God, creating a dualism that permeated the whole world, nature, mankind, and animals, and in practice led to the mutilation of life. Confucianism became a state religion formed from other religious components, linking the worship of natural gods and ancestors. Buddhism, at its inception, was not truly a religion but a philosophy that placed evil in suffering, identified

suffering with existence, and therefore recommended abstinence, the numbing of consciousness, and the destruction of being as the path to salvation. Muhammad, who was familiar with Judaism and Christianity and who, out of his fervent belief in the impending judgment, came to the confession of a single God, certainly initiated a divine and moral reform. But in his personal life, the religious preacher increasingly took a backseat to the statesman and legislator, and the religion he founded enthroned in God the unlimited omnipotence, the absolute arbitrariness, and in man the slavish submission. There was no communion between God and man in this religion, because neither the cause of separation nor the way to reunification was understood. The happiness of heaven consists in the full satisfaction of sensual desires.

If, therefore, we survey the entire scope of general revelation, we find on the one hand that it has been of significant value and has yielded rich fruit, but on the other hand that mankind has not found God through its light. It is through general revelation that all people still possess a religious and moral awareness, that they maintain some consciousness of truth and falsehood, good and evil, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness. They live within the contexts of marriage and family, society and the state, restrained by these external and internal bonds and protected from descending into bestiality. Within these limits, they dedicate themselves to the acquisition, distribution, and enjoyment of various spiritual and material goods. In this way, humanity is preserved in its existence, maintained in its unity, continued, and developed throughout history.

However, despite all this, it remains true to the word of the Apostle Paul that the world, with all its wisdom, has not known God through

His wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:21). When Paul attributes wisdom to the world, he means it in all seriousness. By the light of general revelation, the world has amassed a treasure of wisdom, wisdom concerning the matters of this earthly life. But this wisdom of the world makes mankind all the more blameworthy, for it demonstrates that man has not lacked God's gifts of reason and intelligence, the power of thought and will. Yet it also reveals that man, due to the darkening of his mind and the hardness of his heart, did not use the gifts given to him in the right way.

Thus, the light has shone in the darkness, but the darkness has not comprehended it (John 1:5). The Word was in the world, and the world did not know Him (the Logos) (John 1:10). With all its wisdom, the world has not known God (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Study Questions for Relection

1. What is general revelation, and how does it differ from special revelation?

- Reflect on the definitions and examples of general and special revelation. How do they each contribute to our understanding of God?

2. How can we avoid the extremes of underestimating or overestimating the value of general revelation?

- Consider the balance between appreciating the natural world and recognizing the unique role of Christ and Scripture in revealing God's grace.

3. In what ways does general revelation manifest God's wrath and mercy simultaneously?

- Reflect on examples from nature and human history that illustrate the dual aspects of God's character as revealed through general revelation.

4. How does the narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3 shape our understanding of the human condition and general revelation?

- Analyze the implications of the Fall on human nature and the continued presence of God's grace in the world.

5. What role does the Cross play in reconciling the contradictions observed in general revelation?

- Discuss how the Cross serves as the center of history and the ultimate resolution of the tensions between wrath and mercy, curse and blessing.

6. How did the early history of humanity (pre-Abraham) demonstrate the relationship between general and special revelation?

- Reflect on the events from Genesis 1-11 and how they show the interplay between God's general revelation to all humanity and His special revelation to particular individuals.

7. What is the significance of the confusion of languages at Babel in the context of general revelation?

- Consider how the dispersion of peoples and languages affected human culture and the spread of God's general revelation.

8. How does the existence of various religions and moral systems among different cultures reflect the influence of general revelation?

- Examine the ways in which general revelation has led to diverse yet often distorted understandings of God and morality among different peoples.

9. In what ways has humanity misused the wisdom gained from general revelation, according to the Apostle Paul?

- Reflect on Paul's critique in Romans 1:21-23 and 1 Corinthians 1:21. How has the wisdom of the world fallen short in leading people to a true knowledge of God?

10. How can the study of general revelation enhance our appreciation for God's special revelation in Scripture and Christ?

- Discuss how observing God's handiwork in creation and history can deepen our understanding and gratitude for the specific truths revealed in the Bible and the person of Jesus Christ.

5. Special Revelation.

(The manner of Revelation).

The inadequacy of general revelation brings into sharp focus the necessity of special revelation. However, this necessity must be properly understood.

It does not imply, nor is it intended, that God is obliged or compelled, either by His essence or by external circumstances, to reveal Himself in a special manner. For all revelation, and especially that which comes to us in Christ and through the Scriptures, is an act of God's grace—a free and open gift, a testament to His undeserved and manifold forfeited favor. The necessity for special revelation only arises if it is inseparably connected with the purpose God Himself has determined for His creation. If it is God's will to restore creation marred by sin, to recreate mankind in His image, and to allow them to live with Him forever in heavenly bliss, then special revelation is indeed necessary. For this grand purpose, general revelation is wholly inadequate.

Yet, it is not merely this ultimate goal that necessitates a special revelation. For if we recognize and acknowledge the insufficiency of general revelation to fulfill the divine purpose for the world and mankind, we owe this understanding to special revelation itself. By our natural inclinations, we are prone to believe that we and our virtues, the world and its treasures, are sufficient for our salvation. Pagan religions are no exception to this rule but rather confirm it. They all claim and appeal to a special revelation supposedly received

through priests, soothsayers, oracles, and similar mediums. This fact indirectly provides strong evidence that no one is satisfied with general revelation alone and that everyone feels an inherent need for a more detailed revelation of God than what nature and history provide. However, these so-called special revelations, to which Paganism appeals, clearly show that man, having lost his fellowship with God, no longer comprehends His revelation in nature either. In seeking and groping after God, man follows his own paths, which lead him further from the knowledge of the truth and deeper into the service of idolatry and iniquity (Romans 1:20-32).

Thus, the special revelation of God is necessary for us to correctly understand His general revelation in nature and history, in heart and mind. It is through special revelation that we can purify the true contents of general revelation from all kinds of human errors and learn to value it correctly. In the light of Scripture, we come to realize that general revelation holds rich significance for the entirety of human life. Yet, despite its abundance, it remains insufficient and inadequate for the attainment of mankind's true destiny.

Although, for the sake of clarity and order, we have first discussed general revelation and exposed its inadequacy before proceeding to special revelation, this should not be understood to mean that in the preceding discussion we set aside special revelation and ignored its content. On the contrary, this special revelation has already guided us and illuminated our path throughout our research.

We are not engaging in an ostensibly unbiased investigation to determine which special revelation is necessary and where it can be found. We do not join the doubters of our day in examining all the

different religions to ask whether they offer the special revelation of God that our hearts need. The fact that we have come to recognize false religions as false, to discern idolatry, divination, witchcraft, unbelief, and superstition—whether coarse or refined—as sin, error, and falsehood, we owe entirely to the special revelation given to us in Christ. To set aside this special revelation, or even to temporarily and methodically disregard it, would be to extinguish the light that shines upon us. It would prove that we preferred darkness over light, and that our thoughts and deliberations could not endure the light (John 3:19-21).

Moreover, general revelation can, to a certain extent, make us realize the need and necessity of special revelation. It can also provide strong reasons for the possibility of such a revelation. For if one rejects materialism and pantheism and thereby affirms the existence of a personal God who created the world, endowed man with an immortal soul, destined him for eternal bliss, and who maintains and governs all things through His providence, then there is no principled reason to dispute the possibility of special revelation. Creation itself is a revelation, a wholly supernatural, wondrous revelation. Whoever accepts creation acknowledges, in principle, the possibility of all subsequent revelation, even to the point of the Incarnation. However, whatever general revelation may contribute regarding the necessity and possibility of special revelation, it cannot attest to its reality, for that rests solely on the free gift of God. The reality of special revelation can only be recognized in its own existence. It is perceived and acknowledged in its own light.

This special revelation, wherein God first spoke to us through the prophets and then through the Son (Hebrews 1:1), and which we

recognize and accept not through reasoning and evidence but through childlike faith, is closely related to general revelation but is nevertheless essentially distinct from it. This difference, briefly indicated before but now needing fuller development, is especially evident in the manner of its occurrence, the content it conveys, and the goal it aims to achieve.

The manner in which special revelation occurs, the subject of this discourse, is not uniform but varies according to the means employed by God. Thus, it is described by various terms: appearing, revealing, discovering, making known, proclaiming, teaching, and so forth. Among these, the term "speaking" draws particular attention. The Holy Scriptures use the same word for the works of God in creation and providence. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:3). He made the heavens by His word, and all their host by the breath of His mouth (Psalm 33:6). He speaks, and it comes to be; He commands, and it stands firm (Psalm 33:9). The voice of the Lord is upon the waters, speaks in the thunder, breaks the cedars, makes the wilderness tremble, and rebukes and destroys the enemies (Psalm 29:3-9, 104:7; Isaiah 30:31, 66:6).

All this work of God in creation and providence can be called speech because God is a personal, conscious, and thinking being who brings all things into existence by the word of His power, thus imparting thoughts into the creatures, which mankind, created in His image and likeness, can read and understand. Indeed, God has something to say to mankind through His works.

There is relatively little disagreement regarding the concept of God speaking through the works of His hands. Many, who are unaware of

a special revelation, still readily speak of a revelation of God in creation. However, there remains a significant divergence among them. Some perceive this revelation predominantly in nature, others in history with its eminent figures, and still others prefer to find it in the history of religions with its spiritual personalities. Some emphasize the revelation that comes to humanity externally, through nature and history; others place greater importance on that which occurs within man himself, in his heart or conscience. Increasingly, the idea is taking hold that Revelation and religion are closely related and intimately connected, even that both share the same content and are merely two aspects of the same reality. Revelation is viewed as the divine moment and religion as the human response in the relationship between God and man. God reveals Himself to the extent that one possesses religion, and man has religion to the extent that God reveals Himself to him.

However, this view is fundamentally rooted in pantheism, which equates God with man, and thus also revelation with religion. Those who adhere to it can no longer genuinely speak of the revelation of God, not even in nature and history, in the world and in humanity. For revelation, properly understood, presupposes, as we noted earlier, that God is aware and knows Himself, and that He can therefore, at His pleasure, communicate knowledge of Himself to His creatures. From the pantheistic perspective, however, the personhood, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge, and thus also the rational will in God, are denied. God is nothing more than the essence, the power of and in all things. There can, therefore, be no question here of a revelation of God in the true sense, at best only of an unconscious, unwilling appearance or action of God. This does not introduce thoughts, conceptions, or knowledge of God into the

consciousness of man but at best only arouses in man's heart attitudes, inclinations, or conditions of a certain mood, which are then interpreted and expressed by that man entirely independently and freely, according to his civilization and development. In fact, religion in mankind and in the individual man then becomes a process by which God becomes aware of Himself and learns to know Himself. God does not reveal Himself to man or speak to him; rather, it is man who reveals God to himself.

Thus, when this pantheistic school still uses terms like 'revelation' and 'God's speech,' it does not derive them from its own worldview, in which they no longer fit, but from another, namely the worldview of Scripture, and it uses them in a distorted sense. Scripture, however, already calls general revelation a speaking of God because it proceeds from the assumption that God truly has something to say and says it through that revelation to His creatures. Thus, it maintains the distinction between God and man, between Revelation and religion. For if God has His own thought and knows Himself, and if He has expressed that thought to a greater or lesser degree in His works, then the possibility remains that man, because of his darkened mind, may misunderstand God's thoughts and be thwarted in his deliberations. In this case, religion is so little the other side of Revelation that it becomes, rather, a guilty and erroneous interpretation of it.

Because Scripture interprets God's general revelation as it does, and can call it, in the defined sense, a speaking of God, it keeps the way open for yet another and more real speaking of God in His special revelation. All Scripture reveals God as a being who is fully conscious, who can think and therefore speak. The question in Psalm

94:9, "Does He who planted the ear not hear? Does He who formed the eye not see?" can, according to the meaning and the intent of the Holy Spirit, be completed with these others: Could He who knows Himself perfectly not communicate knowledge of Himself to the creatures? He who disputes this possibility not only denies the God of regeneration but also the God of creation and providence, as Scripture recognizes Him; just as he who understands God's speech in general revelation in the proper sense, in the sense of Scripture, loses the right to raise fundamental objections to God's speech in special revelation. For God can reveal Himself in a special way because He does so in a general way. He can speak in an actual sense because He can do so in a metaphorical sense. He can be the Resurrector because He is the Creator of all things.

The great difference between God's speaking in general revelation and His speaking in special revelation lies in the method and directness of communication. In the realm of general revelation, God leaves it to man to discern His thoughts from the works of His hands. Man must interpret the divine instructions embedded in the natural world, such as those imparted to the farmer in Isaiah 28:26. Here, the farmer is taught by God not through spoken words, but through the natural order of air, soil, time, and place. This instruction is indirect and requires careful observation and interpretation, leaving man susceptible to error. However, when the farmer eventually comprehends these teachings, it is ultimately attributed to God's wonderful counsel and mighty deeds.

In contrast, special revelation involves God directly conveying His thoughts and will to humanity, making His message clear and unmistakable.

The great distinction between God's speaking in general revelation and His speaking in special revelation is in the manner of communication. In the former, God leaves it to man to derive His thoughts from the works of His hands, whereas in the latter, He expresses these thoughts directly, offering them to man and impressing them upon his consciousness. As Isaiah 28:26 illustrates, God instructs and teaches the farmer not through literal words but through the natural arrangements of air, soil, time, and place. The farmer must diligently learn these natural laws to grasp the divine instruction embedded within them. Although prone to error, when the farmer finally understands, it is due to God's wondrous counsel and mighty deeds.

In general revelation, this practical teaching suffices for its intended purpose. God uses it to awaken mankind to seek Him, as Acts 17:27 declares, so that they may seek Him and find Him. If they do not find Him, they are without excuse, as Romans 1:20 states. In special revelation, however, God seeks man and explicitly reveals who He is. He does not leave it to man to deduce His nature from a collection of facts; rather, He declares plainly, "Here I am, and this is who I am."

In special revelation, God uses facts from nature and history, often miracles, to disclose His various attributes. These facts are not mere appendages but integral to Revelation, always accompanied by God's own word. They are framed by divine speech—preceded, accompanied, and followed by it. The central focus of special revelation is the person and work of Christ, who is foretold and described in the Old Testament and explained in the New Testament. Thus, special revelation emanates from Christ and is inseparably linked to the Scriptures, the Word of God.

Therefore, special revelation can be more aptly described as divine speech than general revelation. Hebrews 1:1-2 encapsulates God's revelation through the prophets and the Son as 'speaking,' emphasizing that this revelation was progressive, occurring in various acts over time, and delivered in diverse ways and forms.

In numerous scriptural instances (e.g., Gen. 2:16, 18, 4:6 ff, 6:13 ff, 12:7, 13:14), it is simply stated that the Lord appeared, spoke, or commanded, without detailing the method. However, other passages provide insight into the manner of revelation, allowing us to discern between two types of means employed by God.

The first type of revelation encompasses all those means which possess an objective, figurative character, through which God manifests and speaks to humanity externally. Thus, God often appeared to Abraham, Moses, and the people of Israel on Mount Sinai, above the Tabernacle, and in the Holy of Holies, in clouds of smoke and fire as symbols of His presence (Genesis 15:17, Exodus 3:2, 13:21, 19:9, 33:9, Leviticus 16:2). Furthermore, He conveyed His will through angels (Genesis 18:2, 32:1, Daniel 8:13, Zechariah 1:9, Matthew 1:20), and especially through the Angel of the Covenant, who bore the name of the Lord (Exodus 23:21). Additionally, to make His will known, He frequently used providence (Proverbs 16:33) and the Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:30). Sometimes, He spoke with an audible voice (Exodus 19:9, Deuteronomy 4:33, 5:26, Matthew 3:17, 2 Peter 1:17) or inscribed His law on the tablets of testimony (Exodus 31:18, 32:16).

Miracles, which hold a prominent and extensive place in Scripture, also belong to this group of means of revelation. Presently, however,

they face fierce opposition from all sides. Defending the miracles of Scripture against those who have utterly rejected its worldview is a futile endeavor. If God does not exist, as atheism and materialism claim, or if He is indistinguishable from the world, as pantheism suggests, or if He withdrew from the world after Creation and left it to operate autonomously, as deism asserts, then miracles are indeed impossible. If the impossibility of miracles is presupposed, their reality is dismissed without debate.

However, Scripture presents a different conception of God, the world, and their interrelationship. First, it teaches that God is a conscious, willing, and omnipotent being, who brought the entire world into existence with all its powers and laws, yet has not exhausted His full power therein. He retains and possesses an infinite fullness of life and power. Nothing is too marvelous for Him (Genesis 18:14); with Him, all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).

Second, Scripture does not view the world as a monolithic whole, possessing a uniform essence and substance. Instead, it understands the world as an organism, wherein each member, though part of the whole, is endowed with distinct powers and vocations. The world accommodates diverse beings, each sustained and governed by the same divine power, yet differing in nature. The world contains matter and spirit, soul and body, heaven and earth, inorganic and organic entities, lifeless and living beings, sentient and rational creatures, minerals, plants, animals, humans, and angels. Within humanity, there is a distinction between head and heart, reason and conscience, mind and will, thoughts and actions. These diverse realms within the one world are founded on different forces and operate according to different laws. Everything is interconnected,

akin to the members of a body, yet each part holds its unique place and role within the whole.

Third, Scripture teaches that although God and the world are distinct, they are never separate. God possesses an independent existence in Himself, yet He is not detached from the world. In Him, we live, move, and have our being (Acts 17:28). He is not merely the Creator who initiated all things, but He remains the sustainer, possessor, King, and Lord, constantly upholding and renewing everything by His omnipotent and omnipresent power. Thus, everything, not only at its inception but also in its ongoing existence, finds its primary cause in God. The secondary causes through which God operates vary, but the primary cause of all creation is always God and God alone.

When we align our thoughts with Scripture and stand firmly on the foundation of theism, all grounds for doubting the possibility of miracles vanish. For, according to this view, everything that occurs in nature and history is an act of God, and thus, in a sense, a miracle. The so-called miracles are merely special demonstrations of the same divine power that operates in all things. This power works in diverse ways, through various means (second causes), according to different laws, and consequently with different outcomes. It has been aptly noted that for a stone, it is a miracle that a plant grows; for a plant, it is a miracle that an animal moves; for an animal, it is a miracle that a human being thinks; and thus, for a human being, it is a miracle that God raises the dead. If God, with His omnipresent and omnipotent power, works through all creatures as His instruments, how could He not work in other ways and through other means than those familiar to us from the ordinary course of nature and history?

Miracles, therefore, are not violations of the laws of nature. Scripture fully acknowledges these laws, even though it does not explicitly enumerate or formulate them; for according to Scripture, the order of the entire creation is established in God's covenant with Noah (Genesis 8:22). Just as humanity, through intellect and will, subdues the earth and controls nature, so God has the power to make this created world serve the execution of His counsel. The miracles testify that the Lord is God, not the world.

This would have been self-evident to man if he had not fallen. Then, he would have known and acknowledged God through all the works of His hands. Without delving into whether miracles would have occurred without sin, it suffices to note that they would have had a different character and purpose. The miracles recorded in Scripture are characterized by their distinct nature and purpose.

In the Old Testament, miracles serve the dual purposes of judgment and salvation. The flood destroys a godless generation while preserving Noah and his family in the ark. The miracles surrounding Moses and Joshua—the plagues in Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the giving of the Law at Sinai, and the conquest of Canaan—aim to judge God's enemies and secure a dwelling place for His people in the Promised Land. The miracles associated with Elijah, particularly during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, aim to counteract paganism and reaffirm the worship of Jehovah, culminating in the decisive showdown on Mount Carmel between Jehovah and Baal.

All these Old Testament miracles share the common goal of executing negative judgment on the nations while creating and preserving a space within Israel for the continued revelation of God.

They serve to ensure that, amidst all idolatry and image worship, Jehovah, the God of the covenant, is recognized and acknowledged as the true God: "See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39, 4:35, Isaiah 45:5, 18, 22). When this goal is achieved, the full revelation begins in the person of Christ.

The person of Christ Himself is a miracle—in His origin, essence, words, and works, He is the miracle of world history. Accordingly, the miracles He performs are of a unique nature. During His earthly life, He performs miracles that demonstrate His power over nature (e.g., turning water into wine, miraculous feedings, calming the storm, walking on water). He also performs miracles that show His power over the consequences of sin, such as diseases and infirmities, and miracles that reveal His authority over sin itself, including the forgiveness of sins, exorcisms, and the defeat of Satan's dominion.

In these three categories of miracles, the uniqueness of Christ's person is already evident. Except for a few exceptions, such as the cursing of the fig tree, all of Jesus' miracles are miracles of salvation. He did not come to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17). In these miracles, He acts as Prophet, Priest, and King, doing the works that the Father has shown Him and commissioned Him to do (John 4:34, 5:36, 9:4).

Yet more profoundly, the person of Christ is revealed in the miracles that are not merely performed by Him but are inherent in and through Him. These miracles unveil His very essence. His supernatural conception, miraculous life, sacrificial death,

resurrection, ascension, and exaltation at the right hand of God are miracles of salvation. These events powerfully attest to His supreme authority over sin and all its ramifications, over Satan and his entire dominion. Moreover, they manifest even more compellingly that this authority is a saving, redemptive power, destined to achieve ultimate triumph in the new heaven and new earth.

The miracles wrought by the first witnesses in the apostolic age should be understood as acts of the exalted Christ, as seen in Acts 3:6 and 4:10. These miracles were necessary to confirm that Jesus, though rejected, crucified, and presumed dead, was indeed alive and possessed all authority in heaven and on earth. The miracles of the Old Testament demonstrated that Jehovah is God and there is no other beside Him. The miracles of the New Testament reveal that Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, whom the Jews crucified, has been raised by God and exalted at His right hand as Prince and Savior (Acts 4:10, 5:30-31). Once this goal is accomplished, and a congregation that believes and confesses this revelation is established, the visible outward miracles cease. However, the spiritual miracles of regeneration and conversion persist within the congregation until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, and all Israel is saved. At the end of time, according to the testimony of Holy Scripture, there will be the miracles of the future: the appearing of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and earth.

The entire scope of revelation points towards the restoration of fallen humanity, the re-creation of the world, and the recognition of God as God by all creatures. All miracles are integral to this revelation. They are not extraneous elements, nor arbitrary appendages to revelation;

rather, they are a necessary and indispensable part of it. They themselves are revelation. In both word and deed, God makes Himself known to humanity with all His virtues and perfections.

In addition to the objective and external means of revelation, there exists a second series of forms and methods which God employs. These involve all means that possess a subjective character, which are not external but internal to man, through which God speaks not from without but from within.

Foremost among these is the unique revelation given to Moses, the Mediator of the Old Testament. This revelation is described as one where the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend (Exodus 33:11).

Moses occupied a wholly unique place in the Old Testament, elevated above all the prophets. God communicated with him not through visions or obscure words, but directly, mouth to mouth. Moses did not see the Lord in a vision but beheld His likeness, His form—not His essence or face, but the afterglow of the divine glory that passed before his eyes (Numbers 12:8, Exodus 33:18-23).

Among these means of divine revelation, we also find dreams, as noted in Numbers 12:6 and Deuteronomy 13:1-6; and visions, a state in which the physical eye is closed to the external world, and the eye of the soul is opened to the perception of divine matters, Numbers 12:6, Deuteronomy 13:1-6. Preeminent among these is the inspiration or the intervention of God's Spirit within human consciousness, as recorded in Numbers 11:25-29, 2 Samuel 23:2, Matthew 16:17, Acts 8:29, 1 Corinthians 2:12, and 2 Peter 1:21. This mode of revelation, where the Spirit intervenes within human

consciousness, appears multiple times in the Old Testament, though it is consistently depicted as the Spirit descending from above and momentarily influencing the prophet. In the New Testament, however, with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, inspiration becomes not only more frequent as a form of revelation but also assumes a more organic and enduring character.

These two types of means of revelation can be encapsulated under the terms manifestation and inspiration. It is essential to recognize that the content of manifestation includes not only deeds but also thoughts and words. Furthermore, it should be noted that the inspiration referenced here differs from the activity of the Holy Spirit received by prophets and apostles when recording revelation (theopneustion of the Scriptures) and from the internal enlightenment granted to all believers.

Study Questions for Reflections

1. What is the primary necessity for special revelation, and how does it complement general revelation?

- Reflect on why general revelation is inadequate for salvation and how special revelation fulfills God's purpose for humanity.

2. How does special revelation demonstrate the grace and undeserved favor of God?

- Consider how God's free and unmerited favor is evident in His act of revealing Himself through special revelation, particularly in Christ and Scripture.

3. In what ways does special revelation help us correctly interpret and value general revelation?

- Reflect on how special revelation clarifies and enhances our understanding of God's general revelation in nature and history.

4. What role does faith play in recognizing and accepting special revelation?

- Discuss the importance of childlike faith in perceiving and acknowledging special revelation as the true communication of God's will.

5. How does the manner of communication differ between general and special revelation?

- Explore the differences in how God reveals Himself through the natural world (general revelation) versus direct communication and miracles (special revelation).

6. Why is the person and work of Christ central to special revelation?

- Reflect on how Christ is the ultimate revelation of God and how His life, death, and resurrection serve as the focal point of special revelation.

7. What is the significance of miracles in the context of special revelation?

- Consider the role of miracles as demonstrations of God's power and authority, and how they serve to confirm His message and purposes in both the Old and New Testaments.

8. How do the miracles performed by Christ differ from those in the Old Testament?

- Analyze the nature and purpose of Christ's miracles and how they reveal His identity and mission as the Savior of the world.

9. What is the relationship between the Old Testament prophets and the revelation given to Moses?

- Reflect on the unique manner in which God communicated with Moses compared to other prophets, and the significance of this direct revelation.

10. How does the inspiration of the Holy Spirit function as a means of special revelation?

- Discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the prophets and apostles, and how this form of revelation differs from general spiritual enlightenment granted to all believers.

6. Special Revelation II:

The Content of Revelation

After having considered the various manners in which special revelation has been dispensed, we now turn to its content. Just as

with general revelation, we can better understand it by briefly tracing the history of special revelation. In so doing, the purpose of special revelation will naturally become evident.

Special revelation did not commence with Abraham but began immediately after the Fall. It is no mere accident that Abraham was a son of Terah and a descendant of Shem, whose God was and would be Jehovah, as declared in Genesis 9:26. In the generation of Shem, just as before the Flood in the generation of Seth, the knowledge of God was preserved in its purity for the longest duration. Therefore, when the Lord called Abraham, He did not present Himself as a new deity, but as the God whom Abraham already knew and confessed. From other Scriptural accounts, such as those concerning Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18-20, we know that the knowledge of the true God had not entirely vanished. Similarly, the Philistine king Abimelech, the Hittites of Hebron, and Pharaoh in Egypt recognized and honored the God of Abraham, as seen in Genesis 20:3, 21:22-23, 23:6, 26:29, and 41:8, 16, 38, 39.

However, after the confusion of tongues and the dispersion of mankind, not mere unbelief but superstition and idolatry began to flourish. This was evident in Egypt (Exodus 18:9-12), in Canaan (Genesis 15:16, 18:1), and in Babylon. Even among the Semites, idolatry had taken root. According to Joshua 24:2, 14, 15, the ancestors of Israel, including Terah, Abraham's father, served other gods while they lived beyond the river. From Genesis 31:19, 34, 35:2-4, we learn that Laban possessed and worshipped household gods, or teraphim, and is thus called an Aramean, or Syrian, in Genesis 31:20 and Deuteronomy 26:5.

To prevent humanity from sinking into superstition and unrighteousness, thereby breaking the covenant of nature with Noah and thwarting God's purpose for mankind, the Lord took a different path with Abraham. While He could not destroy humanity again with a flood, He could establish a covenant with one person, and through that individual, with one nation. Through this covenant, He could continue and fulfill His promise, eventually extending it to all mankind. This temporary isolation of one people would ultimately serve to unite all humanity.

With Abraham, a new era in the history of revelation began. The special revelation given to the patriarchs was connected to and built upon the previous revelations, continuing and developing them. It is therefore crucial to understand this new revelation in its particularity, especially since this understanding determines our view of the revelation given to Israel and, consequently, the nature of Israelite religion.

In seeking a correct understanding of the origin and nature of Israel's religion, many today obstruct their own path. Firstly, they deny any historical value to the patriarchal period, viewing Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others as mythical figures akin to the demigods and heroes of Homeric epics. Secondly, they begin their examination of Israel's religion with primitive, pagan forms such as animism, fetishism, ancestor worship, polydaemonism, or polytheism. Thirdly, they argue that the essence of Israel's religion, as it evolved through the prophets—especially those of the eighth century B.C.—was an ethical monotheism recognizing one God who is all-powerful, just, and good.

This modern interpretation aims to explain Israel's religion purely through natural factors and gradual development, dismissing the notion of special revelation. However, the entirety of Scripture stands in opposition to this view, and it ultimately fails to account for the unique development and true nature of Israel's religion.

The origin of Israel's religion cannot be comprehended through such modern frameworks because the prophets consistently proclaimed the same God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Israel. They did not introduce a new deity but spoke in the name of the God of the covenant, whom the people were bound to serve and honor. Recognizing this, many scholars who appreciate the weight of this argument trace Israel's religion back to Moses, considering him the true founder. However, even Moses did not introduce a foreign deity; he called the people to the Exodus in the name of the God who had committed Himself to the patriarchs and was fulfilling His promises. Thus, a serious examination of Israel's religious origins necessitates returning to the patriarchal period, as Scripture demands.

To understand the nature of Israel's religion, we must also look to this patriarchal period. The essence of Israel's religion is not encapsulated in so-called ethical monotheism, though this element—recognizing God as a singular, omnipotent, just, and holy being—is certainly present. Rather, the heart and soul of Israel's religion lie in the covenant relationship where this one eternal, just, and holy God committed Himself to Israel as their God.

The Apostle Paul elucidates this understanding in Romans 4 (with parallels in Galatians 3:5ff), questioning what Abraham received

from God. Referencing Genesis 15:6, Paul emphasizes that Abraham's righteousness was not by works but by faith—by God's grace and the forgiveness of sins, which David later identifies as the salvation of the sinner.

Paul further explains that this great gift of grace was granted to Abraham long before the institution of circumcision (Genesis 15:6), with circumcision later serving as a sign and seal of the righteousness of faith (Genesis 17). Thus, the forgiveness of sins and the entirety of salvation are independent of the Law and its demands. This universality of benefit is also evident in the promise made to Abraham—that he would be the father of many nations and heir of the world—given long before and apart from the Law.

Paul's argument is grounded in the Old Testament narrative itself. The primary importance lies not in Abraham's knowledge of God or his actions for God, but in what God bestowed upon Abraham. Firstly, it is God who sought out Abraham, called him, and led him to Canaan. Secondly, God promised to be Abraham's God and the God of his seed. Thirdly, He promised Abraham a seed against all expectations, making him the father of a great nation and granting that nation the land of Canaan. Fourthly, God assured Abraham that through his seed, all nations of the earth would be blessed. Finally, God elevated this promise to a binding covenant, sealed with circumcision, and confirmed it with an oath after Abraham's trial of faith (Genesis 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1ff; 17:1ff; 18:10; 22:17-19).

The Content of God’s Promise to Abraham

These promises collectively constitute the essence of God's revelation to Abraham. At their core lies the great promise: "I will be your God

and the God of your seed." These promises extend from Israel and its land to Christ, and through Christ, to all humanity and the entire world, as Paul expounds in Romans 4:11f. It is this promise that faith and the walk of faith correspond to, as outlined in Romans 4:16-22 and Hebrews 11:8-21. For a promise can only be ours through faith, and faith is demonstrated through a righteous walk before God, as indicated in Genesis 17:1. Abraham exemplifies trusting faith, Isaac suffering faith, and Jacob fighting faith.

In the history of the patriarchs, the character and calling of Israel are already delineated. While the nations of the earth follow their own paths, developing the gifts of general grace bestowed by God (Genesis 18:10; Deuteronomy 32:6; Isaiah 51:1, 2), from Abraham God raises a people who, like their forefather, must walk by faith, who owe their land not to their own power but to God's grace, and who, by this grace, will achieve a blessed dominion over the nations. This people must keep the promise of the Lord's salvation, like Isaac, and await its fulfillment, like Jacob, through struggle. Neither human plans nor weaknesses can hinder its fulfillment, for God is both the giver and the fulfiller of the promise. While He punishes sin, He simultaneously uses it to fulfill His counsel. Israel, like Jacob of old, can only partake of the promise and blessing of the Lord if purified by punishment, its strength broken, and victorious only through the struggle of faith and prayer. As Jacob declared, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (Genesis 32:26; Hosea 12:4).

This promise remains the core of all subsequent revelations in the Old Testament, though it is expanded and developed therein, retaining its essence in Israelite religion. With the covenant at Sinai and the establishment of the legal dispensation, a new era

undoubtedly began. Yet, to understand Israel's religion and the Old Testament economy, we must be acutely aware that the promise made to Abraham was not annulled by the law.

Paul explicitly reinforces this teaching. In Galatians 3:15f., he compares the promise given to Abraham and his seed with a will, which, once established by the testator, cannot be annulled by another. God's promise to Abraham and all its blessings are a free disposal by God. They are, as it were, bequeathed by God to Abraham and his seed, and must therefore be handed over to that seed by divine decree. The peoples descended from Abraham according to the flesh do not qualify as that seed, thus excluding the descendants through Hagar and Keturah (Genesis 17:20; 25:2). The Scriptures speak not of "seeds," that is, many descendants or peoples, but of one seed, one generation, to come from Abraham—namely, the offspring, the seed, the people born of the promised son, Isaac, culminating in Christ, the seed par excellence.

When God bequeathed His salvation to Abraham and his seed through a will in the promise, it implied that these salvation blessings would belong to Christ, His property and possession, to be distributed by Him to His church, gathered from all nations. Thus, this promise, given to Abraham independently of all human conditions and the law, solely by God's free will, could not be nullified by a subsequent law. If it had been, God would have nullified His own promise, decree, will, and oath.

Only one path is possible: we receive the salvation goods in the promise either from the promise or from the law, from grace or merit, from faith or works. It is a fact that Abraham received

righteousness by faith through the promise, even before his circumcision; that the Israelites in patriarchal times and in Egypt, for hundreds of years, also obtained this benefit solely by virtue of the promise, not the law, which did not exist at that time; and that God bestowed this promise on Abraham and his seed until Christ, extending it to all humanity. Thus, He bestowed it as a divine gift, an everlasting covenant, confirmed with a lasting oath.

As it stands, Galatians 3:17-18 and Hebrews 6:13 and following make it clear that if the law, which God later gave to Israel, could not annul His promise, then it becomes essential to understand why God gave the law to Israel. This inquiry is vital for grasping the meaning and significance of the covenant of grace that was instituted alongside the law, and thus for comprehending the essence of Israel's religion. This question held great significance in Paul's time and remains equally important today.

In the days of the Apostles, there were those who viewed the law as the core of Israel's religion, insisting that Gentiles could only embrace Christianity through Israel, through circumcision, and adherence to the law. Conversely, others despised the law, attributing it to a lower deity and considering it a relic of an inferior religious standpoint. Nominalism and antinomianism stood in opposition as extreme perspectives.

Today, this dichotomy persists under different names and forms. Some define the essence of Israel's religion as ethical monotheism, recognizing God as a holy deity who merely requires obedience to His commandments, thereby erasing the distinction between Judaism and Christianity. For them, an enlightened Jew and an

enlightened Christian profess the same religion entirely. Others, from a lofty sense of spiritual freedom, disdain what they perceive as the narrow-minded legalism of Judaism. They seek to liberate humanity from what they see as the clutches of Judaism, aiming to purge all Semitic elements from Indo-European culture, believing all decay stems from Judaism and all salvation from the Indo-European race. Thus, Semitic and anti-Semitic perspectives wrestle and, as extremes, often touch.

For Paul, the question of the law's purpose and meaning was so crucial that he revisited it frequently in his epistles. His response comprises several key points:

Firstly, the law was supplementary to the promise; it was introduced later and was not originally connected to it. Many years elapsed before the law was proclaimed after the promise. When the law was added, it retained a temporary, transient character. While the promise or covenant of grace is eternal, the law was intended to last only until the time when the true seed of Abraham, Christ, would appear—the one to whom the promise was ultimately made and who was to receive and distribute its blessings (Romans 5:20, Galatians 3:17, 19).

Secondly, the temporary and transient nature of the law is evident from its origin. Although the law came from God, it was not given directly and immediately to the people of Israel or to each member of the nation. It was mediated. On God's side, the law was given through angels, accompanied by thunder, lightning, a dense cloud, and the sound of a powerful trumpet (Exodus 19:16, 18; Hebrews 12:18; Acts 7:38, 53; Galatians 3:19). On the part of the people, who

were afraid and stood at the foot of the mountain, Moses was asked to act as a mediator, to speak with God and receive the law (Exodus 19:21ff; 20:19; Deuteronomy 5:22-27; 18:16; Hebrews 12:19; Galatians 3:19-20).

The contrast is stark when considering the New Covenant. The law was given through intermediaries, while grace and truth came through Jesus Christ, God's own Son (John 1:17). This new revelation is not mediated by angels or received through a representative. Instead, every believer receives it personally in Christ Himself (Galatians 3:22, 26).

Thirdly, being from God, the law is holy, just, good, and spiritual. It is not the cause or agent of sin, even though sin takes advantage of the commandment. The law is not powerless in itself; it is indeed a commandment meant for life, but it becomes powerless because of man's sinful nature. This does not alter the fact that the law differs from the promise, not just in degree, but in essence. While the law is not contrary to the promise, it is also not of the promise or of faith. Therefore, it cannot nullify the promise. The law, being essentially different, carries a distinct character and serves a different purpose (Rom. 3:8, 14:7; Gal. 3:17, 21).

Fourthly, the special purpose of the law, as given by God, is twofold. First, it was added for the sake of transgressions (Gal. 3:19), to make transgressions more evident. Sin, then, takes on a different character; it becomes a violation distinct from sin in general. For Adam, who received a commandment tied to life and death (Rom. 5:12, 14), and for Israel, who were to receive life or death based on obedience or disobedience, sin took on a new dimension.

As sin against a law promising life or death, it became a violation, a breach of covenant, distinct from the general concept of sin. Without such a law, sin remains sin but is not a violation (Rom. 4:15). The sins of the Gentiles are indeed sins, but they do not breach the covenant as Israel's sins do; they are judged without the law God gave to Israel (Rom. 2:12).

For Israel, however, sins could become transgressions because they received a law with the promise of life and the threat of death. The law created the possibility of transgressions. Thus, Paul can say that the Sinai law, while holy and not the cause of sin, was added to increase violations; it is the power of sin, arousing desires. Sin takes its opportunity from the commandment, leading to transgression; without such a law, sin remains dormant and inactive. The law thus increases the crime—not sin in general but those particular sins bearing the nature of a breach of covenant (Gal. 3:19; Rom. 5:13, 20; 7:8; 1 Cor. 15:56). Because the law brings about this, it incurs wrath, threatening divine punishment, pronouncing judgment, justifying no one, and placing all under a curse and making them subject to God's wrath (Rom. 3:19-20; 4:15; Gal. 3:10-11, 22). Thus, if under the Old Testament, anyone received forgiveness of sins and eternal life, it was not due to the law but to the promise.

However, alongside this negative purpose of increasing transgressions and judgment, the law given to Israel also had a positive purpose. By giving sin the character of transgression, breach of contract, and unfaithfulness, by revealing all sin, even hidden lusts in the heart, as contrary to God's law and deserving of His wrath and punishment (Rom. 3:20; 7:7; 1 Cor. 15:56), the law highlighted the necessity of the promise. It proved that if justification of sinners were

possible, it had to come from a righteousness other than works (Gal. 3:11). Thus, far from opposing the promise, the law served as a means to bring the promise closer to fulfillment. The law took Israel into custody, like a prisoner deprived of freedom, a pedagogue leading Israel by the hand, never leaving her free. It acted as a guardian, constantly supervising Israel, so she might learn to know and cherish the promise in its necessity and glory. Without the law, the promise and its fulfillment might have come to nothing. Israel would have quickly reverted to paganism, losing both God's revelation and its own religious identity and place among the nations. The law isolated and maintained Israel, preserving her from corruption, creating a space where God could keep His revelation pure, expand it, develop it, and bring it closer to fulfillment. The law served to fulfill the promise, placing all under God's wrath and the sentence of death, condemning all to sin, so the promise given to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ might be given to all believers, enabling all to obtain the adoption of sons (Gal. 3:21-4:7).

By adopting Paul's perspective, a surprising light is shed on God's revelation in the Old Testament, Israel's religion, the meaning of the law, history, prophecy, psalms, and wisdom.

With the person of Moses, a new epoch indeed dawns in the revelation of God and the history of Israel. Yet, just as God's revelation to Abraham did not sever His earlier disclosures but incorporated and advanced them, so too the dispensation of God's grace under the Law aligns with those that preceded it. The Law, which came alongside the promise, did not annul or nullify that promise; rather, it incorporated it and served its development and fulfillment. The promise is primary, the law secondary; the former is

the goal, the latter the means. The essence of God's revelation and the heart of Israel's religion lie not in the law but in the promise. Since the promise is God's word, imbued with power, it is the expression of His will and accomplishes all that pleases Him (Ps. 33:9, Isa. 55:11). Thus, the promise is the driving force and mainspring of Israel's history until it finds its fulfillment in Christ.

Just as Abraham was redeemed by God's call from the land of the Chaldeans (Isa. 29:22) and received the covenant promise by God's free will, so Israel was first led by the Lord into Egypt and subjected to Pharaoh's servitude, only to be delivered from this misery and brought into God's covenant at Sinai. These three facts—servitude in Egypt, deliverance from bondage by God's mighty hand, and the covenant at Sinai—form the foundation of Israel's history and the pillars of its religious and moral life. They are perpetuated in memory from generation to generation, recounted in history, prophecy, and psalmody, and cannot be stripped of their historical reality even by the most radical criticism.

Moreover, these events provide immediate evidence that the law was not and could not have been given to nullify the promise. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush and called him to his office, He did not present Himself as an unknown deity but as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had seen the affliction of His people and heard their cry. Because He is Jehovah, the faithful God, He descended to fulfill His promise and deliver His people from bondage. Israel did not first become God's people at Horeb or by virtue of the law; it was already His people by virtue of the promise, and it was by that same promise that it was redeemed from its misery. The misery and redemption thus preceded the legislation at

Sinai. Just as Abraham, redeemed by God's call and receiving the promise in childlike faith, was obliged to walk in holiness before God (Gen. 17:1), so Israel, after being rescued from Egypt, was exhorted and obliged by God at Sinai to new obedience. The law given through Moses was a law of thanksgiving; it followed redemption, rested on the promise, and through its strength, God led His people to the sweet abode of His glory (Ex. 15:13). He carried them on eagle's wings and brought them to Himself (Ex. 19:4, Deut. 32:11-12). The law was therefore introduced with the promise: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2, Deut. 5:6).

However, this relationship now demanded further arrangement. In patriarchal times, when only a few families shared in the blessing of the promise to Abraham, such arrangement was unnecessary. In Egypt, where the people suffered in servitude, it was impossible. But now, redeemed and becoming an independent, free people living in their own land, Israel had to be a people of God as a nation. The covenant of grace had to take the form of a national covenant; the promise had to secure itself the aid of the law to maintain and develop further.

This was especially necessary because Israel, as Paul presents it, was still a child. It had undergone a hard schooling in Egypt and had developed a deep sense of dependency, but it was not ready for self-reliance overnight. It took all the wisdom and gentleness of Moses (Num. 12:3) to guide such a people through the exodus and the desert. Time and again they are called a stubborn people for their refusal to bow to God's command (Ex. 32:9, 33:3, 5, 34:9, Deut. 9:6). This characteristic persisted not only in the desert but also later in

Canaan. Israel lacked the clear self-confidence, principled spirit, philosophical sense, and power of abstract thought that characterize mature peoples. However, it was rich in mind and heart, a people deeply connected to its divine calling through faith and promise.

Israel, uniquely formed by God, was both highly receptive to His revelation and deeply influenced by a myriad of earthly and heavenly forces. This character is vividly depicted in Scripture through the lives of men and women who, when called by the Lord, responded with childlike submission: "Behold, I am here, Lord, for thy servant heareth; let it be done according to thy word." They embraced the word of the Lord, treasured it in their hearts, and lived by it. Yet, as Exodus 32:8 indicates, Israel was prone to deviate quickly from the path, displaying a nature that was fickle, capricious, and easily swayed. Their passions could flare into burning hatred or tender, maternal love; they could be plunged into the depths of sorrow or soar with joy. They were never Western-minded but always fervent with Eastern enthusiasm, drawn to stimulating foods like garlic and onions (Num. 11:5), lentil stew (Gen. 25:34), and game meat (Gen. 27:14-17). They had an affinity for brilliant colors, fine garments, perfumes, and precious stones (Josh. 7:21, Isa. 3:18 ff.), and all things that shone and glowed in the sunshine. Figures like Da Costa and Heine are products of this rich cultural heritage.

Such a people needed the guardianship and discipline of the law to fulfill their calling to be a blessing to all nations through the promise. This encapsulates the nature of the law.

Firstly, the law is not of the promise or faith but is added to the promise, serving not to nullify but to prepare the way for its

fulfillment. In contemporary times, there is a tendency to reverse the relationship between the law and the prophets, positing that the laws in the books of Moses were developed centuries after Moses, even post-Exile. This perspective, while recognizing that the law was not the primary element of God's revelation and Israel's religion, fails to appreciate that the promise preceded and was primary, with the law serving as a means to its fulfillment. It is plausible that the Mosaic Law underwent revisions and additions by later editors to address contemporary needs, for it was always intended to be temporary and transitory, as evidenced by its amendments in Deuteronomy. However, the idea that prophecy preceded the law contradicts historical facts, the nature of the law, the role of prophecy, and sound reasoning. Israel had its Temple, priests, sacrifices, and necessary laws and regulations long before the eighth century. A religion without a cult and orders is inconceivable, especially in antiquity. The objection that a written law of such richness could not exist in Moses' time loses its force in light of the discovery of Hammurabi's code, which predates Moses by several centuries.

Secondly, the law's content aligns with its divine purpose. To assess its value, it should not be compared with the laws of modern Christian states. Although the Mosaic Law retains its significance in principle, it was a temporary measure abolished in the fullness of time due to its inherent weakness and unprofitableness.

Comparing Israel's legislation with that of ancient civilizations, such as Babylon, offers valuable insights, highlighting similarities and differences and aiding our understanding of the Mosaic Law. However, Israel was set apart by God with a unique destiny as the

bearer of the promise. Therefore, it had to lead a life distinct from other nations to fulfill this purpose.

In conclusion, Israel's history, character, and law were intricately woven together to preserve and fulfill God's promise. The law served as a guardian, shaping the nation and preparing it for the coming of Christ, in whom the promise would be fully realized. The revelation given through Moses built upon the earlier promises and guided Israel until the ultimate fulfillment in Christ.

When we examine the Law of God given to Israel through this lens, several distinct characteristics emerge:

1. **A Thoroughly Religious Law**: The Law is intrinsically religious in every aspect, not merely in sections concerning worship, but in its entirety, encompassing moral, civil, social, and political directives. It is prefaced with the declaration: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the house of Egypt." This Law is grounded not in abstract monotheism but in a covenantal relationship established by God with His people. It governs Israel's life according to the demands of this Covenant, and every commandment is issued by the Divine Lawgiver and must be observed for His sake. The underlying principle of the entire Law is that Jehovah first loved Israel, sought them out, redeemed them, brought them into His covenant, and accepted them as His people.

2. **A Thoroughly Moral Law**: Within the Mosaic Law, we discern three elements: moral, civil, and ceremonial. This distinction is valid, yet it is crucial to remember that the entire Law is infused with and upheld by moral principles. These moral

principles may be applied to concrete cases differently from today's standards. Jesus Himself acknowledged that Moses permitted certain allowances, such as the giving of a curse to a married woman, due to the hardness of hearts (Matt. 19:8). However, the spirit of the Mosaic Law is one of love. This is the second commandment, equal to the first (Matt. 22:39), and in it, the whole Law is fulfilled (Rom. 13:8, Gal. 5:14, 1 Tim. 1:5). This love is particularly evident in the care shown for the weak and the oppressed: the poor, foreigners, widows, orphans, servants, the deaf, the blind, and the elderly. Such mercy was unknown in ancient laws. Israel's morality is uniquely written from the perspective of the oppressed, never forgetting their own foreignness and suffering in Egypt.

3. **A Holy Law**: The Mosaic Law is holy throughout, not only in the portion termed the holy law (Lev. 17-26) but in all its sections. Unlike any ancient law, it perceives sin with profound seriousness. Sin is described with various terms, indicating its grave nature: crime, guilt, apostasy, rebellion, and it is ultimately an offense against God, the God of the covenant, thus always bearing the character of a breach of the covenant. Forgiveness for all these sins is available, but it is not earned by good works or sacrifices. Forgiveness is rooted in the promise, a benefit of the gospel, obtained only through faith (Ex. 33:19, 34:6-7, 9, Num. 14:18-20).

However, the same passages that proclaim God's grace also declare that He does not leave the guilty unpunished and visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations. This does not contradict the promise. Because Jehovah forgives sins

by grace, He expects His people to walk in the way of that covenant. If they fail, God, in response to the nature of their sin, takes one of three paths with His people. In some instances, the Law, through its sacrifices, opens the possibility of reconciliation without further civil consequences. In other instances, the Law prescribes civil punishment, sometimes the death penalty, though rarely. More often, God Himself reserves the right to visit judgment upon His people through pestilence, exile, or other means. These methods do not nullify the promise but serve to fulfill it, ensuring God's faithfulness even in times of apostasy.

"Of all the nations of the earth, the Lord hath known Israel only: therefore visiteth He all their iniquities" (Amos 3:2).

4. Lastly, the Mosaic Law is also a law of liberty, granting and preserving substantial freedom. This is immediately evident from the notable fact that the people, on the one hand, voluntarily consent to God's covenant and accept His law. God does not impose His covenant and law on Israel by compulsion but invites their willing assent (Ex. 19:8; 24:3, 7; Deut. 5:27; Josh. 24:15-25). Furthermore, the law respects existing rights and relations, recognizing and presupposing them. Even before the legislation at Sinai, Israel was already somewhat organized. The people were genealogically divided into families, clans, genera, and tribes, thus forming a patriarchal organization. Each of these divisions had its own head or representative. Assemblies of these elders took place even in Egypt (Ex. 4:29; 3:16 ff.) and continued after the exodus to hear the words of the Lord (Ex. 19:7), to deliberate on proposals by Moses (Deut. 1:9-14), or to make proposals to Moses themselves (Deut. 1:22, 23).

> Besides these public assemblies, Israel had two other kinds of officials: firstly, the officers or scribes, who regulated civil affairs and already existed in Egypt (Ex. 5:6, 10, 14, 19; Num. 11:16; Deut. 1:15; 16:18; Josh. 23:2); and secondly, the judges introduced by Moses to assist in the administration of justice (Ex. 18:21, 23; Deut. 1:13 ff.), who were later appointed in all the cities by the choice of the elders (Deut. 16:18).

In this organization, the family was the cornerstone and the foundation, as it remains highly esteemed by the Jews today. Because the family held such an important place in Israel, the status of women was elevated compared to other nations. The decisive question here, as has been rightly pointed out, is whether the man is primarily seen as a member of the family (husband, son, brother), or as a citizen or warrior. In Greece and Rome, the latter was the case, resulting in the woman being relegated and considered inferior. But in Israel, the man was foremost a family member; his vocation was to care for his family. He stood not in opposition to or above the woman but alongside her, who was entitled to respect and love from the children (Ex. 20:12) and was worthy of being praised as a virtuous wife (Prov. 12:4; 31:10 ff.).

This patriarchal-aristocratic form of governance, existing in Israel prior to the giving of the Law, was not only recognized but also affirmed by the Law itself. Numerous statutes pertain to marriage, ensuring the sanctity of this institution and the protection of the family. Additional provisions uphold the patriarchal governance structure against encroachments by the priesthood and monarchy. The elders, officers, and judges were distinct from the priests and Levites. Only in the supreme court did priests participate, as seen in

Deuteronomy 17:8-13 and 19:17-18, due to the critical need for proper interpretation of the Law, a duty assigned to the priests (Leviticus 10:8-11, Ezekiel 7:26, 44:23, Jeremiah 18:18).

Israel's governance was antithetical to hierarchical systems. Despotism had no place under the Law. When Israel later desired and received a king (1 Samuel 8:7), he was not to be a monarch like those of other nations but was bound by God's Law, serving merely as an executor of His will (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Fundamentally, God Himself was Israel's King, Legislator, and Judge (Exodus 15:18, 19:6, Numbers 23:21, Deuteronomy 33:5, Judges 8:22, 1 Samuel 8:7, Isaiah 33:22, Psalms 44:5, 68:25). This was evident in the fact that judgment was rendered through impartial judges who adhered strictly to the Law. In special cases, God's will was made known by lot, through the Urim and Thummim, and through prophets. Significantly, for many transgressions, God reserved punishment to Himself. Many legal prescriptions were not civil laws prescribing specific punishments but rather urgent admonitions and warnings directed to the conscience, thereby affording Israel considerable freedom.

The types of punishments were few: primarily beatings, and for grave offenses (blasphemy, idolatry, sorcery, cursing of parents, murder, adultery), death by stoning. There was no mention of inquisition, torture, imprisonment, banishment, confiscation of property, burning, or hanging. If Israel adhered to the covenant, they would receive rich blessings from the Lord; but if they disobeyed, they would be struck by His curse and suffer all manner of miseries (Deuteronomy 28:29).

From these characteristics, the purpose of the Law, as given by God to Israel, becomes evident. The Lord Himself defines this purpose when, at the conclusion of the covenant at Sinai, He instructed Moses to tell the people of Israel that if they obeyed His voice and kept His covenant, they would be His treasured possession among all peoples, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). Israel is called to affirm its identity as God's chosen people, not due to their merit, but by God's free love and in accordance with His oath to the fathers (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). However, Israel did not receive this privilege to isolate themselves from other nations or to exalt themselves above them, but to serve as a kingdom of priests, tasked with bringing the knowledge and service of God to the nations, thus fulfilling a priestly role. Israel could only fulfill this calling if they themselves were a holy people, wholly devoted to the Lord, obedient to His voice, and steadfast in His covenant.

The holiness to which Israel is called does not yet encompass the full and profound meaning that this concept attains in the New Testament. It includes not only moral holiness but also ceremonial holiness, as particularly delineated in Leviticus 17-26. Yet, these moral and ceremonial aspects of the Law are not opposed but rather complement each other. Israel is a holy nation when it adheres to all the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws given by God at Sinai, both inwardly and outwardly, in faith and practice. The Lord, in His omniscience, knew that this people would not remain steadfast in their calling but would repeatedly fall into disobedience and apostasy throughout their history. Consequently, He would visit upon them punishments more severe than those inflicted upon any other nation. However, at the end of their tribulation, the Lord would still return to His people, restore their fortunes, and show mercy upon them. He

would circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants, so that they might love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul (Deut. 4:29-31, 30:1ff). He cannot forsake His people, for His name and honor before the enemies are at stake (Deut. 32:26-27). Through Israel's unfaithfulness, He must confirm His faithfulness, the truthfulness of His word, the immutability of His counsel, and the firmness of His covenant. He must show that He is God and there is no other (Deut. 32:39). Thus, the Law follows the promise and remains in force until the promise is fulfilled.

From the covenantal perspective, Scripture views the entirety of Israel's history. The aim of the historical books of the Old Testament is not to provide a precise and exhaustive account of all Israel's vicissitudes, nor to trace the causal relationships between all events. Rather, they portray the progress of the Kingdom of God, briefly touching upon what is insignificant to this end or passing over it entirely, while dwelling extensively on what is significant. In the history of Israel, Scripture seeks to reveal who and what God is to His people. It is not without reason that Israel's historical narrative has been termed "Jehovah's diary." The Lord, as it were, records His findings and interventions with Israel from day to day.

In the initial period, when the people were still under the powerful impression of God's mighty deeds, they remained faithful to His law. Through these deeds, Jehovah was manifestly demonstrated as the one true God (Ex. 6:6, 18:18), leaving the people with no inclination towards other gods. When they heard the words of the Lord from the mouth of Moses, they responded in unison, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8, 24:3, 7, Deut. 5:27). Later, when they had received the inheritance of Canaan and were given the choice by

Joshua regarding whom they should serve, they almost haughtily declared, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods” (Josh. 24:16, Judg. 2:7).

But when Joshua and the elders, who had witnessed the mighty deeds of the Lord, had passed away, a new generation arose that neither knew the Lord nor the works He had wrought for Israel. They forsook the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt, and pursued other gods, the deities of the surrounding nations (Judges 2:6-13). Israel did not innovate in idolatry; they did not devise their own false religion, but instead adopted the gods of the heathen or attempted to worship the Lord through images, imitating pagan practices. In Egypt and the wilderness, they fell into Egyptian idolatry (Ex. 16:28, Josh. 24:14, Ezek. 20:7, 13). Later in Palestine, they served the gods of the Canaanites, Phoenicians (Baal, Asherah, Astarte), and Assyrians (worshiping fire and stars) (Judges 10:6, 2 Kings 21:3, 5, 7, 23:5-15, Jer. 7:24-31, Ezek. 20:21, 22:3f). Israel repeatedly violated the first and second commandments, thereby eroding the very foundation of the covenant.

In the era of the Judges, those "heroes of the law," Israel’s history unfolded through cycles of apostasy, punishment, distress, and subsequent deliverance and blessing (Judges 2:11-23). It was a time of disorder, with tribes losing sight of the national cause, each following its own path, and every man doing what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17:6, 21:25). This chaotic period was brought to an end by Samuel and the establishment of kingship. However, after Solomon, the national unity was irreparably broken, with ten tribes seceding from the Davidic kingdom. Jeroboam deepened the political rift into a religious schism by establishing a sanctuary in Dan,

promoting idol worship, and abolishing the lawful priesthood. Thus, he became known as the king "who made Israel to sin." For two and a half centuries, the history of the kingdom of Ephraim was marked by relentless apostasy from Jehovah, despite the persistent voice of prophecy, culminating in the exile of the ten tribes. Though Judah was more favored than Israel, being ruled by the Davidic dynasty and retaining the legitimate sanctuary and priesthood, it too succumbed to such apostasy and wickedness that judgment was inevitable. Nearly one hundred and forty years after the fall of the Kingdom of Israel, Judah also lost its sovereignty.

However, amidst Israel's continuous apostasy, God preserved a remnant according to the election of grace. Throughout the ages, there remained a core within Israel faithful to Jehovah's covenant. Even in the darkest days of Elijah, there were still seven thousand who had not bowed to Baal. These were the devout, the righteous, the faithful, the poor, and the needy, as often described in the Psalms, who steadfastly trusted in the God of Jacob and remained true to His covenant. They thirsted for God as the deer pants for streams of water; they longed to dwell in His sanctuary; they meditated on His law and clung to His promises. For them, the law was not a burden but a delight, their meditation all day long. They echoed Moses, affirming that adherence to this law would be Israel's wisdom and understanding before the nations. When other nations heard these statutes, they would marvel: "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." "For what nation is there so great, who has God so near to them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon Him for? And what nation is there so great, that has statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?" (Deut. 4:6-8).

And as the times grew darker, they clung more tightly to the promise. God would not abandon the work of His hands; for His name's sake and His own covenant, which He had graciously made with the fathers, He would remain faithful. From their midst, God raised up prophets, psalmists, and wise men who proclaimed His word and revealed the promise in ever clearer terms. In the midst of affliction, they lifted up their heads, beheld the future by the light of the Lord's Spirit, and foretold the coming of a new day—the day of David's Son and Lord, the root of Jesse, Immanuel, the Spirit of Righteousness, the Servant of the Lord, the Angel of the Covenant, the new covenant, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament, beginning after the fall with the promise of the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15), concludes with the announcement of the coming of the Angel of the Covenant (Mal. 3:1).

Even after the Exile, a faithful remnant remained in Israel (Mal. 3:16). Through the Exile, the nation was purified, turning away from idolatry and images permanently, and placed under the strict discipline of the Law by Ezra and Nehemiah. This period introduced new dangers; a focus on the letter of the Law overshadowed its essence and spirit, and sects such as Phariseism, Sadduceism, and Essenism emerged, each distorting divine revelation to their ends and substituting the fleshly for the spiritual Israel. Yet, even during the four hundred years between Malachi and John the Baptist, God's providential care continued with His people. Israel never regained full political independence after the Exile; it passed from one dominion to another, being successively subject to Persia, Media, Macedonia, Egypt, Syria, and Rome. It was a servant in its own land.

However, this political subjugation deepened Israel's awareness of its unique character and calling. It treasured divine revelation as its highest honor and privilege, taking great care in its collection and preservation. This spiritual consciousness not only shaped Israel's national identity but also fortified it to maintain its distinctiveness under severe persecution. Israel has suffered and been oppressed like no other nation in the world.

Despite this, both within and outside Palestine, Israel remained true to itself. In its Old Testament, it possessed a treasure richer than all the wisdom of the Gentiles. It formed a cosmopolitan community with Jerusalem as its center. Through its synagogues, it offered idolatrous peoples a vision of a religion without images, altars, sacrifices, or priesthood. Everywhere it proclaimed the unity and truthfulness of Israel's God, and it harbored an unquenchable hope of a glorious future, which would bring blessing to all nations. Thus, it prepared the way for Christianity among the pagans. Within its own circle, by God's grace, the multitude of faithful were preserved—those like Simeon and Anna, who quietly awaited the redemption of Israel. Mary, the mother of the Lord, stands as the most glorious example of these pious souls. In her, Israel reaches its culmination, to receive and hold the highest revelation of God with childlike faith. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

Thus, the entire revelation of the Old Testament culminates in Christ, not through a new law, doctrine, or institution, but through the person of Christ Himself. A human being, the Son of Man, is the completed revelation of God; the Son of Man is also God's own begotten Son. The Old and New Testaments do not stand together as

law and gospel, but they relate to each other as promise and fulfillment (Acts 13:12, Rom. 1:2), as shadow and substance (Col. 2:17), as image and reality (Heb. 10:1), as temporal and eternal (Heb. 12:27), as servitude and freedom (Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4). Since Christ is the very substance of Old Testament revelation (John 5:39, 1 Peter 1:11, Rev 19:10), He is also its keystone and crown in the dispensation of the New Covenant. He is the fulfillment of the law and all righteousness (Matt. 3:15, 5:17), of all promises, which in Him are yes and amen (2 Cor. 1:20), of the entire covenant, which is now confirmed in His blood (Matt. 26:28). The people of Israel, with their history, offices, institutions, temple, altar, sacrifices, ceremonies, prophecy, psalmody, and wisdom, find their destination and goal in Him. Christ fulfills all these, first in His person and appearance, and then in His words and works, in His birth and life, in His death and resurrection, in His ascension and sitting at the right hand of God.

Once He has appeared and completed His work, the revelation of God can no longer be supplemented or increased, but only explained and extended to all peoples through the apostolic witness in Scripture. Since Revelation has been completed, the time has come for its contents to become the property of all humanity. Whereas in the Old Testament everything was prepared for Christ, now everything is derived from Him. Christ is the turning point of time. The promise made to Abraham now extends to all nations. The Jerusalem that was below makes way for the Jerusalem that is above and the mother of us all (Gal. 4:26). Israel is replaced by the congregation of all languages and nations. It is now the dispensation of the fullness of time, in which the middle wall of separation is

broken down, Jew and Gentile are created into a new man, and everything is gathered under Christ as Head (Eph. 1:10, 2:14-15).

This dispensation continues until the fullness of the Gentiles comes and Israel shall be saved. When Christ has gathered His church, prepared His bride, and completed His kingdom, He hands it over to the Father, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28). "I will be your God and you shall be My people," that was the substance of the promise; and that promise is perfectly fulfilled in Christ, through Him who was, who is, and who is to come, in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:3).

Questions for Reflection

1. What is the significance of special revelation beginning immediately after the Fall, rather than with Abraham?

- Reflect on how the continuity of God's revelation from the time of Adam to Abraham shapes our understanding of His plan for humanity.

2. How did the confusion of tongues and the dispersion of mankind affect the purity of the knowledge of God?

- Consider the impact of these events on human religious practices and the rise of idolatry and superstition.

3. Why did God choose to establish a covenant with Abraham, and what was the intended purpose of this covenant?

- Discuss the reasons behind God's selection of Abraham and how this covenant was meant to prevent humanity from descending into superstition and unrighteousness.

4. In what ways does the promise to Abraham serve as the foundation for Israel's religion and identity?

- Analyze how the promise "I will be your God and the God of your seed" influences the entire narrative of Israel's history and religion.

5. What role does faith play in the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham and his descendants?

- Reflect on the significance of Abraham's faith and how it exemplifies the relationship between promise and faith in God's plan.

6. How does the giving of the Law at Sinai relate to the promise made to Abraham?

- Consider the relationship between the Law and the promise, and how the Law serves to guide and preserve Israel in light of the promise.

7. What is the dual purpose of the Law according to Paul, and how does it serve the promise?

- Discuss the dual role of the Law in revealing sin and leading to transgressions, as well as its positive role in guiding Israel towards the fulfillment of the promise.

8. How did the prophets in Israel maintain the continuity of God's promise despite the nation's apostasy and idolatry?

- Reflect on the role of the prophets in calling Israel back to the covenant and preserving the hope of the promise amidst widespread disobedience.

9. What is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham, and how is it realized in Christ?

- Analyze how Christ embodies the fulfillment of God's promise and how His person and work are the culmination of the entire Old Testament revelation.

10. How does the New Covenant in Christ extend the promise to all nations, and what implications does this have for the church today?

- Discuss the transition from the Old Covenant with Israel to the New Covenant with all nations, and how this shapes the mission and identity of the Christian church.

7. The Holy Scriptures

In acquainting ourselves with both general and special revelation, we turn to the Holy Scriptures. It is vital to discern the distinction and connection that exist between the two. On the one hand, there is a

significant difference between revelation and Scripture. Revelation often preceded its written account by considerable time; for instance, before Moses, there was revelation, yet no Scripture. Such revelation frequently encompassed far more than what was eventually recorded in writing; the books of the prophets, like Amos, often represent only a brief summary of their spoken messages to their contemporaries. Numerous prophets in the Old Testament and apostles in the New Testament, though all were conduits of special revelation, left nothing in writing; even of Jesus, it is explicitly stated that He did many other signs, so numerous that if each were written down, the world could not contain the books, John 20:30, 21:25. Conversely, there are instances where God revealed something to His prophets and apostles as they wrote, which they had not known beforehand and thus could not have preached, such as the revelation John received on Patmos regarding the future.

Therefore, Scripture is not the revelation itself but the description, the record, through which revelation can be known. However, when we refer to Scripture as the record of revelation, we must be wary of another misconception. Some distinguish between Revelation and Scripture to such an extent that they separate and disassociate them. They concede that God acted in a special manner in the revelation preceding the Scriptures, but then suggest that the recording of this revelation was left entirely to the human authors themselves, without God's special providence. In this view, Scripture remains a record of revelation, but an incidental and imperfect one, causing great difficulty in discerning what does or does not belong to special revelation. From this perspective, a significant distinction is drawn between the Word of God and Holy Scripture, leading to the claim

that Holy Scripture is not the Word of God, but rather that the Word of God is contained within Holy Scripture.

This representation is inherently improbable. Besides adopting a far too mechanical view of the relationship between word and scripture, it overlooks the necessity that if God intended to provide a special revelation meant for all humanity through the seed of Abraham, that is, in Christ, He must also have taken special measures to preserve this revelation unaltered and to make it universally known through the Scriptures. The written word serves this purpose admirably. Unlike the spoken word, which dissipates into the air, the written word remains; it is not corrupted like oral tradition but retains its purity, and it is not confined to a few listeners but can be extended to all peoples and all times. Writing preserves the spoken word, safeguards it from decay, and renders it universal.

We need not dwell any longer on this human reasoning. The notion that special revelation is from God, but that Scripture came into being without His special care, stands in direct opposition to the testimony of Scripture itself. Repeatedly and emphatically, Scripture declares that it is not merely a human record but the very Word of God. While distinct from previous revelation, Scripture is not separate from it. It is not an incidental or imperfect addition to Revelation but a constituent part of it. It serves as the conclusion, the completion, and the cornerstone of God's revealed truth.

To see this clearly, we need only consider the testimonies contained within Scripture itself.

Firstly, God repeatedly instructs the prophets to not only communicate His revelations orally but also to record them in

writing. In Exodus 17:14, Moses is commanded by the Lord to write down the account of the battle against Amalek, which held great significance for Israel. In Exodus 24:3-4, 7, and 34:27, Moses is directed to record the statutes and laws by which God established His covenant with Israel. When Israel completed its wanderings and arrived in the plains of Moab, it is expressly stated that Moses documented the journeys of the children of Israel at the command of the Lord, Numbers 33:2. The Lord also instructed Moses to write down the song in Deuteronomy 32, to serve as a witness against the Israelites in times of apostasy, Deuteronomy 31:19, 22. Similar commands to record revelations are given to later prophets, such as in Isaiah 8:1, 30:8, Jeremiah 25:13, 30:2, 36:2, 27-32, Ezekiel 24:2, Daniel 12:4, and Habakkuk 2:2. Though these directives apply to a portion of Scripture, they underscore that God, who forbids adding to or subtracting from His words, Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32, Proverbs 30:6, has also extended His care to the written record of revelation.

Secondly, Moses and the prophets are acutely aware that their writings are not their own words but the Word of God. Moses is not only called to lead Israel, Exodus 3, but God speaks to him face to face, as a man speaks to his friend, Exodus 33:11, revealing His statutes and commandments. The entire body of Mosaic Law is attributed to the Lord throughout Scripture. God made known His words to Jacob and His statutes to Israel; He has done this for no other nation, Psalm 147:19-20, 103:7. Likewise, the prophets know they are called by the Lord, 1 Samuel 3, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 1-3, Amos 3:7-8, 7:15, and they receive their revelation from Him, Isaiah 5:9, 6:9, 22:14, 28:22, Jeremiah 1:9, 3:6, 20:7-9, Ezekiel 3:16, 26-27, Amos 3:8. Amos's assertion captures their conviction: surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing His secret to His

servants the prophets, Amos 3:7, echoing Genesis 18:17. They understand that in writing, they do not convey their own words but the Word of the Lord. As Moses wrote the laws, they introduce their prophecies with phrases such as: Thus says the Lord, or: The word of the Lord came to me, or: The vision, the word, the burden of the Lord, Isaiah 1:1, 2:1, 8:1, 13:1, Jeremiah 1:2, 4, 11, 2:1, Ezekiel 1:1, 2:1, 3:1, Daniel 7:1, Amos 1:3, 6, 9, etc.

Thirdly, there is the testimony of the New Testament. Jesus and the apostles frequently cite statements from the Old Testament under the names of Moses, Isaiah, David, and Daniel (Matt. 8:4, 15:7, 22:43, 24:15). Equally often, they employ phrases such as: "It is written" (Matt. 4:4), "The Scriptures say" (John 7:38), "God says" (Matt. 12:26), and "The Holy Spirit says" (Heb. 3:7). By using such expressions, they demonstrate that the Scriptures of the Old Covenant, despite being composed of various parts and authored by different individuals, constitute a unified whole with God as their ultimate author. This conviction is not merely implied but is also explicitly affirmed by Jesus and the apostles. Jesus asserts that "Scripture cannot be broken," meaning it cannot be annulled or stripped of its authority (John 10:35). He also declares that He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17, Luke 16:27). The apostle Peter refers to the prophetic word as firm and reliable, a light shining in a dark place. This is because the prophecy contained in the Scriptures was not produced by human will; rather, holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:19-21, cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Similarly, Paul affirms that the holy Scriptures, which comprise the Old Testament, can make one wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. He asserts that all Scripture is God-breathed (theopneustos) and thus

profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

Fourthly, regarding the Scriptures of the New Testament, Jesus Himself did not leave any writings. However, He chose, called, and empowered His apostles, especially after His departure from the world, to serve as His witnesses (Matt. 10:1, Mark 3:13, Luke 6:13, 9:1, John 6:70). He endowed them with special gifts and powers for this purpose (Matt. 10:1, 9, Mark 16:15ff, Acts 2:43, 5:12, Rom. 15:19, 1 Thess. 2:4), particularly with the Holy Spirit, who would remind them of all that Jesus had said and would also reveal future things to them, guiding them into all truth (John 14:26, 16:13). Thus, it is not merely the apostles themselves who testify about Christ; it is the Holy Spirit who acts in and through them as Jesus' witness (John 15:26, 27). Just as the Son came to glorify the Father (John 17:4), so the Holy Spirit comes to glorify the Son, taking from the Son all that He speaks and does (John 16:14).

The apostles were charged to bring the testimony of Christ not only to their own people and contemporaries in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but to all mankind and to the ends of the earth (Mark 16:15, Acts 1:8). While the explicit command to write down their testimony is not directly stated, the promise made to Abraham—intended for all mankind in Christ—implies that the Gospel must be recorded, preserved for all ages, and extended to all nations. Consequently, the apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit in their missionary work, naturally took up the pen and, through the Gospels and epistles, bore witness to the fullness of grace and truth revealed in Christ. They were consciously devoted not only in their oral preaching but also in

their writings to expound the truth which God had revealed in Christ and made known to them through His Spirit.

Matthew pens the genealogy, the history of Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Matt. 1:1). Mark recounts the commencement of the Gospel with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, marking its origin from Him (Mark 1:1). Luke, through diligent investigation and orderly narration, seeks to provide Theophilus with certainty concerning those matters fully affirmed among the faithful by the Apostolic testimony (Luke 1:1-4). John, in his Gospel, aims to instill belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, so that through believing, we may have life in His name (John 20:32). Similarly, in his first letter, John declares what he has seen, heard, looked upon, and handled of the Word of life, that we might have fellowship with the Apostles, and thereby, fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1-3). Paul, fully convinced of his Apostolic calling by Jesus Christ Himself (Gal. 1:1), asserts that he received his Gospel through revelation (Gal. 1:12, Eph. 3:2-8, 1 Tim. 1:12), and proclaims that he preaches the Word of God both orally and by letter (1 Thess. 2:13, 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:14, 1 Cor. 2:4, 10-13, 2 Cor. 2:17). He sternly declares that anyone who preaches another gospel is accursed (Gal. 1:8). Just as all the apostles tied the eternal fate of humanity to the reception or rejection of their word, John, in the final chapter of Revelation, pronounces severe judgment upon anyone who adds to or subtracts from the prophecy of this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

The unique activity of the Holy Spirit, through which the recording of revelation was accomplished, is termed inspiration (2 Tim. 3:16). This concept is elucidated through comparisons with natural phenomena and further scriptural explanations. In general, humans

are capable of receiving thoughts from others and being guided in their thinking by them; all education, instruction, knowledge, and science are grounded in this capability. Typically, this communication occurs through signs, gestures, spoken, or written words, which we consciously and intentionally incorporate into our minds, often with significant effort. However, phenomena such as hypnotism and suggestion demonstrate that ideas and thoughts can be introduced into our consciousness and imposed upon our will and actions without our effort. In such cases, individuals can be reduced to mindless tools, merely executing the commands of another (the hypnotist). Scripture and experience attest that humans are similarly susceptible to the influence and effects of evil spirits, speaking and acting under their control, as seen when the evil spirit, through the possessed person, recognizes Jesus as the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24).

Another phenomenon shedding light on the Holy Spirit's inspiration is the inspiration observed among artists. Great thinkers and poets often experience their best and most beautiful works as not resulting from their efforts, but as thoughts suddenly occurring to them. Such experiences do not negate prior research and thought; rather, genius and inspiration complement effort and diligence.

Yet, although diligent study is often an essential precursor to such profound experiences, they do not necessarily arise as the logical culmination or mature outcome of such efforts. There remains a mysterious and incalculable force at work in genius. Nietzsche, in a letter to his sister, described this phenomenon: "You cannot comprehend the violence of such creations; one is full of passionate enthusiasm, rapture, and tension. One hears and sees nothing, one

takes. The thought strikes like lightning. Everything happens involuntarily to the highest degree, as if in a storm of feeling of freedom, of independence, of power, of divinity; that is my experience of inspiration."

If such phenomena are already present in the ordinary lives of humans or artists, then all objections to the possibility of God's influence upon the thoughts and will of His creatures must be laid to rest. God's Spirit resides in all created things (Genesis 1:3, Ps. 33:6, Ps. 104:30) and particularly in humans, who are enlivened by the breath of the Almighty (Job 33:4, Ps. 139:1-16). "In Him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Even human thought, will, and action—though tainted by sin—remain under God's dominion; nothing transpires outside His foreknowledge and counsel (Eph. 1:11). "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov. 21:1). He weighs the hearts and considers all man's ways (Prov. 5:21, 16:9, 19:21, 21:2).

In a more intimate manner, God’s Spirit dwells within His children; it is by this Spirit that they confess Christ as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3), know the things freely given to them by God (1 Cor. 2:12, 1 John 2:20, 3:24, 4:6-13), are endowed with gifts of wisdom and knowledge (1 Cor. 12:8), and are energized both to will and to act according to His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

These workings of the Spirit in the world and in the church differ from the inspiration granted to the prophets and apostles, but they can help to elucidate the latter. If the Spirit of God indeed dwells and works within all creation, and if that same Spirit dwells especially within God’s children, then there is no rational basis for deeming the

particular activity known as inspiration impossible or improbable. Yet it is crucial to understand the distinction between the Spirit's general working in the world and the church and His specific inspiration of the prophets and apostles. This distinction becomes clear when comparing Romans 8:14 with 2 Peter 1:21. In the former, Paul asserts that all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. In the latter, Peter explains that holy men of God, the prophets, were carried along by the Holy Spirit and thus delivered prophecy. The Spirit's guidance of believers involves enlightening the mind and guiding and controlling the will and affections, thereby enabling them to know, desire, and perform what pleases God. Conversely, the inspiration given to prophets and apostles was a unique impetus, compelling them to reveal God's counsel to humanity.

The nature of this inspiration is further elucidated by the formula frequently employed: what is written in the Old Testament was spoken by the Lord through the prophet (Matt. 1:22, 2:15, 17, 23, 3:3, 4:14). In Greek, the preposition used with "the Lord" indicates Him as the origin of what is spoken; the preposition used with "the prophets" indicates that they are the means, the instruments through which God has spoken. This is even more evident when it is said that God spoke through the mouth of His prophets (Luke 1:70, Acts 1:16, 3:18, 4:25). Thus, Scripture teaches us that God or His Spirit is the actual author or speaker of His word, while the prophets and apostles served as His instruments.

We would, however, greatly misunderstand Scripture if we were to infer from this notion that the prophets and apostles were mere instruments devoid of consciousness or will, serving only as passive conduits in the hand of the Holy Spirit. God always honors His own

creation and never treats His rational creatures as if they were insensible beings. The Scriptures strongly contradict this mechanical conception of inspiration. Although the prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, they themselves spoke (2 Pet. 1:21). The words they wrote are repeatedly cited as their own words, such as in Matt. 22:43, 45, John 1:23, 5:46, Rom. 10:20, etc. In receiving and recording the revelation, they remained fully conscious and engaged. Their own activity was not suppressed but elevated, strengthened, and purified by the impulse of the Spirit. They diligently investigated, as Luke mentions (Luke 1:3), they thought and acted with awareness, and they were not afraid to act. They reflected on and remembered past revelations (John 14:26), used historical sources (Num. 21:14, John 10:13), and found inspiration in their own experiences, as the psalmists did for their songs. In all the writings comprising the Bible, the distinct personalities, development, education, language, and style of the various authors are evident. The study of Scripture reveals not only the one word of God but also the unique characteristics of its human writers. What a difference exists between the books of Kings and Chronicles, between Isaiah and Jeremiah, between Matthew and Luke, between John, Peter, and Paul!

Here again, as in all God's works, diversity emerges from unity and unity from diversity. When God spoke through the prophets and apostles, He employed their entire personalities, which He had shaped Himself, making them the self-conscious and self-operating instruments of His inspiration. This inspiration, therefore, bore no mechanical, but an organic character.

In this view of inspiration, we can fully appreciate the human aspect of Scripture. The Bible did not descend from the sky all at once but came into being gradually. The Old Testament, as we use it, contains thirty-nine books: five books of law, twelve historical books (Joshua to Esther), five poetical books (Job to Song of Songs), and seventeen prophetic books. This order is not chronological; for instance, many historical books like Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are of much later date than many poetic and prophetic books, and among the prophetic books, some shorter ones like Joel, Obadiah, Amos, and Hosea are older than the larger books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The order groups similar books together. The genesis of all these books occurred gradually over many centuries, under varied circumstances, through the labors of diverse men.

In theology, a special discipline investigates the circumstances under which a certain book of the Bible was written, by whom, and to whom it was addressed. Because of the misuse of this discipline, it has acquired an unfavorable reputation, and it is often said that the critics have "torn out page after page from the Bible." But misuse does not negate the proper use. For a proper understanding of Scripture as a whole and of each of its parts, it is crucial to know precisely how it came into being over time and under what circumstances each book was written. This knowledge ultimately benefits the interpretation of the Word of God. It teaches us that the inspiration of God's Spirit profoundly influenced the lives and thoughts of His holy men.

For centuries, up to the time of Moses, there existed no Scripture, no penned Word of God, or at least no record of such is known to us. It is entirely plausible, however, that even before Moses, some records

of significant words or events pivotal to the history of special revelation might have been documented and later incorporated into his books.

This suggestion might once have been dismissed as fanciful, owing to a belief that the art of writing had not been discovered by the time of Moses. Yet, contemporary discoveries in Babylon and Egypt have enlightened us greatly, revealing that the art of writing was not only known but also extensively utilized long before Moses. We are aware of historical and legal documents written centuries before him, supporting the notion that Moses could have employed older written sources to compose his narratives and laws. The account in Genesis 14, for instance, might well derive from such a written tradition.

Despite these possibilities, we possess no definitive evidence of written scriptures prior to Moses. Nonetheless, this does not imply an absence of the Word of God since special revelation commenced immediately post-fall, thereby establishing a canon—a rule of faith and life. Humanity has always been endowed not only with the general revelation of God through nature and conscience but also with His special revelation through word and deed. Initially, this Word of God was transmitted orally from one generation to the next within families. In an era when human society was smaller, life spans longer, and familial and ancestral respect profoundly more significant than today, such oral tradition sufficed for preserving and transmitting God's Word purely.

However, as humanity grew and diverged into various forms of idolatry and superstition, mere oral tradition became inadequate. Thus, with Moses, we see the advent of the written Word of God.

While it is plausible that Moses might have utilized existing documents, which he then compiled and edited—since direct references to Moses' own writings are sparse within the Pentateuch—this remains speculative. But it is conceivable that parts of the Pentateuch predated Moses or were subsequently edited and expanded upon either by him, under his directive, or by others posthumously. This was widely accepted regarding the description of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34, and considering additions such as those in Genesis 12:6, 13:7, and 36:31, this view could extend to other sections as well.

Such potential origins detract not from the Divine authority of these texts. Scripture repeatedly refers to the law or the book of Moses (e.g., 1 Kings 2:3, 2 Kings 14:6, Malachi 4:4, Mark 12:26, Luke 24:27, 44, John 5:46, 47) even if some passages might have been derived from other sources, dictated by Moses' assistants, or later revised in his doctrinal spirit by subsequent writers. Similarly, Paul often dictated his epistles, evident in passages like 1 Corinthians 16:21. And the Psalms, while traditionally attributed to David as he founded the psalmody, include works by other authors, emphasizing that a collection's association with a foundational figure does not necessitate his authorship of every part.

On the foundation of Mosaic legislation—that is, the covenant God established with the patriarchs, reaffirmed with Israel at Sinai, and inscribed in the Law of Moses—there emerged, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, three distinct kinds of sacred literature in the history of Israel: prophecy, psalmody, and wisdom literature. These divine gifts of the Holy Spirit complemented the natural endowments of the Semitic race and especially the people of Israel. They transcended

these natural gifts, being consecrated to the service of the Kingdom of God and intended for the edification of humanity at large.

Prophecy commenced even with Abraham, as evidenced in Genesis 18:17, 20:7, Amos 3:7, and Psalm 105:15, continued with Jacob (Genesis 49), Moses (Numbers 11:25, Deuteronomy 18:18, 34:10, Hosea 12:14), and Miriam (Exodus 15:20, Numbers 12:2). However, it particularly flourished through and after Samuel, persisting throughout Israel's history until long after the exile. The Hebrew Old Testament divides the books of the prophets into two major groups: the "former" and the "latter" prophets. The "former" prophets include the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books are so named because they were authored by prophets and document the activities of earlier prophets.

Thus, there were many more prophets in Israel beyond the four major prophets and the twelve minor prophets whose books are preserved in our Bible. The aforementioned historical books are replete with the names of prophets, detailing their actions at length. They recount the lives of Deborah, Samuel, Gad, Nathan, Ahijah, Shemaiah, Azariah, Hanani, Jehu son of Hanani, Elijah, Elisha, Huldah, Zechariah (the first martyr among the prophets of Judah), and numerous others, some unnamed (e.g., 2 Chronicles 25). Of these prophets, none left scriptural records that have survived to us. There is even mention of prophetic schools (1 Samuel 10:5-12, 19:19-20; 2 Kings 2:3, 5; 4:38-43; 6:1), where many sons or disciples of the prophets engaged in spiritual exercises and theocratic labor. These schools likely contributed to the prophetic historiography preserved in the books of Joshua, Judges, and others. Particularly in the books

of Chronicles, historical writings by prophets are mentioned multiple times (1 Chronicles 29:29; 2 Chronicles 9:29; 20:34, etc.).

The prophets whose activities are chronicled in the historical books are often referred to today as prophets of action, to distinguish them from the later writing prophets. This distinction, while not incorrect, must be understood in the context that all prophets, whether early or later, were prophets of the word. They all spoke and bore witness; their Hebrew name, nabi, likely indicates this (Exodus 4:16, 7:1). The fundamental aspects of prophetic preaching are already evident in the testimonies of the earliest prophets. However, the prophets of the earlier period differed from the later ones in two main respects: First, their focus was confined to the internal affairs of the people of Israel, excluding other nations from their purview. Second, they concentrated more on the present than the future, with their exhortations and warnings often aimed at immediate, practical concerns. This period, which spanned the reigns of David and Solomon and continued for some time thereafter, was characterized by the hope that Israel would adhere to God's covenant and walk in His ways.

In the ninth century B.C., when Israel began to entangle itself in foreign politics and, forsaking its unique calling and destiny, succumbed to external influences, the prophets shifted their gaze to the nations surrounding Israel. They no longer anticipated the complete fulfillment of God's promises in the current apostate age but looked forward to a Messianic future orchestrated by God Himself. Positioned on their watchtowers, these prophets surveyed the breadth and length of the earth. They interpreted the signs of the times not through their own wisdom but by the illumination of the

Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 1:4, 2 Pet. 1:20-21), testing all circumstances within Israel's religious, moral, political, and social spheres, as well as its interactions with other nations such as Edom, Moab, Asshur, Chaldaea, and Egypt, against the central covenant that Jehovah maintained with His people. In this way, each prophet, according to his own nature and era, proclaimed the unalterable word of God. They exposed Israel's sins and declared God's impending judgments, offered comfort with the assurance of His steadfast covenant and the promise of forgiveness, and directed all eyes to the joyous future when God, through a king from David's house, would extend His dominion over Israel and all nations.

This prophetic word thus acquired a significance that transcended the immediate present. It was no longer confined to ancient Israel but contained a universal scope, pointing towards fulfillment in the entirety of humanity. Beginning in the ninth century B.C., from the times of Joel or Obadiah, prophets began committing their oracles to writing, sometimes at God's explicit command (Isa. 8:1, Hab. 2:2, Isa. 30:8), with the clear intention that these words endure until the last day, to be validated by future generations (Isa. 34:16).

Parallel to prophecy runs psalmody, which also dates back to ancient times. Song and music were beloved in Israel (1 Sam. 18:7, 2 Sam. 19:35, Am. 6:5). Historical books preserve various songs on diverse subjects: the song of the sword (Gen. 4:23-24), the song of the well (Num. 21:17-18), the song of the conquest of Hesbon (Num. 21:27-30), the song of the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 15), the song of Moses (Deut. 32), the song of Deborah (Judges 5), the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2), David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1), and his lament for Abner (2 Sam. 3:33-34). The Book of the

Righteous, referenced in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18, likely contained many songs. Additionally, numerous songs are found within the prophetic writings, such as the song of the vineyard (Isa. 5), the song of mockery for the fallen king of Babylon (Isa. 14), the psalm of Hezekiah (Isa. 38:9ff), Jonah's prayer (Jonah 2), and the hymn of Habakkuk.

Many of these songs closely relate to the psalms and often blend seamlessly with them. There exists an intimate connection between prophecy and psalmody, even reflected in their forms; both are born from the powerful inspiration of the Holy Spirit, encompass the whole world of nature and history, view all things in the light of God's word, aim to proclaim the Messianic kingdom, and employ the language and form of poetry. When the psalmist is granted insight into God's counsels, he becomes a seer; when the prophet renews his spirit with God's promises, he adopts the tone of the psalms (1 Chron. 25:1-3). Asaph is called a seer (2 Chron. 29:30), and David is referred to as a prophet (Acts 2:30).

Yet there remains a distinction. The psalmody was nurtured by the aforementioned songs, notably the song of Miriam (Exod. 15), the song of Moses (Deut. 32), and the psalm of Moses (Ps. 90). However, it reached its zenith in David, the beloved psalmist of Israel (2 Sam. 23:1), following the revival of the service of Jehovah under Samuel. Davidic psalmody set the foundational forms for subsequent psalmody under Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and during and after the exile. In the superscription of Ps. 72, the psalms of David are collectively referred to as "prayers," indicating their fundamental nature. Though psalms vary—being hymns of praise and thanksgiving, laments, or supplications—they are invariably

characterized by a prayerful disposition. While prophecy often involves the Spirit overpowering an individual, the same Spirit leads the psalmist into the depths of personal soul experiences. The psalmist's state of mind, shaped by the Spirit of the Lord, forms the basis of his song.

David's status as the "sweet singer of Israel" is deeply rooted in his character and rich life experiences. His emotional states—encompassing sadness, fear, temptation, persecution, and resurrection—serve as the strings upon which God's objective words and deeds play their melodies. The harmony achieved between God's objective revelation and His subjective guidance is expressed in the psalmist's song, sung in God's presence and to His glory, inviting all creatures to join in His praise until heaven and earth unite in song. The Psalms thus become timeless expressions of the deepest soul experiences in connection with God's revelation in Christ. They were not only spoken by the psalmists but also inscribed, becoming the prayers of the congregation throughout the ages.

Alongside prophecy and psalmody stands "chokmah," the wisdom literature. This wisdom, rooted in natural gifts, is exemplified by Jotham's fable (Judges 9:7), Samson's riddle (Judges 14:14), Nathan's parable (2 Sam. 12), and the counsel of the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam. 14). However, it attained its sanctified character primarily through Solomon (1 Kings 4:29-34, Prov. 10-22, 25-29), continuing in the Proverbs of other sages (Prov. 22:17, 30-31) and in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs, extending well beyond the exile. Prophecy unfolds God's counsel in Israel's and the nations' history; psalmody interprets the spiritual resonance of this divine counsel in the devout soul; wisdom literature (chokmah)

relates divine counsel to practical life. This wisdom literature, grounded in the divine revelation that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7), applies revelation to daily life—husband and wife, parents and children, friendship, business, and social interactions. While it does not reach the prophetic heights or descend into the depths of psalmody, it addresses the vicissitudes of life, providing faith in the justice of God's providence, thus acquiring universal human significance and being preserved in Scripture for all time under the guidance of the Spirit.

Revelation—the Law, the counsel of God, initially encapsulated in the books of Moses—is brought to completion in the Old Testament through the preaching of the prophet, the song of the psalmist, and the wisdom of the sage. The prophet serves as the head, the psalmist as the heart, and the sage as the hand.

In the Old Covenant, the prophetic, priestly, and royal ministries executed their divine mandate for Israel and for mankind. In Christ, this invaluable treasure of sacred literature has become the common inheritance of the entire world.

As the fulfillment accords with the promise, so the Scriptures of the New Testament harmonize with those of the Old Covenant. Each is incomplete without the other; the Old Testament is fully revealed in the New, and the New Testament is already enfolded in the Old by its core and essence. They relate to each other as pedestal to statue, lock to key, shadow to body. The names Old and New Testament initially denoted the two dispensations of the covenant of grace, granted by God to His people before and after Christ, as seen in Jeremiah 31:31ff, 2 Corinthians 3:6ff, Hebrews 8:6ff. Over time, these terms

were extended to the scriptures that describe and account for these two covenantal dispensations. In Exodus 24:7, the law, which proclaimed God's covenant with Israel, was already termed the book of the covenant, cf. 2 Kings 23:2, and Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:14 refers to a reading of the Old Testament, meaning the books of the Old Covenant. Following these examples, the word Testament gradually came to refer to the writings or books contained in the Bible, which elucidate the old and new dispensations of grace.

The New Testament, like the Old, is comprised of multiple books: five historical (the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles), twenty-one doctrinal (the Epistles of the Apostles), and one prophetic book (the Revelation of John). Yet, while the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament were composed over more than a thousand years, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament were all written within the latter half of the first century A.D.

The Gospels hold the first place in the New Testament, a precedence of substance rather than chronology. Although many of the Apostolic Epistles are older, the Gospels stand foremost because they address the person and work of Christ, forming the foundation for all subsequent apostolic endeavors. The term Gospel originally signified a pleasant, joyful message; by the New Testament era, it specifically referred to the joyful message proclaimed by Jesus the Christ, as noted in Mark. Later ecclesiastical writers like Ignatius and Justin extended this term to the books or writings that contained that joyful message of Christ.

Four such Gospels are positioned at the forefront of our New Testament. However, these four writings do not present four distinct

gospels or glad tidings, for there is but one Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as affirmed in Mark 1:1 and Galatians 1:6-8. This one Gospel, this singular glad tidings of salvation, is depicted in four distinct narratives, by four distinct authors, from four distinct perspectives. This concept is reflected in the headings above our Gospels. They are identified as the one Gospel, but according to the four distinct descriptions of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This phrasing does not suggest that our four Gospels were not genuinely written by these four men, but rather emphasizes that in the four Gospels, the one Gospel, the one portrait of the person and work of Christ, is rendered from different vantage points. Thus, the early church likened the four Evangelists to the four cherubim in Revelation 4:7: Matthew with the man, Mark with the lion, Luke with the ox, and John with the eagle. For the first Evangelist depicted Christ in His humanity, the second in His prophetic office, the third in His priestly role, and the fourth in His divinity.

Matthew, also known as Levi the tax collector, was chosen by Christ to join the ranks of the apostles, as noted in Matthew 9:9 and Mark 2:14. According to the early church father Irenaeus, Matthew initially composed his Gospel in Aramaic, targeting the Jewish Christians in Palestine around 62 A.D. His aim was to demonstrate that Jesus was indeed the Christ, fulfilling all the prophecies of the Old Testament, as declared in Matthew 1:1.

Mark, the son of Mary (Acts 12:12), likely had his residence in Jerusalem. Initially a companion of Paul and later of Peter (1 Peter 5:13), tradition holds that the Christians in Rome urged him to recount the origins of the Gospel through Jesus Christ. Mark, being intimately acquainted with these events due to his time in Jerusalem

and his close association with Peter, likely penned his Gospel in Rome between 64 and 67 A.D., encapsulating this knowledge in his narrative (Mark 1:1).

Luke, affectionately referred to as the beloved physician by Paul (Colossians 4:14), is thought to have hailed from Antioch, becoming an early member of the church there around 40 A.D. He accompanied and collaborated with Paul, remaining steadfastly loyal to him until the end (2 Timothy 4:11). Luke authored a historical account, not only of Christ's life and ministry in his Gospel but also of the early spread of the Gospel across Palestine, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome in the Acts of the Apostles, dedicating these works to a certain Theophilus, a man of notable standing who showed great interest in the Gospel. These writings were likely completed between 70 and 75 A.D.

The first three Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—share a close relationship, preserving the tradition upheld by the initial disciples concerning Jesus' teachings and life. The fourth Gospel, however, stands apart in its character. John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, remained in Jerusalem after Christ's ascension and, along with James and Peter, was regarded as one of the pillars of the early church (Galatians 2:9). Eventually, John left Jerusalem and, towards the end of his life, settled in Ephesus, succeeding Paul. During the reign of Emperor Domitian around 95-96 A.D., John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he later died a martyr around 100 A.D.

John did not engage prominently in missionary endeavors or in founding new churches. His primary concern was preserving the existing churches in the pure knowledge of the truth. By the end of

the first century, the church's context had shifted. The early conflicts regarding the relationship between the Christian community and Judaism, particularly concerning the Law and circumcision, had subsided. The church, having established its independence from Judaism, was increasingly interacting with the Greco-Roman world and encountering emerging ideologies, notably early Gnosticism.

John's purpose in his later writings, dating from 80 to 95 A.D., was to guide the church through these anti-Christian threats, particularly those denying the incarnation of the Word (1 John 2:22, 4:3). In contrast to these heretical views, John elaborated on the full reality of Christ as the Word made flesh. His Gospel underscores that Christ embodied this reality during His earthly ministry; his Epistles affirm that Christ continues to be such within the church; and Revelation proclaims that Christ will remain so in the future.

All these New Testament writings, thus far discussed, have come into being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is equally true for the other epistles penned by Paul and Peter, as well as those by James and Jude. Following Jesus' ascension and the subsequent persecution of the Jerusalem congregation, the apostles went forth to preach the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles, yet they did not sever their fellowship and interaction with the congregations that had sprung up through their ministry.

They received both oral and written reports concerning the spiritual state of these congregations, took a profound interest in their well-being, and felt the weight of the care of all the churches upon their apostolic hearts, as Paul testifies in 2 Corinthians 11:28. They felt compelled, therefore, to visit these congregations whenever possible

or to address their needs through letters, offering admonition, comfort, warning, or encouragement, thereby further instructing them in the truths of godliness.

Like all their apostolic endeavors, this written work—integral to their ministry—had a foundational character. The Gospels and Epistles of the Apostles, akin to the writings of the prophets, though prompted by specific occasions, transcend the immediate and local concerns of their initial audiences. They speak to the church universal and for all ages.

Every Scripture, despite its historical context, is, as St. Augustine aptly described, a letter sent by God from heaven to His congregation on earth. Far from diminishing the divine nature of Scripture, historical inquiry into the origins of the biblical books, when conducted properly, reveals the marvelous means by which God has fashioned this masterpiece.

This investigation into the origins of the biblical books is but the beginning of the study of Scripture. A whole array of sciences has gradually developed around Scripture, all aimed at attaining a deeper understanding of its meaning and message. It is necessary here to make some observations about these sciences.

Firstly, the various books of the Bible did not only come into existence individually; they were also gathered and compiled into a canon—a definitive list or collection of writings that serve as the rule of faith and life. This process of collection had already begun with some books of the Bible; for instance, the Psalms and the Proverbs were composed by different authors and later compiled into one volume. The same process occurred later with all the books of the

Bible. This compilation should not be misconstrued to suggest that the Church created the canon or conferred canonical authority upon the writings of the prophets and apostles. From the moment these writings were penned, they possessed authority within the Church, serving as the rule of faith and life. The Word of God, whether unwritten or written, derives its authority not from men or the faithful, but from God, who Himself oversees it and brings it to recognition.

But when, in the fullness of time, the number of prophetic and apostolic writings increased, and other writings began to emerge that did not originate from true prophets or apostles but were falsely attributed to them, it became necessary for the Church to discern the genuine, canonical books from the spurious, apocryphal, or pseudepigraphical writings. This discernment was undertaken both for the books of the Old Testament before the coming of Christ and for the writings of the New Covenant in the fourth century after Christ. A specialized field of study emerged, meticulously examining these matters to illuminate the canonicity of the Scriptures.

Secondly, it is a solemn truth that the original manuscripts penned by the prophets and apostles themselves have all perished. What we possess now are merely copies. The oldest extant copies of the Old Testament date back to the ninth and tenth centuries, while those of the New Testament date to the fourth and fifth centuries. Between the original autographs and these extant copies lie many centuries during which the text has undergone a history of transmission, often subject to minor or significant variations.

For instance, the original Hebrew manuscripts lacked vowel points, punctuation marks, and inscriptions; these were only added in subsequent centuries. The chapter divisions as we know them today were introduced in the early thirteenth century, and the division into verses appeared in the mid-sixteenth century. Therefore, there exists a necessary science devoted to establishing the original text using every available means, which then serves as the foundation for sound exegesis.

Thirdly, the Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. As soon as the Bible was disseminated among peoples unfamiliar with these languages, the need for translation arose. By the third century B.C., a translation of the Old Testament into Greek had begun, known as the Septuagint. Subsequently, translations of both the Old and New Testaments continued into many ancient and later into modern languages. Following the resurgence of missionary activity among the Gentiles in the nineteenth century, this work was fervently renewed, resulting in the Scriptures being translated, in whole or in part, into nearly four hundred languages. The study of these translations, especially the ancient ones, is crucial for the correct understanding of the Scriptures, as every translation inherently involves interpretation.

Fourthly, from the days of the Jewish people to the present age, and not least in our own time, an immense amount of care and effort has been dedicated to the exposition of the Scriptures. While it is true that every heretic finds support for his views and many interpretations reflect personal biases, the history of biblical exegesis reveals a remarkable progress, with each century contributing its

own insights. Ultimately, it is God Himself who, through all human errors and wanderings, sustains His Word and makes His thoughts prevail over the wisdom of the world.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the distinction between revelation and Scripture help us understand the purpose and nature of the Bible?

- Reflect on the significance of revelation preceding its written account and how this affects our view of Scripture as the record of God's revelation.

2. What are the implications of viewing Scripture as not just a human record but the very Word of God?

- Consider how this understanding influences our approach to reading, interpreting, and applying the Bible in our lives.

3. Why did God instruct prophets and apostles to write down His revelations, and what purpose does the written word serve?

- Discuss the advantages of the written word over oral tradition in preserving and spreading God's revelation.

4. In what ways did the prophets and apostles demonstrate their awareness that their writings were the Word of God?

- Reflect on specific examples from Scripture where prophets and apostles acknowledged the divine origin of their messages.

5. How do Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament affirm the authority and unity of the Old Testament Scriptures?

- Analyze the ways in which Jesus and the apostles referenced and interpreted the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God.

6. What role did the Holy Spirit play in the inspiration and writing of the New Testament Scriptures?

- Consider the significance of the Holy Spirit's guidance in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the apostolic writings.

7. How does the concept of inspiration relate to the unique contributions of the human authors of the Bible?

- Discuss how the distinct personalities, styles, and experiences of the biblical authors were used by God in the process of inspiration.

8. Why is it important to understand the historical context and development of the biblical canon?

- Reflect on how knowledge of the canon's formation aids in our appreciation of the Bible's authority and coherence.

9. What challenges and methods are involved in establishing the original text of the Scriptures from existing copies?

- Explore the significance of textual criticism and the efforts to preserve the integrity of the biblical text.

10 . How have translations and interpretations of the Bible impacted its accessibility and understanding across different cultures and languages?

- Consider the importance of translations and the role of biblical exegesis in making Scripture understandable and relevant to diverse audiences.

8. Scripture and Confession

In the era of the apostles and the subsequent generations, myriad disputes arose regarding the essence of Christianity and its relationship to both Judaism and paganism. Yet, it is profoundly remarkable to witness the unanimity with which the Scriptures were universally acknowledged as the Word of God throughout the Christian Church.

This acknowledgment pertains primarily to the Old Testament. In the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, continual references and appeals were made to these Scriptures. Naturally and seamlessly, the authority of the Old Testament transitioned from the Jewish synagogue to the Christian ecclesia through the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. The Gospel carried the Old Testament with it, and it could not be received or recognized independently. The Gospel is the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament, without which it

would be devoid of foundation, and the Old Testament serves as the bedrock upon which the Gospel stands, the root from which it has sprung. Whenever the Gospel was embraced in any place, the Scriptures of the Old Testament were concurrently accepted as the Word of God, without dissent or contradiction. Hence, the New Testament Church has never existed without a Bible; from its inception, it possessed the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets.

Soon, the apostolic writings were appended to these Scriptures. Some of these writings, such as the Gospels and the General Epistles, were intended for the universal Church; others, like various Epistles, were addressed to specific congregations in cities like Rome, Corinth, and Colossae.

It is evident that these writings, originating from apostles and apostolic men, were held in high regard from the outset by Christian congregations. They were read in assemblies and circulated to other congregations for communal reading. The apostle Paul himself urged that the epistle he wrote to the Colossians be read in the church at Laodicea and that the Colossians also familiarize themselves with the letter he wrote from Laodicea, likely referring to the letter to the Ephesians (Col. 4:16). In 2 Peter 3:15-16, Peter not only mentions a letter received from Paul but also references other epistles by Paul, which echo the doctrine Peter himself espouses, though they contain complexities that the unlearned and unstable might distort. While this does not imply that a complete collection of Paul's letters existed at that time, it clearly indicates that Paul's writings were widely known beyond the local congregations to which they were specifically addressed. In those early days, the churches primarily derived their

understanding of the Gospel from the oral teachings of the apostles and their emissaries.

But when the apostles and their immediate successors passed from this life, and their preaching ceased, the value of the apostolic writings naturally increased. From testimonies around the middle of the second century, we learn that the Gospels, and later the Epistles, were regularly read in the assembly of the faithful, quoted as authoritative proof of various truths, and were esteemed on par with the writings of the Old Testament. By the end of the second century, the writings of the New Testament, together with those of the Old Testament, were regarded as "the whole Scripture," "the foundation and pillar of our faith," and as the Scriptures regularly read in religious assemblies (Irenaeus, Clemens Alexandrinus, Tertullianus). There was prolonged debate about whether certain writings (Hebrews, James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Revelation of John, Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas, etc.) should be included among the Holy Scriptures. Yet, clarity and unanimity gradually emerged. The universally recognized writings were collected under the name of the canon (rule of truth or faith), and at the synods of Laodicea in 360, Hippo Regius in 393, and Carthage in 397, they were formally listed and established as such.

These Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments constitute the foundation of prophets and apostles, upon which all Christian churches, in communion with one another, position themselves, or at least claim to do so. Every church has officially acknowledged the divine authority of these Scriptures in their confessions and accepted them as a reliable rule of faith and life. This dogma has never been a matter of contention or dispute among Christian churches; the

challenges to Scripture as the Word of God have traditionally come from outside, such as from heathen philosophers like Celsus and Porphyry in the second century, and only began to arise within Christendom in the eighteenth century.

However, the church has not received this Scripture from God to rest idly upon it, much less to bury this treasure in the ground. On the contrary, it is called to preserve, interpret, proclaim, apply, translate, disseminate, praise, and defend this Word of God; in essence, to make the thoughts of God, as contained in the Scriptures, prevail over the thoughts of men everywhere and at all times. All the activity to which the congregation is called is a labor on and a ministry of the Word of God. It is the ministry of the Word of God when it is preached, declared, and applied in the assembly of the faithful, when it is dispensed in the signs of the covenant and enforced in the discipline. But the service of the Word in a broader sense also entails its application, elaboration, and dominion in one's own heart and life, in profession and business, in home and workplace, in science and art, in state and society, in works of mercy and mission, in all aspects and directions of life. The church must be a pillar and firm ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), that is, a pillar and foundation that upholds the truth, not in itself—for the truth rests in God—but that upholds, maintains, and confirms the truth here on earth before the world. If the Church neglects this duty, it forfeits its calling and undermines its own existence.

As soon as the church begins to fulfill its calling, however, differences of opinion about the meaning of God's Word inevitably arise. Though the Holy Spirit has been promised and given to the church as a guide into all truth, neither the church as a whole nor its particular

members are endowed with the gift of infallibility. Already in the apostolic congregations, various errors emerged, originating either from Judaism or Paganism. Throughout the centuries, these have been the two pitfalls perpetually threatening the congregation, which it must avoid with utmost vigilance and prudence.

In the face of these errors, both from the right and the left, the church of Christ is compelled to declare resolutely and clearly the truth entrusted to it by God in His Word. The church does this by convening in smaller and larger assemblies (synods) and there determining what, in one matter or another, it is convinced is the divine truth and thus the doctrine of the church. The truth laid down in Scripture naturally leads to a confession by everyone who believes and embraces it. Confession is the calling of all believers and also the impulse of their hearts; whoever truly believes, with all his heart and soul, cannot but confess, that is, testify to the truth that has set him free, and to the hope that has been planted in his heart by that truth. Every believer and every congregation, as they bear the witness of the Holy Spirit within them, testify that God's Word is the truth. As error assumes subtler forms, the congregation must, with increasing diligence, account for the content of the truth it professes, and express in clear and unambiguous terms what it believes. Thus, oral confession necessarily evolves into written confession (symbol, confession).

There have been objections from various quarters against the drafting and handing down of such ecclesiastical confessions. The Remonstrants in this country, for instance, argued that a confession contradicted the exclusive authority of the Holy Scriptures, deprived the conscience of its freedom, and hindered the growth of

knowledge. But these objections stem from misunderstanding; the confessions do not diminish the Scriptures but uphold them and safeguard them against individual arbitrariness; they do not violate but support the freedom of conscience against all kinds of erroneous spirits, who seek to mislead weak and ignorant souls; and they do not impede the development of knowledge but preserve and direct it on the right path, and they can always be legitimately examined and revised in light of the Scriptures as the only rule of faith.

The Apostles' Creed (the 12 Articles) is the oldest symbol. Although it was not composed by the apostles, it originated at the beginning of the second century, developing from the Trinitarian baptismal commandment given by Christ Himself, Matt. 28:19. Originally, it was somewhat shorter than it is today, but the fundamental structure was the same; it was a brief enumeration of the great facts on which Christianity rests, and as such, it remains the common basis and the indissoluble bond of all Christendom. To this apostolic symbol should be added four other confessions of an ecumenical (general) character, which are adopted by many churches: the confession of the Council at Nicea in 325; the confession which, in Article 9 of our Dutch Confession of Faith, is referred to as the Nicene Creed, but which, although it incorporates the Nicene Creed, expands upon it and only came into being somewhat later; next, the creed of the Council of Chalcedon in 451; and finally, the creed of Athanasius, which is mistakenly attributed to him, and which is also accepted as a symbol in Article 9 of the Confession of the Netherlands.

In all these creeds, the doctrine of Christ and the Trinity is expounded. This was the focal point of the great controversies in the early centuries. "What do you think of the Christ?" That was the

paramount question the congregation had to answer for itself and to the entire world, grounded in the Word of the Lord.

On the Jewish side, there were those willing to acknowledge Jesus as a man, sent by God, endowed with extraordinary gifts, animated by the prophetic spirit, powerful in words and deeds, yet no more than a man. On the Pagan side, some viewed Jesus as a son of the gods, a divine manifestation who descended from heaven, much like the angels in the Old Testament, appearing on earth briefly and taking on a semblance of a body; but they refused to confess Him as the only begotten of the Father, truly incarnate. Confronting these heresies, the church had to uphold, in accordance with Scripture, both the true divinity of Christ as the only begotten Son of God and His true incarnation in the flesh. After prolonged struggle, she articulated this in the aforementioned creeds and, with the Apostle John, denounced as anti-Christian any doctrine that denied the Son of God's incarnation, 1 Jn 2:18, 22, 4:2, 3. By doing so, the Christian Church preserved the essence and core, the very unique nature of the Christian faith. Hence, the councils and synods that accomplished this monumental task hold fundamental significance for all Christendom. The facts of Christianity enumerated in the Apostles' Creed and the doctrines concerning the person of Christ and the triune nature of God foster a unity among Christian churches against Judaism and Paganism, a unity that, despite their sad divisions, should never be forgotten or overlooked.

Yet, on this common ground, various disagreements and schisms soon emerged. The practice of discipline led to the separations of Montanism (second half of the 2nd century), Novatianism (mid-3rd century), and Donatism (4th century). More serious was the gradual

schism between the Church in the East and that in the West. Various factors contributed to this: primarily, the aversion between Greeks and Latins, the rivalry between Constantinople and Rome, and the conflict for supremacy between the Patriarchs and the Pope.

Additionally, there were many minor doctrinal and liturgical differences, the most significant being the Greek Church's confession that the Holy Spirit did not proceed from the Father and the Son (filioque), as taught in the West, but only from the Father. The separation, which had intermittently occurred, reached a climax in 1054. The Eastern Church, which prefers to call itself Orthodox, believing it has remained more faithful to the teachings of the ancient Church than Rome, suffered significant losses due to various sects (Armenian Christians; Nestorians in Syria; Thomas Christians in Persia; Monophysite Jacobites in Syria and Copts in Egypt; Maronites in Lebanon), which separated from it, and especially due to the rise of Mohammedanism, which in 1453 even conquered Constantinople.

On the other hand, the Orthodox Church gained significantly through the conversion of the Slavs, and today persists in Greece, Turkey, Russia, and smaller nations such as Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania. Yet, in Russia, its stability is threatened by the emergence of numerous and diverse sects. Like the state, the church finds itself in a profound crisis.

In the West, the power of the Catholic Church, under the leadership of the bishops of Rome, expanded progressively through the centuries. Following a prolonged period of persecution and defamation, the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity

heralded an era of peace, privilege, and prestige. Despite increasing secularization, the church made notable contributions from Constantine's conversion until the Reformation. Just as she combated and overcame paganism in the early centuries, she later worked diligently for the conversion of the European peoples and the advancement of civilization. She upheld the core truths of Christianity and defended the church's independence with commendable steadfastness, significantly contributing to the development of Christian art and science. However, despite her merits, it is undeniable that in her quest for expansion and power, she often diverged from the path laid by original, apostolic Christianity. This is particularly evident in three areas.

First, the Catholic Church increasingly elevated tradition to an independent rule of faith alongside, above, and even against Scripture. Many Roman doctrines and practices, such as the Mass, clerical celibacy, the veneration of saints, and the immaculate conception of Mary, lack scriptural substantiation but are upheld based on tradition. Although it is claimed that this tradition includes "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all," ultimately, it is the pope who decides whether something constitutes tradition.

Thus, Rome has inverted the entire relationship between Scripture and Church. In Rome's view, Scripture is not necessary but merely useful for the Church, whereas the Church is deemed necessary for Scripture. The Scriptures hold no authority apart from the Church, which asserts their credibility; they are inherently obscure and become clear only through the Church's interpretation; they do not precede nor form the foundation of the Church, but rather the Church is primary and is the foundation upon which the Scriptures

rest. Although the prophets and apostles were endowed with the gift of inspiration, the pope too, when speaking "ex cathedra," in his papal capacity, is believed to enjoy special support and guidance from the Spirit, rendering him infallible. Consequently, the Church is considered self-sufficient, even in the absence of the Scriptures; it is viewed as the one true and perfect agent of salvation, possessing and dispensing all the benefits of grace through the sacraments; it is perceived as the preeminent agent of grace, the state, and kingdom of God on earth.

Secondly, the Catholic Church has muddled the essence of the Gospel, namely, God's free grace and the justification of sinners by faith alone, devoid of works of the law. If not wholly lost, this core has been tainted with very impure elements, thereby confounding the distinction between law and Gospel. This corruption of the original Gospel began in the early centuries but later intensified and received official endorsement. In the struggle between Augustine and Pelagius, a battle that continues in principle to this day, the Roman Church, especially post-Reformation, has increasingly sided with the latter—not in name but in practice. While God grants the power to convert and persevere in conversion to those who hear the Gospel, the will and accomplishment ultimately depend on man. Man must gain entry to the kingdom of God through good works.

In Rome, these good works fall into two major categories: works to maintain the ordinary commandments applicable to all, and works to accomplish the counsels added by Christ to these commandments (celibacy, poverty, and obedience). The first way is good, but the second is better, more arduous, yet shorter and safer. The former is for laymen, the latter for monks and nuns. Those who tread this path

of good works receive from the Church, via the sacraments, as much grace as they have earned. Ultimately, if they persevere to the end, they enter the kingdom of heaven—not at the moment of rebirth or even at death, but after years spent in purgatory.

Thirdly, the Catholic Church soon distinguished between clergy and laity. The clergy alone are considered true priests, not the general faithful. Furthermore, within the clergy, various distinctions arose over time.

In the New Testament, "elder" and "overseer" refer to the same ministers. However, by the second century, this unity was obscured; the bishop (episcopus, bishop) was elevated far above deacons and elders (or presbyters, priests) and gradually regarded as a successor to the Apostles and a guardian of tradition. These bishops have pastors, parish priests, and chaplains under them, with archbishops, patriarchs, and ultimately the pope above them. The pope, officially declared infallible at the Vatican Council in Rome in 1870, represents the culmination of this extensive ecclesiastical hierarchy. He is the "father" (papa, pope) of the entire Church, the "chief priest," the successor of Peter, the "deputy of Christ," wielding supreme legislative and judicial power. With the support of a large cadre of officials (curia: cardinals, prelates, procurators, notaries, etc.), he governs the entire Church.

These errors, originating from minor deviations, have magnified over the centuries. They continue to evolve, transforming the ancient Christian Catholic Church into the Ultramontane, the Roman Church (inseparably tied to the Church in Rome), and the Papal Church. In this transformation, Mary, the mother of Christ, and the Pope, the

vicar of Christ, increasingly eclipse the person and work of Christ. These three errors represent a reduction of and an infringement upon the prophetic, priestly, and royal office of Christ.

This corruption of the church did not proceed without vigorous resistance at every turn. Particularly in the Middle Ages, there was no shortage of individuals and movements striving for reform. However, these efforts largely bore little fruit; some passed quietly without lasting impact, while others were violently suppressed and extinguished in bloodshed. Such means of suppression and extermination were also employed against the Reformation in the sixteenth century, yet they did not succeed. This failure was due to the fact that the times were ripe for reformation. The church had fallen into such profound religious and moral decay that even her own sons no longer trusted her; there was a widespread sense that the status quo was untenable, and a fervent desire for change; in Italy, for example, many ridiculed all religion and Christianity, plunging into complete disbelief. What the fate of the church would have been without the Reformation is beyond speculation; the Reformation proved to be a blessing for the Roman church, a benefit that persists to this day.

Moreover, the Reformation was not an isolated movement heralding the new era. It was preceded, accompanied, and followed by other significant movements in various fields. The invention of printing and gunpowder, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the discovery of America, the Renaissance of literature and art, and the advancements in science and philosophy—all these phenomena and events signified the awakening of self-consciousness and the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern age.

Through all these movements, the Reformation, while stemming from its own principles and aiming at its own goals, was supported and propelled forward.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the Reformation, in its opposition to the Roman church, attacked the root of the problem. It sought not merely an external improvement in forms but aimed to eliminate the very cause of the decay. For this, a fixed point of departure, a reliable yardstick, a positive principle was necessary. This principle was found, in contrast to the traditions of the Roman church, in the word of Christ—credible in itself, essential for the life and welfare of the church, and perfectly sufficient and clear. In contrast to the good works to which Rome bound salvation, the Reformation emphasized the perfect and all-sufficient work of Christ, needing no supplementation by human effort. And in contrast to the pope, who claimed to be the infallible substitute of Christ, it upheld the Spirit of Christ, poured out in the church, leading all God's children into the truth.

The Reformation did not arrive at this positive principle through scientific research and reflection, but through the experience of the guilt-laden heart, which found reconciliation and forgiveness only in God's free grace. The Reformation was not a scholarly or scientific movement but a religious and moral one. Many joined it, as often happens in times of division and upheaval, for impure and unjust motives; but its core was formed by the weary and burdened, who sighed under Rome's oppression and found rest for their souls at the feet of the Holy One.

Luther rested in the experience of forgiveness, finding solace in discovering "a merciful God." While this revelation granted him a more expansive view of the world than the Roman Christian, who deemed the natural inherently profane, he ultimately relegated secular matters—art, science, state, and society—to their own courses. The Lutheran Reformation thus confined itself to restoring the preaching ministry. Upon answering the question, "How does man attain salvation?" from Scripture, their efforts largely ceased.

For Zwingli and Calvin, however, who spearheaded the reformation in Switzerland, this was merely the starting point. They too arrived at reformation not through rational argument but through the profound experience of sin and grace, of guilt and reconciliation. Yet, for them, this experience was the foundation, not the culmination. They delved deeper and traced further back. Behind the grace of God manifest in the forgiveness of sin lay the sovereignty of God, His infinite and awe-inspiring essence with all His virtues and perfections. If God was sovereign in salvation, He was sovereign always and everywhere, in creation as well as in re-creation. If He had become King in the heart, He must also reign in the mind and hand, in the household and workplace, in the state and society, in science and the arts. The query, "How does man attain salvation?" was not sufficient; it must be encompassed within the higher, deeper, all-encompassing question, "How does God receive His due glory?" Hence, for Zwingli and more profoundly for Calvin, finding peace for their hearts in the blood of the cross marked the true commencement of reformation.

For them, the entire world lay open—not to be abandoned to its devices, but to be permeated and sanctified through the Word of God

and prayer. They began locally, with the church and city wherein they dwelt, restoring not only the preaching office but also worship and discipline, transforming religious life on Sunday and civil and social life during the week, influencing both the private life of the citizen and the public life of the state. From these beginnings, their reformation radiated outward to other lands. While the Lutheran Reformation mainly took root in Germany and the Nordic countries, Calvin's Reformation spread to Italy and Spain, Hungary and Poland, Switzerland and France, Belgium and the Netherlands, England and Scotland, and across to America and Canada. Had it not been for the "Counter-Reformation" led by the Jesuits, which opposed, repelled, and eradicated it in many regions, Calvin's Reformation might well have permanently dismantled Rome's world dominion.

It was not destined to be so. From its inception, the Reformation faced staunch opposition from the Church of Rome, which at the Council of Trent firmly set itself against the reformers and resolutely continued on its chosen path. This self-imposed opposition weakened the church through internal divisions and endless disputes. In the same sixteenth century, Socinianism and Anabaptism emerged, both rooted in the same fundamental dichotomy—the irreconcilable opposition between nature and grace —and thus offered either grace to nature or nature to grace. This enduring conflict between creation and re-creation, between the human and the divine, between reason and revelation, between earth and heaven, between humanity and Christianity, or however one might articulate these opposing forces, has persisted to this day. The divisions and schisms initiated in the sixteenth century did not cease there; each successive century has witnessed an increase in their number.

The seventeenth century saw the rise of Remonstrantism in the Netherlands, Independentism in England, and Pietism in Germany. In the eighteenth century, Herrnhuttism, Methodism, and Swedenborgianism emerged, while Deism swept over all the churches like a flood. Following the French Revolution at the dawn of the nineteenth century, a powerful religious awakening took place within both Roman and Protestant churches. Nonetheless, divisions continued to multiply: Darbyism and Irvingianism, Mormonism and Spiritism, along with a multitude of other sects, chipped away at the integrity of the churches, which themselves were often weakened and consumed by a spirit of doubt and indifference. Beyond the churches, the force of monism, in its materialistic or pantheistic forms, was organizing a final, deadly assault on the entirety of the Christian faith.

It thus appears that all hope for the unity and universality of the church of Christ is lost. Of the more than 1.5 billion people living on earth according to common estimates, there are approximately 10 million Jews, 175 million Muslims, 214 million Brahmins, 120 million Buddhists, 300 million Confucians, 140 million Shintoists, and 173 million polytheists. Christians comprise only about a third of the world's population, approximately 534 million, and among themselves are divided into 254 million Roman Catholics, 106 million Eastern Orthodox, 165 million Protestants, along with many other groups and sects.

Yet, there is one enduring consolation—Christ is gathering His own from all races and languages, from all peoples and nations; He will bring them all together, and they will hear His voice. "And they shall be one flock, one shepherd," (John 10:16).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How did the early Christian Church view the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures, and what role did they play in the transition from Judaism to Christianity?

- Reflect on the continuity of the Old Testament's authority from the Jewish synagogue to the Christian church and its significance in the early Church's theology.

2. What process did the early Christian Church follow to recognize and compile the New Testament Scriptures?

- Consider the criteria and practices involved in the early Church's recognition and circulation of apostolic writings.

3. Why is it important for the Church to preserve, interpret, and proclaim the Word of God according to the chapter?

- Discuss the responsibilities and duties of the Church in relation to Scripture as outlined in the chapter.

4. What challenges and errors did the early Church face regarding the interpretation and understanding of God's Word?

- Reflect on the various errors that emerged from both Judaism and Paganism and how the Church addressed these issues.

5. What is the purpose and importance of confessions in the Christian Church, according to the chapter?

- Consider how confessions help in maintaining doctrinal purity and unity within the Church.

6. How do the Apostles' Creed and other ecumenical creeds contribute to the unity of the Christian Church?

- Discuss the significance of these creeds in articulating core Christian beliefs and their role in fostering unity among different Christian traditions.

7. What were the primary doctrinal controversies addressed by the early ecumenical councils, and why were they significant?

- Reflect on the issues concerning the divinity and humanity of Christ and the Trinity, and how the councils resolved these controversies.

8. How did the Roman Catholic Church's view of tradition and Scripture contribute to its divergence from original apostolic Christianity?

- Analyze the Catholic Church's elevation of tradition and its impact on the relationship between Scripture and the Church's authority.

9. What were the key principles of the Reformation, and how did they contrast with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church?

- Discuss the Reformers' emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture, justification by faith, and the role of Christ's work versus human effort.

10 . How does the chapter view the ongoing divisions within Christianity, and what hope does it offer for future unity?

- Reflect on the chapter's perspective on the current state of Christian unity and the ultimate hope in Christ's promise to gather His flock.

9. The Being of God

Thus far, we have explored the nature of the revelation bestowed upon us by God's grace, elucidating how this revelation was conveyed and became known to us through Holy Scripture, guided by the Confession. We must now turn our attention to the substance of that revelation, outlining in an orderly fashion what it imparts to our intellect and our hearts, to our awareness and our existence. Previously, we examined the edifice of revelation from the exterior, forming an impression of its architectural grandeur; now, we are to enter the sanctum itself, beholding the treasures of wisdom and knowledge it offers.

It is evident, however, that the rich content of this revelation can be explored in various manners, with its components arranged before us in different sequences. We need not delve into all possible methods, but it is worthwhile to highlight two approaches by which the subject matter of Christian doctrine is often treated.

Firstly, we may approach the believer, who has embraced the revelation with genuine faith, and inquire by what means they have come to know the truth, what elements comprise this knowledge, and what fruits this knowledge has borne in their consciousness and life. This approach is exemplified in the Heidelberg Catechism. In this catechism, the believer speaks, providing a comprehensive and lucid account of the singular comfort that accompanies them in life and death, and of the essential components necessary to live and die in this comfort with blissful assurance. This method of treatment is commendable, especially for practical instruction, as it directly relates the truth to the entirety of Christian life. It steers clear of scholarly abstractions and idle speculations, consistently demonstrating the impact of each doctrine on the mind and heart of an individual. "What use and what comfort do you derive from believing all this? That in Christ I am righteous before God and an heir of eternal life."

Yet, there exists another method for addressing the truths of faith. Instead of solely interrogating the believer about their beliefs, we can assume the perspective of the believer, endeavoring to articulate the contents of our faith to ourselves and others from Scripture. In this approach, the development of our confession is not driven by external inquiries; rather, we systematically expound the content of our faith. We focus not on the chronological order in which we have come to understand the truth, but seek to discern the intrinsic order within the truths of faith, how they interrelate, and what constitutes their fundamental principle. This order is observed in our Dutch Confession of Faith. Here, the believer speaks, not in response to posed questions, but by proactively elucidating the substance of their faith. They believe with their heart and confess with their mouth the

declarations of God to the congregation, as revealed in His Word and by His Spirit.

These two methods of treatment, rather than being antagonistic or mutually exclusive, complement and enhance each other, each holding immense value. For the Reformed churches and, indeed, for Reformed educational institutions, it is an inestimable privilege to possess the Catechism alongside the Creed, and the Confession in conjunction with the Catechism. Through this union, both the theological and anthropological perspectives are harmonized; head and heart are reconciled, rendering the truth of God a profound blessing for our understanding and our lives.

That these two approaches to unfolding the content of Revelation are not adversarial but mutually enriching is evident in the fact that within both the Catechism and the Creed, it is the voice of the Christian that speaks. This voice is not that of an isolated individual but of the Christian in communion with all fellow believers. It is the congregation that articulates its faith. "We all believe with our hearts and confess with our mouths" – this is the foundation, the continuity, and the culmination of the Dutch Confession of Faith. Above all, there stands the significant inscription: "True Christian Confession, containing the principal doctrine of God and the eternal salvation of souls."

These two – the doctrine of God and the doctrine of eternal salvation – are not two disparate entities devoid of connection. They are inextricably linked; the doctrine of God inherently involves the doctrine of eternal salvation, and vice versa. The knowledge of God,

as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, His Son, is itself eternal life, as proclaimed in John 17:3.

This knowledge of God differs fundamentally from the knowledge we gain in daily life or in the academic realms of education and science. It is distinct not merely in degree but in essence. It stands apart in its principle, its object, and its fruit, as elucidated more fully in the earlier discourse. It is a matter of both head and heart. This knowledge does not primarily seek to make us "wiser" in the conventional sense but to make us wiser, better, and happier in a profound, transformative way. It bestows happiness and eternal life, not only in the hereafter but also in the present life. The three things we must know are essential not merely for dying in happiness but for living in happiness here on earth from the moment we come to this knowledge.

"Blessed are the pure in heart," for even now on earth, they are blessed through the promise that they will see God, as stated in Matthew 5:7. They are "saved by hope," as declared in Romans 8:24.

But if we have received the principle of eternal life in our hearts in this way, we cannot help but long to know more of Him who granted us that life. As our focus shifts from ourselves to Him, the fountain of our salvation, we move from the comfort we enjoy to a deeper worship of the Eternal Being. We come to realize more profoundly that God does not exist for our sake, but rather, we exist for His. Our salvation, while never indifferent to us, becomes a means for His glory. The knowledge of God gives us life, but life, in turn, drives us back to seek His knowledge. In God, we find all our salvation and all our honor. He becomes the object of our worship, the content of our

song, the strength of our life. From Him, through Him, and to Him are all things—this becomes the choice of our heart and the motto of our actions. We and all creation around us become vehicles for His glory. The truth, which we initially cherished because it granted us life, becomes dearer to us for its own sake, for what it reveals and makes known about the Eternal Being. The entirety of the doctrine of faith, in all its parts, becomes a proclamation of God's praise, a display of His virtues, and a glorification of His Name. Thus, the Catechism leads us to the Creed.

If we endeavor to fathom what it means for us—poor, weak, sinful creatures—to know God, the infinite and eternal Being, we are seized with deep reverence and holy awe. Is it truly possible that into the darkened consciousness of guilty humanity, a ray of light might penetrate from Him whom no man has seen nor can see, who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16), who is pure light without darkness (1 John 1:5)?

Many have answered this question negatively, and many still do. This denial of the knowability of God can arise from two very different attitudes. Today, for many, it is the conclusion of purely rational, deductive scientific reasoning. They argue that the human mind's knowledge is confined to observable phenomena and that it is contradictory to ascribe personality, consciousness, and will to God while also claiming that He is infinite, eternal, and wholly independent.

To this, we may readily respond that there can be no knowledge of God for humanity unless God has revealed Himself to us, whether in a general way through nature and history, or in a special way through

His Son. If God has indeed revealed Himself, it follows that He can be known to the extent that He has revealed Himself. To claim that He has not revealed Himself at all would imply that the world has existed apart from and independent of God for all eternity and that He could not reveal Himself in or through it. This would render any discussion of God meaningless, as the concept would be nothing more than a sound without any foundation in reality. Thus, so-called agnosticism (the doctrine of the unknowability of God) practically aligns with atheism (the denial of the existence of God).

However, the denial of the knowability of God can also stem from a profound awareness of one's own smallness and insignificance, coupled with a deep sense of God's infinite greatness and overwhelming majesty. In this sense, the acknowledgment that "we know nothing" and that "knowledge is too wonderful for us" has been the confession of all devout people. The fathers and teachers of the Church often expressed that when contemplating God, they could say much better what He is not than what He is. Calvin admonishes his readers not to strip God of mysteries far beyond the grasp of our feeble minds. Poets such as Vondel and Bilderdijk have often celebrated this all-transcending greatness of God in their sublime verses.

Although this humble confession of God's exalted majesty and man's insignificance might, in a certain sense, be called a denial of God's knowability, it is preferable, to avoid misunderstandings, to distinguish between God's intelligibility and knowability according to the Holy Scriptures. No other book in the world, to the same degree and in the same manner as the Holy Scriptures, upholds both the absolute transcendence of God above all creatures and the intimate

connection and close relationship between the creature and its Creator.

From the very first page of the Bible, we encounter the absolute exaltation of God above all His creatures. Without weariness or effort, He brings the whole world into existence through His Word alone. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host" (Ps. 33:6). "He speaks, and it comes to be; He commands, and it stands firm" (Ps. 33:9). "He does according to His will among the host of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth; none can stay His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:35). The nations are as a drop in a bucket and as dust on the scales. "Behold, He takes up the coastlands like fine dust. Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him; they are accounted by Him as less than nothing and emptiness" (Isa. 40:15-17). "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with Him?" (Isa. 40:18). "Who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord?" (Ps. 89:6). No name can fully capture His essence; His name is Wonderful (Gen. 32:29; Judges 13:18; Prov. 30:4). When the Lord addressed Job out of the whirlwind and displayed the greatness of His works, Job humbly responded, "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40:4). "God is great, and we know Him not" (Job 36:26). "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (Ps. 139:6).

Yet, this same high and exalted God maintains a close relationship with all His creatures, even the smallest and most insignificant. Scripture does not offer a deductive conception of God as philosophy

does; rather, it presents the true, living God before our eyes, making Him visible through all the works of His hands. "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?" (Isa. 40:26). Everything was created by His hand; everything came forth according to His will and counsel; everything is sustained by His power. Thus, everything bears the imprint of His virtue, the mark of His goodness, wisdom, and power. Among all creatures, man is created in His image and likeness; he alone is called God's offspring (Acts 17:28).

Because of this close relationship, God can be described in terms of His creatures, and He can be spoken of in a human manner. The same Scriptures that most sublimely depict God's incomparable greatness and majesty also speak of Him in parables and images that are vibrant with life. They speak of His eyes and ears, hands and feet, mouth and lips, heart and bowels. They attribute to Him various virtues—wisdom and knowledge, will and power, justice and mercy—and also emotions such as joy and sorrow, fear and grief, zeal and jealousy, repentance and wrath, hatred and vengeance. They mention His examining and thinking, hearing and seeing, smelling and tasting, sitting and standing up, visiting and leaving, remembering and forgetting, blessing and chastising, and so forth. They compare Him to the sun and the moon, a fountain and a watering hole, a rock and a shelter, a shield and a buckler, a lion and an eagle, a hero and a warrior, an artist and a builder, a king and a judge, a farmer and a shepherd, a husband and a father. Everything in the entire world that can offer support, protection, and help to humanity can be found in God originally, perfectly, and abundantly. "All the families of the earth are named after Him" (Eph. 3:15). He is the "Father of lights," and all creatures are "His grateful rays."

In the pursuit of understanding God, it is paramount to hold in balance the dual aspects of His nature as presented in Scripture. Should we forsake the absolute exaltation of God above all creation, we risk descending into polytheism, a fragmentation of the divine akin to Pagan practices, or pantheism, wherein everything is seen as a manifestation of God, thus blurring the distinction between Creator and creation. History shows these two errors often intertwine and morph into one another.

Conversely, if we neglect God's intimate relationship with His creatures, we drift towards deism, the belief in a distant, uninvolved deity, or even atheism, the outright denial of God's existence. These errors, too, share similarities and often reinforce each other. Scripture, however, upholds both the transcendence and immanence of God, and Christian theology has diligently followed this scriptural balance. God, in His majesty, transcends all names we could ascribe to Him, yet He graciously accepts many names that reflect His diverse attributes. He is the infinitely exalted One, yet also the living God who cares for all His creatures. His attributes are, in some respects, incommunicable, yet in others, communicable. This duality is beyond human comprehension; there is no concept of God that can fully encapsulate His essence. A definition that aligns perfectly with His nature eludes us, and a name that wholly expresses His being cannot be found. Yet, this paradox does not lead to contradiction.

Precisely because God is the High and Exalted One who dwells in eternity, He also dwells with the contrite and lowly in spirit (Isa. 57:15). God's revelation is not intended to lead us to a philosophical abstraction but to a personal acknowledgment and confession of

Him as the true and living God. These profound truths are hidden from the wise and prudent but revealed to babes (Matt. 11:25).

The knowledge we gain of God through faith is thus both profound and limited; it does not equate to God's infinite essence, for He surpasses all His creation. This knowledge is neither wholly symbolic, nor merely clothed in human terms that bear no relation to the divine reality. Rather, it is ectypal or analogical, reflecting the resemblance and relationship between God and His works, despite His transcendence. The knowledge God imparts of Himself in nature and Scripture is finite and partial, yet pure and true. Such is God as revealed in His Word, particularly through Christ, and such is the God our hearts yearn for.

In the early Christian Church, the endeavor to faithfully represent all scriptural data concerning God led to a distinction between two sets of divine attributes. These have been named differently across traditions: Roman theology speaks of negative and positive attributes, Lutheran theology of quiescent and operative attributes, and Reformed theology of incommunicable and communicable attributes. Despite terminological differences, the underlying aim remains consistent: to uphold both God's transcendence—His distinction from and supremacy over the world—and His immanence —His intimate presence and activity within it. The Reformed terms, in particular, make this dual emphasis clear. The preservation of incommunicable attributes guards against polytheism and pantheism, while the affirmation of communicable attributes protects against deism and atheism.

There is no compelling reason to abandon the Reformed classification of God's attributes, even though all our human categorizations are inherently flawed. However, we must be mindful that the incommunicable and communicable properties of God are not separate entities. Although we cannot address both groups simultaneously and must discuss them sequentially, the classification serves to remind us that God possesses all His communicable attributes in an absolute, infinite, and indivisible manner. God's knowledge, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, and other virtues do indeed bear some resemblance to these qualities in creatures, yet in God, they exist in an independent, unchanging, eternal, omnipresent, and utterly divine way.

Unlike creatures, whose being and characteristics can be distinguished—such that a human can lose an arm or leg, or be asleep or unconscious without ceasing to be human—this is not so with God. His attributes are identical to His essence. He is not merely wise and true, good and holy, just and merciful. Rather, He is wisdom, truth, goodness, holiness, justice, and mercy themselves, and thus, He is the source and fountainhead of all such virtues as they are found in creatures. He is all that He has, and He is the origin of all that creatures have—the abundant fountain of all good.

The incommunicable attributes, therefore, are those perfections of God that signify His absolute divinity, indicating that everything in God exists in an absolutely divine manner, to an extent that cannot be communicated to creatures. These attributes affirm the absolute elevation and incomparability of God, most clearly interpreted by the name Elohim, God. Although the name of God is sometimes applied to creations—such as when Scripture refers to the idols of the

Gentiles as gods (Exod. 20:3), or calls Moses a god before Aaron (Exod. 4:16) and Pharaoh (Exod. 7:2), or designates judges as gods (Ps. 82:1, 6), a point Christ invokes in His defense (John 10:33-35)—this usage is transitive and derivative. The name of God belongs originally and essentially only to God, always carrying the idea of an infinite, personal power elevated above all creatures. God alone is God.

As such, the incommunicable qualities belong to Him alone. They are unique to Him, absent in any creature, and cannot be imparted to any creature. All creatures are dependent, changeable, compound, and subject to time and space. But God is independent, determining all things without being determined by anything, as Acts 17:25 and Romans 11:36 affirm. He is unchangeable, remaining forever the same while all change occurs within creatures and their relation to Him (James 1:17). He is simple, free from all compositions of spirit and matter, thought and extension, essence and properties, mind and will, and is wholly what He is. He is entirely free, embodying pure truth, life, and light (Ps. 36:9, John 5:26, 1 John 1:5). He is eternal, existing above all time while His eternity permeates every moment of time (Ps. 90:2). He is omnipresent, existing above all space while His omnipotent and omnipresent power sustains every point of space (Ps. 139:7, Acts 17:27-28).

In our contemporary era, there are many who dismiss the significance of God's incommunicable attributes for the religious life, viewing them as mere metaphysical abstractions. However, the contrary is evidenced by the fact that the neglect of these attributes inevitably paves the way for pantheism and polytheism.

Should God lack independence and immutability, eternity and omnipresence, simplicity and freedom from composition, He would be reduced to the level of the creature and identified with the cosmos or one of its constituent forces. Increasingly, individuals are substituting the God of revelation with an immanent world force or opting for polytheism over the confession of the one, true God. The unity and singularity of God are inextricably bound to these incommunicable attributes, as proclaimed in Deuteronomy 6:4, Mark 12:29, and John 17:3. God is truly the one and only God when nothing can be said to exist above, beside, or below Him in what He is. Only by being independent and immutable, eternal and omnipresent, can He be the God of our unconditional faith, absolute trust, and complete salvation.

Yet, it is undeniable that these incommunicable attributes alone are insufficient for us. What benefit would it be to know of God's independence, immutability, eternity, and omnipresence, if we were unaware of His mercy and grace, His abundant loving-kindness? While the incommunicable attributes inform us of the manner in which everything in God exists, they leave us in the dark regarding the content of His Divine Being. Thus, we turn to His communicable attributes, which reveal that this God, so infinitely high and exalted, also dwells within His creation and possesses virtues akin to those found in creatures, though in an infinitely perfect form. He is not merely a God from afar but also one who is near. He is not only independent and inviolable, eternal and omnipresent, but also wise and powerful, just and holy, merciful and gracious. He is Elohim and also Jehovah.

Just as the incommunicable attributes are embodied in the name Elohim, the communicable attributes find their expression in the name Jehovah. The exact derivation and original meaning of this name are lost to us, though it likely existed long before Moses, as indicated by the name Jochebed. However, God had not yet revealed Himself to His people by this name. To Abraham, He disclosed Himself as El-Shaddai, God Almighty (Genesis 17:1, Exodus 6:2), subduing the forces of nature to serve His divine will. Yet, after centuries, when it seemed He had forgotten His covenant and promise to the patriarchs, He revealed Himself to Moses as Jehovah — the God who is the same one who appeared to the fathers, who keeps His covenant, fulfills His promises, and remains unchanged to His people throughout the ages. Jehovah thus signifies "I am who I am" or "I will be who I will be," highlighting God's unchanging faithfulness in His relationship with Israel. Jehovah is the God of the covenant, who, out of free love, chose His people and made them His possession. While the name Elohim signifies the Eternal Being in His sovereign exaltation above the world, the name Jehovah reveals that this same high and exalted God has voluntarily made Himself known to His people as a God of holiness, grace, and faithfulness.

All the spiritual contention in Israel, and extending to our own era, has revolved around this fundamental question: whether Jehovah is Elohim or the LORD God.

Pagans and numerous wise men, both ancient and contemporary, assert that Jehovah is merely the God of Israel—a national, limited, and lesser deity. However, Moses, Elijah, all the prophets, Christ, and His apostles stand firmly against this notion, affirming that the LORD, who entered into covenant with the patriarchs and the people

of Israel, is the one, eternal, and true God, and that there is no other God besides Him (Isa. 43:10-15, 44:6). Therefore, Jehovah is God's proper and distinctive name (Isa. 42:8, 48:11). The God of the covenant, who humbles Himself to dwell with His people and resides with those of a contrite and lowly spirit, is simultaneously the High and Exalted One who inhabits eternity and whose name is holy (Isa. 57:15).

The incommunicable and the communicable attributes of God do not conflict; rather, the former serve to elucidate and fortify the latter. Consider, for instance, the love of God. We would neither speak of nor comprehend it if what is genuinely called love among humans did not in some way reflect (as an ectype), image, and likeness the love that resides in God. There must be some semblance between divine and human love; otherwise, our thoughts and words about God's love would be false and meaningless. Yet, this similarity does not imply equality. The purest and most profound love among humans is but a faint echo of the love that exists in God. This understanding of the indivisible attributes teaches us that the love in God infinitely surpasses that of all creatures. For the love in God is independent, immutable, simple, eternal, and omnipresent. It does not depend on us or originate from us but flows freely and purely from the depths of the divine essence. It knows no change, neither diminishes nor increases, neither appears nor vanishes, and is devoid of even the slightest shadow of variation. It is not one attribute among others within the Divine Being, nor does it ever conflict with them; rather, it is identical with the Divine Being itself: God is love—entire, perfect, with His whole essence. It transcends time and space, descending from eternity into the hearts of all God's children. Such love is utterly dependable; our souls can rest in it

amid all distress and death. If such a God of love is for us, who can be against us?

The same principle applies to all communicable attributes. Of knowledge and wisdom, goodness and mercy, righteousness and holiness, will and power—all inherent in God—there exists a faint resemblance in creatures. All that is perishable is an image. The visible things are fashioned from things unseen (Heb. 11:3). Yet, all these attributes are present in God in an original, independent, immutable, simple, and infinite manner. The LORD alone is God, and He has made us His people, the sheep of His pasture (Ps. 100:3).

The communicable attributes of God are so numerous that it is impossible to enumerate and describe them all exhaustively. If we were to endeavor such a task, we would need to explore all the names, images, and likenesses that Scripture employs to convey who and what God is to His creatures, and especially to His people. As previously mentioned, Scripture ascribes to God various human features such as eyes and ears, hands and feet, and even human sensations and passions. It designates Him with titles and roles known among men, calling Him a king, legislator, judge, warrior, hero, farmer, shepherd, husband, and father. Furthermore, Scripture draws from the entire organic and inorganic world to bring God near to us, comparing Him to a lion, an eagle, the sun, fire, a rock, a shield, and more. All of these descriptions serve as a means to help us know God and to impress upon us the sufficiency of His being. While we, in our weakness and poverty, need the whole world outside ourselves for our spiritual and physical existence, God, in whom is the original, perfect, and infinite abundance of all good, is

self-sufficient. He is the highest good and the overflowing fountain of all goodness.

The primary aim of Scripture with all these names and descriptions of the Divine Being is to instill in us an unwavering conviction that Jehovah, the God who revealed Himself to Israel and in Christ, is the true, essential, and living God. The idols of the heathen and the gods of philosophers—whether pantheistic, polytheistic, deistic, or atheistic—are the work of human hands; they neither speak, see, hear, feel, nor walk. But the God of Israel is in heaven and does whatever pleases Him. He alone is God (Deut. 6:4), the true God (John 17:3), the eternally living God (Deut. 5:26, Josh. 3:10, Dan. 6:27, Acts 14:15, 2 Cor. 6:16, 1 Tim. 3:15, 6:17). While people attempt to render God lifeless to manipulate Him as they wish, Scripture declares with authority: you are mistaken, God exists. He is the true God, He lives now and forever, and it is dreadful to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

As the living God, who is life itself and the fountain of all life (Ps. 36:10, Jer. 2:13), He is also Spirit (John 4:24), without a body, even though various bodily parts and actions are attributed to Him (Deut. 4:12, 16). Thus, He is invisible (Deut. 4:15-19, Ex. 33:20, John 1:18, 6:46, 1 Tim. 6:16). As Spirit, He possesses perfect self-consciousness and self-knowledge (Matt. 11:27, 1 Cor. 2:10) and, through Himself, perfect knowledge of all that is or will be in time, however hidden or obscure (Isa. 46:10, Jer. 11:20, Matt. 10:30, Heb. 4:13). His will, by which He accomplishes all that pleases Him (hidden will or will of decision), is inviolable (Ps. 115:3, Prov. 21:1, Dan. 4:35), and He establishes what is to be the rule for our conduct (revealed will or will of command) (Deut. 29:29, Matt. 7:21, 12:50). His power is such

that He can perform all that He resolves, in spite of all opposition, and nothing is impossible for Him (Gen. 18:14, Jer. 32:27, Zech. 8:6, Matt. 19:26, 1 Tim. 6:15).

But this knowledge, will, and power are not arbitrary, but are in all parts morally determined. This is already evident in the wisdom attributed to God in Scripture, as seen in Proverbs 8:22-31, Job 28:20-28, Romans 16:27, and 1 Timothy 1:17, by which He arranges and governs everything in accordance with the purpose He intended at creation and re-creation (Psalm 104:24, Ephesians 3:10, Romans 11:33). Furthermore, this is clearly expressed in the goodness and mercy, on the one hand, and in the holiness and righteousness, on the other hand, attributed to God. God is not only the Almighty but also the All-Good, entirely good (Matthew 19:17), perfect (Matthew 5:48), and the source of all that is good in creatures (Psalm 145:9). This goodness of God extends over the whole world (Psalm 145:9, Matthew 5:45), but it changes according to the objects at which it is directed, taking different forms. It is called meekness when shown to the punishable (Romans 3:25), mercy when shown to the guilty who receive forgiveness of sins (Ephesians 2:8), love when God out of mercy communicates and gives Himself to the creatures (John 3:16, 1 John 4:8), kindness when shown to the poor and the needy, benevolence when the goodness of God shows itself to His favored ones (Genesis 39:21, Numbers 14:19, Isaiah 54:10, Ephesians 2:7), and pleasure when it is emphasized that this goodness with all its benefits is a free gift (Matthew 11:26, Luke 2:14, Luke 12:32, 2 Thessalonians 1:11).

His holiness and justice accompany this goodness and grace of God. God is called the Holy One, not only because He is exalted above all

creatures but above all because He is separated from all that is sinful and impure in the world. Therefore, He demands that His people, whom He elected as His own by free grace, should be holy (Exodus 19:5-6, Leviticus 11:44-45, 1 Peter 2:9), and He sanctifies them through Christ (Ephesians 5:26-27), who sanctified Himself for them so that they too might be sanctified in truth (John 17:19). As the Holy One, He cannot have fellowship with sin; He hates it (Psalm 45:8, Job 34:10). His holy nature demands that He maintains justice in the world of creatures and impartially rewards everyone according to their works (Romans 2:2-11, 2 Corinthians 5:10). Today, people often reassure themselves and others that God is not concerned with such trifles as sinful thoughts and deeds of man. But the true, living God, whom the Scriptures reveal to us, thinks quite differently. He is terribly wroth at both congenital and actual sins and wants to punish them temporally and eternally by means of a righteous judgment (Deuteronomy 27:26, Galatians 3:10).

According to that righteousness, He not only punishes the wicked but, according to the remarkable teaching of Scripture, it is also according to that same righteousness that He grants salvation to the pious. It is true that the pious, considered in themselves, are sinners and no better than others. While the wicked hide or disguise their sins, the pious acknowledge and confess their guilt. This acknowledgment makes the difference. Although personally guilty and impure, they are nevertheless, as far as the matter is concerned, on the side of God and against the world. Therefore, they may plead on the promise of His covenant of grace, on the truth of His word, and on the righteousness which God Himself has wrought in Christ.

According to that righteousness, we may reverently assert, God Himself is bound to forgive the sins of His people and to grant them eternal life (Ps. 4:2, 7:10, 31:2, 34:23, 35:23, 51:16, 103:17; 1 John 1:9). And though God often delays, testing the faith of the pious for a season, His truthfulness and faithfulness shine forth all the more in their complete salvation (Gen. 24:27, 32:10; Josh. 21:45; 2 Sam. 7:28; Ps. 57:4, 105:8).

The Lord will perfect that which concerns His people; His mercy endures forever (Ps. 138:8). He is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 86:15, 103:8, 145:8).

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will trust in the name of the Lord our God (Ps. 20:8; Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17). For such is our God forever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death (Ps. 48:15). He is the blessed and glorious God (1 Tim. 6:15; Eph. 1:17). And blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord (Ps. 33:12).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. What are the two primary approaches to understanding the content of Christian doctrine as presented in the chapter, and how do they complement each other?

- Reflect on the benefits of examining Christian doctrine through the lens of personal faith experience (Heidelberg Catechism) and systematic theology (Dutch Confession of Faith).

2. How does the knowledge of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, differ from other types of knowledge we acquire in daily life or academia?

- Consider the transformative impact of this knowledge on both the intellect and the heart, and its significance for living a life of faith.

3. What is the significance of the statement "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8) in the context of the chapter?

- Reflect on how purity of heart relates to the blessedness of seeing God and experiencing His presence in daily life.

4. Why is it important to recognize both the transcendence and immanence of God in Christian theology?

- Discuss the balance between God's absolute exaltation above creation and His intimate relationship with His creatures, as emphasized in Scripture.

5. How does the chapter address the challenge of knowing an infinite and transcendent God through finite human understanding?

- Reflect on the role of God's self-revelation in nature and Scripture in making Himself known to humanity, despite our limitations.

6. What are the incommunicable attributes of God, and why are they essential for understanding His divine nature?

- Consider the importance of attributes such as independence, immutability, eternity, and omnipresence in distinguishing God from His creation.

7. How do the communicable attributes of God reveal His intimate involvement with His creation, and why are they significant for believers?

- Reflect on attributes like wisdom, power, justice, mercy, and love, and how they demonstrate God's care and relationship with humanity.

8. In what ways does the name "Jehovah" encapsulate both the transcendence and immanence of God?

- Discuss the meaning of the name Jehovah as revealed to Moses and its implications for understanding God's covenant faithfulness and presence with His people.

9. How does the chapter describe the relationship between God's attributes and His essence, particularly regarding the concept of divine simplicity?

- Reflect on the idea that God's attributes are identical with His essence and how this understanding affects our view of His nature.

10. What role do God's attributes play in guiding the faith and trust of believers, according to the chapter?

- Consider how the knowledge of God's attributes—both incommunicable and communicable—strengthens the believer's

faith and provides assurance of His faithfulness and goodness.

10. The Trinity of God

Richer and more vivid still than in its attributes, the Eternal Being reveals itself in the triune existence. In the holy Trinity, the Divine Being and every perfection therein, so to speak, first come into their own, unfolding their richest content and receiving their deepest meaning. Only then do we truly know who and what God is; only then, above all, do we understand who and what God is for the guilty and lost child of man, when we know and can confess Him as the Triune God of the covenant: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In dealing with this profound part of our confession, a holy reverence and childlike fear should pervade our minds more than ever. For Moses, it was an awe-inspiring and unforgettable hour when the Lord appeared to him in the desert, in a flame of fire, out of the midst of the bramble. When Moses saw the blazing fire from afar, which burned but did not consume, and wished to rush towards it, the Lord stopped him and called out: "Do not come any closer; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." And when Moses heard this, he was greatly afraid; he hid his face and feared to look upon the Lord (Exod. 3:1-6).

Such a holy fear is also fitting for us when God reveals Himself to us in His Word as the Triune One. We must always remember that we are not dealing here with a doctrine about God, a deductive concept of God, or some philosophical system concerning God. We are not dealing with a human proposition about God, which we or others have invented, and which we now attempt to dissect and understand logically. Rather, we are dealing with God Himself, the one and true God, who has revealed Himself in His Word when He speaks of the Trinity. Just as He said to Moses: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod. 3:6), so He also reveals Himself to us in His Word and makes Himself known to us as Father, Son, and Spirit.

In this sense, the Christian church has always accepted and confessed the revelation of God as the Triune. Consider our Twelve Articles of Faith. The Christian does not declare therein that he thinks this or that about God. He does not provide a conception of God, nor does he state that he believes God possesses certain attributes and that certain things exist. Rather, he confesses: "I believe in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, and in the Holy Spirit; I believe in the Triune God." In doing so, he expresses that God, the living and true God, God as Father, Son, and Spirit, is the God of his trust, to whom he has surrendered himself completely, in whom he trusts with his whole heart. God is the God of his life and his salvation. As Father, Son, and Spirit, God has created him, saved him, sanctified him, and glorified him. The Christian owes everything to Him. And it is his joy and consolation that he may believe in that God, trust in Him, and expect everything from Him.

What the Christian further confesses about God is not articulated in abstract terms but described through a series of deeds wrought by God from eternity past, continuing in the present, and extending into the future. These are works and miracles that constitute the Christian's confession; it is a long, broad, grand history that he recounts in his confession—a history encompassing the entire world in its length and breadth, its beginning and end, its origin, development, and destination, from creation to the end of the ages. The church's confession is a proclamation of God's great works.

All these works, though numerous and diverse, form a strict unity. They are interconnected, supporting and preparing one another, and flowing seamlessly into each other. There is order and progress, development and ascension within them. It moves from creation through redemption to sanctification and glorification. The end point returns to the starting point, yet elevated to a higher pinnacle. The works of God form a circle that ascends in a spiral, connecting the horizontal with the vertical line, moving simultaneously forward and upward.

In all these works, God is the artist and builder, the origin and final goal; from Him, through Him, and to Him are all things. He is the Creator, the Rescuer, and the Finisher of them all. The unity and diversity in the works of God reflect the unity and diversity within the Divine Being. That Being is one, unique, and simple; yet it is also triune in persons, manifestations, and operations. The entire work of God is an unbroken whole, rich in variety. The church's confession encompasses the entire history of the world, including all moments of creation and fall, reconciliation and forgiveness, renewal and

restoration. It proceeds from the triune God and leads everything back to Him.

Thus, the Article of Faith concerning the Holy Trinity is the heart and core of our confession, the distinguishing mark of the Christian religion, the glory and consolation of all true believers in Christ.

This doctrine has been the subject of battle and spiritual wrangling throughout the ages. It is the precious jewel entrusted to the Christian church for preservation and defense.

If the confession of the Trinity holds such a central place in the Christian faith, it is crucial to understand the foundation upon which it rests and the source from which it flows to the church. Many in our time consider it the fruit of human reasoning and scholastic learning, deeming it of no value in religious life. They propose that the original Gospel, as proclaimed by Jesus, knew nothing of this doctrine of the Trinity, not only because of the term later used to designate this article of faith but also because of the substance that this term sought to express. They argue that only when the simple Gospel of Jesus was brought into contact with Greek philosophy and distorted by it did the Christian church adopt this doctrine.

The Christian Church, in its understanding of the divine nature of Christ and the Holy Spirit, embraced the doctrine of three distinct persons within the one divine essence, thus confessing the Trinity.

Yet, the Christian Church has always viewed this doctrine differently. It did not regard the doctrine of the Trinity as an invention of shrewd theologians or a product of Greek philosophy fused with the Gospel. Rather, it saw it as a confession inherently contained within the

Gospel and the entirety of God's Word, a confession derived from God's revelation. To the question, "Since there is only one divine being, why do you call the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?" the Heidelberg Catechism provides a succinct and conclusive answer: "Because God has revealed Himself in His Word" (Q&A 25). God's revelation is the firm foundation upon which this church confession rests; it is the principle from which the doctrine of the one, holy, universal, Christian church has grown and been established. God has revealed Himself in this manner because He exists in this manner, and He exists in this manner because He has revealed Himself thus.

The Trinity in God's revelation points back to the Trinity in His existence.

This revelation was not instantaneous; it was not accomplished in a single moment. It unfolded over a long historical process, spanning centuries. It began with creation, continued after the fall with the promises and acts of salvation to Israel, reached its culmination in the person and work of Christ, in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the founding of the church. It now stands firm throughout all ages and amidst all opposition in the indestructible testimony of Scripture and the rock-solid confession of the church. Because revelation has had such a long history, the confession of God's Triune existence has also progressed and developed. God does not change by this progression; He remains eternally the same. Yet, in the progress of revelation, He makes Himself more clearly and wonderfully known to men and angels; with His revelation, our knowledge increases.

When God began to reveal Himself in the days of the Old Covenant, the unity of God was foremost in that revelation.

Through the sin of mankind, the pure knowledge of God was lost; the truth, as Paul profoundly states, was suppressed in unrighteousness. Even what is evident of God in His creatures was thwarted by vain imaginations and darkened in the hearts of men; mankind everywhere fell into idolatry and iconoclasm (Romans 1:18-23).

Thus, revelation had to begin by emphasizing God's unity. It declared to mankind: the gods to whom you bow down are not the true God. There is only one true God, namely the God who created the heavens and the earth and all their host in the beginning (Gen. 1:1, 2:1), who made Himself known to Abraham as God Almighty (Gen. 17:1, Exod. 6:2), who appeared to Moses as Jehovah, the I AM WHO I AM (Exod. 3:14), and who, by His own free will, chose the people of Israel, called them, and included them in His covenant (Exod. 19:4). The initial content of revelation was thus: Jehovah alone is Elohim, the LORD alone is God; there is no other God but He (Deut. 4:35, 39; 32:39; Josh. 22:22; 2 Sam. 22:32; 1 Kings 18:39; Isa. 45:5, 18, 21).

For the people of Israel, the revelation of God's unity was of paramount necessity. Surrounded by nations steeped in idolatry, they were continually enticed to forsake the Lord and embrace foreign gods. Even during their exile, many Israelites gravitated towards pagan worship, disregarding the prohibitions of the Law and the admonitions of the prophets. Hence, God asserted that He, the LORD who revealed Himself to Moses and sought to deliver His people through him, was the very same God who had manifested to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty (Exod. 3:6, 15). When

giving His law to Israel, He prefaced it with: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage," and strictly forbade all forms of idolatry in the first and second commandments (Exod. 20:2-5). As the one and only Lord, Israel was to love Him with all their heart, soul, and might (Deut. 6:4-5). The LORD alone was Israel's God, and thus they were to serve Him exclusively.

Despite the strong emphasis on God's unity, which stands as the foundational article of Israel's faith, the progressive revelation of the divine nature begins to unveil a diversity within this unity, a personal distinction within the Godhead. The Hebrew name for God, Elohim, already hints at this complexity. Though Elohim is a plural form, it does not directly indicate the Trinity; rather, it conveys the fullness of life and power inherent in God. This plural form aligns with the instances where God refers to Himself using plural pronouns, indicating a complex unity with personal distinctions (Gen. 1:26-27, 3:22, Isa. 6:8).

Significantly, the Old Testament teaches that God accomplishes all things in creation and sustenance by His Word and Spirit. Unlike a human craftsman who labors with existing materials, God brings all things into existence from nothing by His mere word. The first chapter of Genesis exalts this truth, depicting God as one who speaks creation into being. "He spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9). His voice commands the elements, shaking the wilderness, making mountains leap, and stripping forests bare (Ps. 29:3-10).

This exalted depiction of God's creative work highlights two key aspects: first, God's omnipotence—He alone, by His word, brings all things into being, and His word is a command imbued with power (Ps. 33:9, Ps. 29:4). Second, it underscores God's wisdom—He does not act without purpose or thought. His word is powerful and wise; "He made the earth by His power, established the world by His wisdom, and stretched out the heavens by His understanding" (Jer. 10:12, 51:15). All His works are crafted in wisdom, and the earth is filled with His creations (Ps. 104:24). This wisdom is intrinsic to God, existing with Him from eternity, serving as the principle of His creative acts. Wisdom was present when God created the heavens, set the earth's boundaries, and established the foundations of the world. It was a constant delight to Him, rejoicing in His presence, as described in Proverbs 8:22-31 and Job 28:20-28. God delighted in wisdom, by which He fashioned the world.

Next to the Word and Wisdom, the Spirit of God functions as the Mediator of creation. Just as God is Wisdom and also possesses Wisdom, so that He might impart it and manifest it in His works, He is in His very essence Spirit (Deut. 4:12, 15), and has the Spirit, through whom He indwells the world and is ever-present within it (Ps. 139:7). Without counsel from anyone, the Lord has fashioned everything by His Spirit (Isa. 40:13). This Spirit hovered over the waters at creation's dawn (Gen. 1:2) and remains active in all created things. By that Spirit, God adorns the heavens (Job 26:13), renews the face of the earth (Ps. 104:30), gives life to man (Job 33:4), maintains the breath in his nostrils (Job 27:3), grants him understanding and wisdom (Job 32:8), and also causes the grass to wither and the flower to fade (Isa. 40:7). In sum: by the Word of the

Lord, the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth, all their host (Ps. 33:6).

This self-distinction within God is even more abundantly expressed in the works of re-creation. Here, it is not merely Elohim but Jehovah, the covenant God, who reveals Himself in acts of redemption and salvation. He does not merely save and guide His people by the word spoken to them, but also sends the Angel of the Covenant (the Angel of the Lord). This Angel, appearing in the history of the patriarchs with Hagar (Gen. 16:6ff), Abraham (Gen. 18ff), and Jacob (Gen. 28:13ff), is particularly manifest in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 3:2, 13:21, 14:19, 23:20-23, 32:34, 33:2, Num. 20:16). This Angel is not on par with created angels but is a unique manifestation of God. He is distinguished from God, who speaks of Him as His angel, yet He is one with God in name, power, salvation, and blessing, and is worthy of worship and honor. He is called the God who sees (Gen. 16:13), the God of Bethel (Gen. 31:13), and alternates with God or the LORD Himself (Gen. 32:28, 30, Ex. 3:2, 4). He bears the name of the Lord within Him (Ex. 23:21), delivers Israel from all evil (Gen. 48:16), and rescues Israel from the Egyptians (Ex. 3:8). He cleaves the waters and dries up the sea (Ex. 14:21), guards the people on their journey, brings them safely to Canaan, and triumphs over their enemies (Ex. 3:8, 23:20). He must be obeyed as God Himself (Ex. 23:20) and always encamps around those who fear the Lord (Ps. 34:7, 35:5).

In re-creation, just as Jehovah carries out His redeeming work through the Angel of the Covenant, so through His Spirit He dispenses diverse gifts and powers to His people. In the Old Testament, the Spirit of God is the source of all life, salvation, and

ability. He grants courage and strength to judges such as Othniel (Judg. 3:10), Gideon (Judg. 6:34), Jephthah (Judg. 11:29), and Samson (Judg. 14:6, 15:14). He endows those who fashion the priestly garments, the tabernacle, and the temple with skill (Ex. 28:3, 31:3-5, 35:31-35, 1 Chr. 28:12). He gives understanding and wisdom to the judges who assist Moses (Num. 11:17, 25). He bestows the gift of prophecy upon the prophets (Num. 11:25, 29, 24:2-3, Mic. 3:8), and grants the righteous renewal, sanctification, and guidance to all God's children (Ps. 51:13, 143:10).

In sum, the Word, the promise, and the covenant established with Israel at the Exodus, along with the Spirit given to them, endured through all ages and remained even after the Exile during the days of Zerubbabel, ensuring they need not fear (Hag. 2:5). When the Lord brought Israel out of Egypt, He became their Savior. This divine disposition was manifest in the fact that in all their afflictions, He too was afflicted; thus, He sent the Angel of His Presence to save them, redeeming them by His own hand.

He redeemed them by His love and mercy, taking them up and carrying them all the days of old; moreover, He gave them the Spirit of His holiness to guide them in the ways of the Lord (Isa. 63:9-12).

In the era of the Old Covenant, the Lord, through the High Priest, bestowed His threefold blessing upon the people of Israel: the blessing of His guardianship, His mercy, and His peace (Num. 6:24-26).

Thus, in the history of God's guidance with Israel, and progressively more clearly, the threefold distinction in the divine nature and works comes to light. Yet, the Old Testament also contains the promise of a

higher and richer revelation to come. Israel rejected the Word of God and grieved His Holy Spirit (Isa. 63:10; Ps. 106:13). The revelation of God in the Angel of the Covenant and in the Spirit of the Lord proved insufficient; if God was to confirm His covenant and fulfill His promise, another, higher revelation was necessary.

This was proclaimed by the prophets. In the future, in the last days, the Lord would raise up from among Israel a prophet like Moses, into whose mouth the Lord would put His words (Deut. 18:18); a priest, who would be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4); a king of the house of David (2 Sam. 7:12-16); a child from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:1); a son who would reign as king and administer justice in the earth (Jer. 23:5). He would be a human being, the son of a woman (Jer. 7:14), without form or majesty (Isa. 53:2); yet at the same time, He would be Immanuel (Isa. 7:14), the Lord our righteousness (Jer. 23:6), the Angel of the Covenant (Mal. 3:1), the Lord Himself who appears to His people (Ps. 45:8, 110:1; Hos. 1:7; Mal. 3:1), bearing the name of Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

This coming of the Servant of the Lord would be followed by a richer dispensation of the Holy Spirit. In an extraordinary measure, this Spirit, as the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, would rest upon the Messiah (Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). Furthermore, the Spirit would be poured out upon all flesh: upon sons and daughters, old and young, servants and maidservants (Joel 2:28-29; Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:26-27; Zech. 12:10). He would grant all a new heart and a new spirit, enabling them to walk in His statutes and to keep His judgments (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27; Jer. 31:31-34; 32:38-41).

Thus, the Old Testament itself intimates that the full revelation of God will culminate in the unveiling of His triune nature.

This promise and prediction find their fulfillment in the New Testament. Here too, the unity of God is the foundation of all revelation (John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4; 1 Tim. 2:5). Yet, from this unity, the diversity in the divine nature now emerges far more distinctly, first in the great salvific events of the incarnation, atonement, and the outpouring of the Spirit, and subsequently in the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. The work of salvation is a singular divine act from inception to completion, yet it comprises three principal phases: election, redemption, and sanctification, each reflecting the triune cause in the divine nature—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The incarnation of Christ manifests the triune activity of God. While the Father gives the Son to the world (John 3:16), and the Son descends from heaven (John 6:38), He is conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35). At His baptism, Jesus is anointed with the Holy Spirit and declared by the Father to be His beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased (Matt. 3:16-17). His miracles are performed by the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28). His resurrection is a work of the Father (Acts 2:24) and also an act of Christ Himself, proving Him to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:4). After His resurrection, He ascended into heaven in the Spirit that quickened Him, submitting to the angels, authorities, and powers (1 Peter 3:19, 22).

The teachings of Jesus and the apostles are consistent with this trinitarian revelation.

Jesus came to earth to declare the Father and to make His name known to mankind (John 1:18; 17:6). The title "Father" for God, as Creator of all, was used by pagans and is supported in Scripture (Luke 3:38; Acts 17:28; Eph. 3:15; Heb. 12:9). The Old Testament refers to God as Father in His theocratic relationship with Israel, having created and preserved it by His mighty power (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:16). Yet, in the New Testament, a new and glorious light is cast upon this name. Jesus consistently makes an essential distinction between His relationship to the Father and that of others. For instance, when He teaches His disciples to pray, He says, "When you pray, say, 'Our Father...'" (Luke 11:2). After the Resurrection, He tells Mary Magdalene, "I ascend to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God" (John 20:17). The Son knows and loves the Father uniquely, as only the Son can (Matt. 11:27). Therefore, the apostles refer to God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in a special sense (Eph. 1:3). This relationship is eternal, not temporal (John 1:1, 14; 17:24). God is Father, primarily because He is the Father to the Son in an utterly unique sense; this fatherhood is His original, special, personal quality.

In a derivative sense, God is also called the Father of all creatures, as He is their Creator and Sustainer (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:15; Heb. 12:9); of Israel, as He elected and called them (Deut. 32:6; Isa. 64:8); and of the Church and all believers, as the Father's love for the Son extends to them through Christ (John 16:27; 17:25), adopting them as His children and regenerating them by His Spirit (John 1:12; Rom. 8:15).

Thus, the Father is ever the Father, the first person from whom the initiative springs forth in the essence of God, in the counsel of God,

and in all outward works, in creation and preservation, redemption and sanctification. He granted the Son to have life in Himself (John 5:26), and causes the Spirit to proceed from Him (John 15:26). His is the purpose, the election, and the good pleasure (Matt. 11:26; Eph. 1:4, 9, 11). In a special sense, He possesses power, strength, and glory (Matt. 6:13). He particularly bears the name of God, distinct from the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 13:13). Indeed, Christ Himself, as Mediator, calls Him not only His Father but also His God (Matt. 27:46; John 20:17) and is Himself called the Christ of God (Luke 9:20; 1 Cor. 3:23; Rev. 12:10). In sum, the first person in the Divine Being is the Father, for from Him are all things (1 Cor. 8:6).

If God is the Father, it implies there is also a Son, who received life from Him and shares in His love. The title "Son of God" was already used in the Old Testament for the angels (Job 38:7), for the people of Israel (Deut. 1:31; 8:5; 14:1; 32:6, 18; Hos. 11:1), and particularly for the theocratic king (2 Sam. 7:11-14; Ps. 2:7; 82:27, 28). However, in the New Testament, this title acquires a much deeper meaning. Christ is the Son of God in a wholly unique sense; He is exalted above angels and prophets (Matt. 13:32; 21:27; 22:2), and He declares that no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son (Matt. 11:27). Unlike angels and men, He is the only Son (Rom. 8:32), the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased (Matt. 3:17), the only begotten Son (John 1:18), to whom the Father gave life in Himself (John 5:26).

This entirely unique relationship between Father and Son did not arise in time through the supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit, nor through the anointing at baptism, nor through the resurrection

and ascension, as some have asserted, but it exists from all eternity. For the Son, who assumed human nature in Christ, existed as the Word with God in the beginning (John 1:1), was already in the form of God (Phil. 2:6), richly and gloriously clothed (John 17:5, 24), the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being (Heb. 1:3). Hence, in the fullness of time, He could be sent, given, brought into the world (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:6). Thus, creation (John 1:3; Col. 1:15) and preservation (Heb. 1:3), and the procurement of all salvation (1 Cor. 1:30), are attributed to Him. He is not made or created like the creatures, but is the firstborn over all creation, meaning the Son who holds the preeminence and rights of the firstborn over all creatures (Col. 1:15). As He is the firstborn from the dead and the firstborn among many brothers, He is the first in all and over all (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:18). Although He took on the form of a servant in the fullness of time, He was in the form of God and is in all things equal to God the Father (Phil. 2:6)—in life (John 5:26), in knowledge (Matt. 11:27), in power (John 1:3; 5:21, 26), in honor (John 5:23). He Himself is God, to be praised above all things forever (John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:8, 9). As all things are from the Father, so they are all through the Son (1 Cor. 8:6).

Both the Father and the Son are united and joined together in the Holy Spirit, and through Him dwell in all creatures. God is Spirit by nature (John 4:24) and also holy (Isaiah 6:3); yet the Holy Spirit is distinctly set apart from God as Spirit. Just as man, according to his invisible aspect, is spirit and also possesses a spirit by which he knows himself, so God Himself is Spirit in His essence and also has a Spirit who searches the depths of His being (1 Cor. 2:11). Thus, He is called the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit (Ps. 51:13, Isa. 63:10-11), distinct from the spirit of an angel, a human, or any other creature.

Although separate from God, the Father, and the Son, the Holy Spirit maintains the most intimate fellowship with both. He is termed the breath of the Almighty (Job 33:4), the Spirit of His mouth (Ps. 33:6), sent by the Father and the Son (John 14:26, 15:26), and proceeds from both; not only from the Father (John 15:26) but also from the Son, as He is called the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of the Son, as well as the Spirit of the Father (Rom. 8:9).

Because the Holy Spirit is given, sent, poured out, or tortured out of the Father and the Son in this manner, He is often perceived as a power or gift that equips people for their calling and ministry. For example, in Acts 8:15, 10:44, 11:15, 15:8, and 19:2, the Holy Spirit is associated with the gift of tongues or prophecy. However, many wrongly deduce from this that the Holy Spirit is nothing but a gift or power of God. Elsewhere, He clearly appears as a person, bearing personal names, possessing personal qualities, and performing personal works. In John 15:26 and 16:13-14, despite the Greek word for Spirit being neuter, Christ uses a masculine pronoun: He will testify of Me and glorify Me. In the same passages, He is called the Comforter or Advocate, the same title used for Christ in 1 John 2:1, translated in Dutch as Voorspraak.

In addition to these personal names, all kinds of personal characteristics are attributed to the Holy Spirit, such as selfhood (Acts 13:2), self-consciousness (Acts 15:28), self-determination or will (1 Cor. 12:11), and various personal activities, including investigating (1 Cor. 2:11), hearing (John 16:13), speaking (Rev. 2:7), teaching (John 14:26), and praying (Rom. 8:27). This is most clearly and magnificently expressed in the fact that He is placed on the same

level as the Father and the Son, who are undoubtedly persons (Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:13).

This already implies more, pointing to the fact that the Holy Spirit is not only a person but also truly God. The Scriptures offer all necessary data for this significant confession. Despite the aforementioned distinction between God and His Spirit, the two are constantly interchanged in Scripture, making it clear that it is entirely the same whether God or His Spirit says or does something. In Acts 5:3-4, lying to the Spirit is equated with lying to God; in 1 Cor. 3:16, believers are called the temple of God because the Spirit of God dwells in them. Additionally, various divine attributes, such as eternity (Heb. 9:14), omnipresence (Ps. 139:7), omniscience (1 Cor. 2:11), omnipotence (1 Cor. 12:4-6), and various divine works in creation (Ps. 33:6), preservation (Ps. 104:30), and re-creation (John 3:3), are attributed to the Holy Spirit as much as to the Father and the Son. He shares the same honor with them; He is placed alongside the Father and the Son as the source of salvation (2 Cor. 13:13, Rev. 1:4). In His name, we are baptized (Matt. 28:19) and blessed (2 Cor. 13:13). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is even an unforgivable sin (Matt. 12:31-32). While all things are from the Father and through the Son, they all exist and rest in the Holy Spirit.

All these elements of the doctrine of the Trinity, which are spread throughout Scripture, are succinctly gathered by Christ in His baptismal commission and by the Apostles in their benediction. After His Resurrection and before His Ascension, Christ commands His Apostles to go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the singular name, in which, nonetheless, three distinct persons are revealed. Father, Son, and Spirit are, in their unity and

distinction, the complete revelation of God. Similarly, according to the Apostles, all salvation and blessedness for mankind lies in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:13, 1 Pet. 1:2, 1 John 5:4-6, Rev. 1:4-6). The pleasure, foreknowledge, power, love, kingdom, and strength belong to the Father. The mediation, atonement, grace, and redemption are the Son's. The regeneration, renewal, sanctification, and communion are the work of the Spirit. The relationship of Christ to the Father is perfectly mirrored by the relationship of the Holy Spirit to Christ. Just as the Son speaks and acts not of Himself but receives all from the Father (John 5:26, 16:15), so the Holy Spirit receives all from Christ (John 16:13, 14).

As the Son testifies of and glorifies the Father (John 1:18, 17:4, 6), so the Holy Spirit testifies of and glorifies the Son (John 15:26, 16:14). Just as no one comes to the Father except through the Son (John 14:6), so no one can declare that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). Through the Spirit, we have fellowship with both the Father and the Son. In the Holy Spirit, God Himself dwells in our hearts through Christ. Given this truth, the Holy Spirit, with the Son and the Father, is the one true God, eternally to be praised.

The Christian church has affirmed this scriptural teaching in her confession of the Trinity of God with a resounding yes and amen. This rich and glorious confession did not come without a long and arduous spiritual struggle. For centuries, the deepest experiences of the spiritual life of God's children and the most profound thoughts of the Church's fathers and teachers labored to fully comprehend the revelation of the Holy Scriptures on this point and to faithfully articulate it in the confession. The church could not have succeeded

in this essential work, nor achieved such fruitful results, had she not been led by the Holy Spirit into all truth, and had not received in Tertullian, Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, and Hilary those men who, endowed with extraordinary gifts of piety and wisdom, steered their course along the pure path.

The very essence of Christianity was at stake in this theological battle. The congregation faced the peril of being torn from the solid foundation upon which it had been built and being engulfed by the world.

On one side stood the Arianism, named after the Alexandrian presbyter Arius, who died in 336. He held that the Father was the only true and eternal God because He was unbegotten in the fullest sense. However, regarding the Son, the Logos who became flesh in Christ, Arius taught that since He was begotten, He could not be God but was a creature. Although preeminent above all other creatures, the Son was brought forth from nothing by the will of God. Likewise, the Holy Spirit was regarded as a creature or merely a power or gift of God.

On the other side stood the party of Sabellianism, named after a certain Sabellius, who lived in Rome at the beginning of the third century. He viewed the Father, Son, and Spirit as three names for the one God, who revealed Himself in various forms and guises as His revelation progressed. In the form of the Father, God first acted as Creator and Lawgiver; then, in the form of the Son, as Redeemer; and now, in the form of the Holy Spirit, as the Sanctifier of the Church.

While Arianism sought to maintain the unity of God by placing the Son and the Spirit outside the Divine Being, reducing them to mere creatures, Sabellianism aimed to achieve the same goal by stripping the three persons of their distinctiveness, transforming them into three successive manifestations of the same Divine Being. In the first direction, the Jewish, deistic, rationalistic way of thinking is expressed; in the second, the ideas of Pagan pantheism (algodism) and mysticism are represented. As the Church began to consider with clarity the truth later enshrined in the doctrine of the Trinity, these directions emerged on the left and right, continuing to accompany it to this day. The congregation and each of its members must always be vigilant, neither to compromise the one essence of God nor to neglect the distinct persons within that divine essence. Unity and diversity must be upheld in their indissoluble connection and pure relationship, both theologically in thought and practically in life. This is the vocation of all believers.

To fulfill this calling, the Christian Church and theologians have employed various terms and expressions not found verbatim in Scripture. They speak of the one essence of God and of three persons or modes of functioning within that essence; of trinity and triplicity; of essential and personal characteristics; of the eternal generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, and so forth.

There is no reason why the Church and theology should refrain from using such terms and expressions. The Holy Scriptures were not given by God to the congregation merely to be imitated but to be experienced in their fullness and richness, absorbed into our consciousness, and expressed in our own language, so that we may

proclaim the great works of God. Moreover, these terms and expressions are necessary to defend the truth of Scripture against its opponents and to protect it from misunderstanding and error. History has shown that lightly rejecting and dismissing these terms leads to various deviations in the confession.

Yet, when using these terms, we must always remember that they are of human origin, limited, imperfect, and fallible. The Fathers of the Church have always acknowledged this; they said, for example, of the term "persons," which denotes the three modes of existence in the Divine Being, that it did not fully capture the matter but served as an auxiliary to uphold the truth and counter error. This term was chosen not because it was perfect in all respects, but because no better one could be found. Thus, the word falls short of the thought, and the thought again falls short of the matter. Although we cannot fully grasp the matter except in its imperfect form, we must never forget that it is the matter, not the word, that is paramount. In the dispensation of glory, other and better names will undoubtedly be placed upon our lips.

The matter itself, concerning the confession of the Holy Trinity, is of utmost significance for both mind and heart.

By this confession, the congregation affirms the unity and diversity within the essence of God. The Divine Being is singular; there is but one Being who is God and who rightfully bears the name God. In creation and re-creation, in nature and grace, in church and world, in state and society, everywhere and always, we encounter the one, identical, living, true God. The unity of the world, the unity of humanity, the unity of truth, virtue, justice, and beauty all hinge

upon the unity of God. Once this unity of God is denied or weakened, the door is opened to polytheism.

Yet, this unity of God, as revealed in Scripture and experienced by the congregation, is not an empty, abstract unity but a fullness of life and power. It encompasses diversity. This diversity is manifested in the three persons or modes of existence of the Divine Being. These three persons are not mere forms of manifestation but modes of existence within the Being of God. Father, Son, and Spirit share the same divine nature and attributes; they are one being. Yet, each has a distinct name and a special quality that distinguishes them from one another: the Father alone is Father, the Son is begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from both.

The order of the three persons in all divine works corresponds to this order of existence within the Divine Being. It is the Father, from whom all things proceed; it is the Son, through whom all things are accomplished; and it is the Spirit, in whom all things are. From the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit, all things originate in creation and re-creation; and in the Spirit and through the Son, all things return to Him. Thus, we give thanks especially to the Father for His electing love, to the Son for His redeeming grace, and to the Holy Spirit for His regenerating and renewing power.

Secondly, with this confession, the congregation staunchly opposes the errors of deism, pantheism, Judaism, and paganism. There is always a dual tendency in the human heart: one tendency to think of God as distant and to detach the entire world from God, and another tendency to draw God into the world, to identify Him with the world, and thus to deify oneself with the world. If the first tendency prevails

in us, we are led to believe that in nature, in our professions, in our business, in our science, in our art, or in the work of salvation, we can manage without God and save ourselves. If the second inclination dominates our hearts, we transform the glory of God into the image of some creature; we deify the world, the sun, the moon, and the stars, or art, science, and the state, and in the creation of ourselves, we often seek our own greatness. There, God is only from afar; here, only close by. There, He is above, outside, separate from the world; here, He is alone inside and united with the world.

But the church confesses both: God is above the world, distinct in essence, yet fully present in it, and at no point of space or moment of time separated from it. He is both distant and near, highly exalted and simultaneously deeply embedded in all His creatures. He is our Creator, who, distinct in His being, brought us forth by His will. He is our Redeemer, who saves us not by our works but by the riches of His grace. He is our Sanctifier, who dwells within us as His temple. As a triune God, He is God above, for, and in us.

Finally, this confession of the congregation holds profound significance for the spiritual life. It is often claimed, albeit incorrectly, that the doctrine of the Trinity is merely a philosophically derived dogma with no bearing on religion or daily life. The Dutch Confession of Faith holds a different view, asserting in Article IX that God's triune nature is known not only through the testimonies of Holy Scripture but also through their effects, especially those experienced within ourselves. While our belief in the Trinity is not founded on mere feeling and experience, embracing this belief reveals its deep connection to the spiritual experience of God's children.

Believers come to know the workings of the Father, the Creator of all things, who grants them life, breath, and all things. They recognize Him as the Lawgiver, who imparts His holy commandments for their guidance. They perceive Him as the Judge, who abhors all iniquity and never leaves the guilty unpunished. Ultimately, they come to trust Him as the Father, who for Christ's sake is their God and Father, assuring them that He will provide for all their needs and turn every trial to their benefit. They affirm this trust by confessing: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Similarly, they experience the workings of the Son, the only begotten of the Father, conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary. They know Him as their highest Prophet and Teacher, who fully reveals God's hidden counsel and will for their salvation. They acknowledge Him as their only High Priest, who redeemed them with the sacrifice of His body and continually intercedes for them before the Father. They also recognize Him as their eternal King, who governs them by His Word and Spirit, safeguarding their redemption. They profess this faith by declaring: I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, our Lord.

Moreover, they come to understand the workings of the Holy Spirit, who resurrects them and leads them into all truth. They know Him as the Giver of faith, through which they partake in Christ and all His benefits. They recognize Him as the Comforter, who prays within them with unspeakable sighs and confirms to their spirits that they are God's children. They trust Him as the pledge of their eternal inheritance, preserving them until the day of redemption. They affirm this belief by stating: I believe in the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the confession of the Trinity is the heart and essence of the entire Christian religion. Without it, neither creation, redemption, nor sanctification can be rightly upheld.

Any deviation from this confession inevitably leads to error in other doctrines; conversely, any misrepresentation of these articles of faith results in a misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. We can proclaim God's great works truthfully only when we acknowledge and confess them as the singular, magnificent work of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

In the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Spirit lies all the salvation and blessedness of mankind.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the doctrine of the Trinity enhance our understanding of God's revelation in Scripture and His work in the world?

- Reflect on how knowing God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit helps us grasp the full depth of His actions and character as revealed in the Bible and throughout history.

2. What is the significance of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6) for understanding the holiness and mystery of the Trinity?

- Consider how this Old Testament event sets a precedent for approaching the revelation of the Triune God with reverence and awe.

3. In what ways does the Christian confession of the Trinity differ from philosophical or human conceptions of God?

- Discuss how the doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in God's self-revelation rather than human invention, and how this shapes our understanding of God.

4. Why is it essential to maintain a balance between the unity and diversity of God's nature in the doctrine of the Trinity?

- Reflect on the importance of holding both the oneness of God and the distinct persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in proper tension to avoid theological errors.

5. How does the Old Testament prepare for the revelation of the Trinity, and what indications of the Trinity can be found in the Old Testament?

- Explore examples such as the plural form of Elohim and the roles of the Word and Spirit in creation that hint at the triune nature of God.

6. How does the New Testament fully reveal the doctrine of the Trinity through the person and work of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

- Discuss key New Testament passages and events, such as the baptism of Jesus and the Great Commission, that explicitly reveal the triune nature of God.

7. What role does each person of the Trinity play in the work of creation, redemption, and sanctification?

- Reflect on how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are involved in the various stages of God's plan for the world and for humanity's salvation.

8. Why is the confession of the Trinity described as the heart and core of the Christian faith, and how does it impact a believer's life and worship?

- Consider how the understanding of God as Triune influences Christian doctrine, practice, and personal devotion.

9. How has the doctrine of the Trinity been defended and articulated throughout church history, and what challenges has it faced?

- Explore the historical development of the doctrine, including the responses to heresies such as Arianism and Sabellianism, and the contributions of key church fathers.

10. In what ways does the Trinity provide a model for Christian community and relationships?

- Reflect on how the relational nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit serves as a blueprint for unity, love, and mutual support within the body of Christ.

11. Creation and Providence

The practical significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the life of the Christian leaves no room for doubt that Scripture does not aim to provide us with a mere deductive concept of God but rather to bring us into personal contact and fellowship with the living and true God Himself. It dismantles our preconceived notions and guides us back to God Himself. Hence, it does not simply speak about God but allows us to behold Him through the manifold works of His hands. "Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these things." Among the creatures, His invisible attributes, His eternal power, and divine nature are clearly perceived from the foundation of the world. It is not apart from His works, through mere reflection and reasoning, but through His works in nature and grace that God is made known and glorified.

Thus, Scripture incessantly points us to the mighty works of God. It serves as both a description and a hymn of praise of the works of the Almighty. Precisely because it seeks to make us know the living, true God, it recounts His mighty deeds on nearly every page. As the living God, He is also the ever-active God; He cannot cease from His works; He is perpetually at work, as Christ testifies in John 5:17; for all life, and especially the perfect, infinite life of God, is power, energy, activity. As the Creator is, so are His works. As God is the Maker, the Creator of all things, His works are great and marvelous, as the Psalmist declares: "How great are your works, O Lord!" (Ps. 92:5), "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14), and "Great and marvelous are your works, O Lord God Almighty" (Rev. 15:3). His works are true and faithful (Ps. 33:4, 111:7), just and merciful (Ps. 145:17, Dan. 9:14). These works encompass the creation and preservation of all things, the heavens and the earth, mankind and His chosen people, the miracles wrought in Israel, and the works

He performs through His servants (Gen. 2:2-3, Ex. 34:10, Job 34:19, Isa. 19:25, John 9:4). All these works praise Him (Ps. 145:10); indeed, the Lord rejoices in them (Ps. 104:31). He is the Rock; His work is perfect (Deut. 32:4).

All these works, moreover, are not brought about by God thoughtlessly or forcibly, but most consciously and freely. This is evident from the fact that He creates, maintains, and governs everything through His Word. Speaking and commanding, He brings things into being, as the Psalmist declares, "For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9). Without the Word, which in the beginning was with God and was God Himself, not a single thing was made that has been made (John 1:3). In Job 28:20ff. and Proverbs 8:22ff., it is presented that God, having created the world, first consulted wisdom, viewed it, and searched through it, so that now everything is made with wisdom (Ps. 104:24, Jer. 10:12). The same idea is elsewhere expressed in Scripture, that God brings about everything according to His counsel. Here it is more clearly and powerfully stated that all God's works, in creation and re-creation, are not only a revelation of His thought but also a product of His will. Hence, in human terms, all God's work is preceded by a deliberation of the mind and a decision of the will. Therefore, the name of the counsel of the Lord, as it appears, for example, in Ps. 33:11, Prov. 19:21, Isa. 46:10, Acts 2:23, is elsewhere interchanged with that of decision, Gen. 41:32, 2 Cor. 25:16, Ps. 2:7, Isa. 10:23, 14:27; intention, Jer. 51:12, Rom. 8:28, 9:11, Eph. 1:11, 3:11, 2 Tim. 1:9; predestination, Acts 10:42, 13:48, 17:26, 31, Rom. 8:29, 30, Eph. 1:5, 11; pleasure, Isa. 49:8, 53:10, 60:10, 61:2, Matt. 11:26, Eph. 1:5, 9; and Paul speaks of the counsel and pleasure of God's will, Eph. 1:5, 11.

Of this counsel of God, the Scriptures further teach that it is great and victorious (Isa. 28:29, Jer. 32:19), independent (Matt. 11:26), indestructible (Heb. 6:17), and that it holds authority over all things (Eph. 1:11), even over the crime of the unrighteous who hung Christ on the cross and killed Him (Acts 2:23, 4:28). Because events, even the sinful thoughts and deeds of men, are eternally known and determined in the counsel of God, they are not deprived of their character. On the contrary, they are all determined and safeguarded in their own nature, context, and circumstances. Sin and punishment, freedom and responsibility, a sense of duty and conscience, law and justice, are all contained in the counsel of God. Everything that is and is done is mutually related in the counsel of the Lord, precisely as it appears to our eyes in reality. The conditions are determined as well as the effects, the means as well as the ends, the ways as well as the results, the prayers as well as the answers, the pleasure as well as the justification, the sanctification as well as the glorification. According to this counsel, God gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Thus understood, in the light of Holy Scripture and according to the discernment granted by the Spirit, the confession of the ever-wise counsel of the Lord is a wellspring of profound consolation. By this divine counsel, we are assured that neither blind chance, nor dark fate, nor an unreasonable and unholy will, nor the inevitable forces of nature govern the world and mankind. Rather, the governance of all things rests in the hands of an omnipotent God and a merciful Father. Indeed, faith is required to grasp this truth. For we often do not see it, and man treads upon this earth in mystery; yet that faith sustains us in the trials of life and enables us to face the future with

confidence and hope. For the ever-wise counsel of the Lord endures forever, possessing eternal power.

The creation of the world marked the commencement of the execution of this counsel of God. As Scripture alone reveals to us the counsel of God, so it alone discloses the origin of all things and speaks of God's creative omnipotence. The question of the origin of everything—man and beast, plant and the whole world—is an ancient one, yet it perpetually remains relevant. Science offers no answer to it. Science itself is a creature that has arisen in time; it stands upon the foundation of created things and presupposes the existence of the things it investigates. Therefore, by its very nature, it can never reach back to the time before things existed or penetrate to the moment when they received their existence.

Experience and empirical research tell us nothing about the origin of things. Even the profound speculations of philosophy have sought in vain for an explanation of the world throughout the ages. Weary of contemplation, many have ultimately resigned themselves to the notion that the world had no origin but has existed eternally and will continue to exist eternally. This notion has been elaborated by philosophers in various directions.

Few have maintained that this world, as it now exists, is eternal and will continue perpetually. This notion, fraught with numerous objections, has largely been abandoned. Instead, the concept of evolution or development has gained prominence, proposing that nothing is static, but all is in a state of becoming, with the universe and everything within it engaged in an endless process.

Development, indeed, is a remarkable phenomenon, yet it inherently presupposes an entity that develops, possessing the potential for such development. Development cannot act as a creative force that brings things into existence; it merely describes the progression of things once they exist. Thus, the theory of evolution falls short in explaining the origin of things, implicitly suggesting the eternal existence of these things in an undeveloped state. It begins with an unprovable assumption, relying on faith as much as the doctrine of creation by God's hand.

However, the theory of evolution is not content with this arbitrary assumption. While it may assert that things existed eternally in an undeveloped form, it must still account for the original condition from which the present world emerged. Depending on the philosophical school, there are two responses to this question. In our observation of the world, we discern two groups of phenomena: spirit and matter, soul and body, the seen and the unseen, the psychic and the physical. This duality is unsatisfactory; today, we seek a monistic explanation, deriving everything from a single principle, which can lead us in two directions.

One might claim that matter was the first principle, eternal and inherently possessing force. This is the stance of materialism, which posits matter as the unchanging, original element of the world and seeks to explain force, soul, and psychic phenomena as emergent properties of matter. Conversely, one might argue that force was the primary principle, eternal and foundational to all existence, with matter as its manifestation. This is the view of pantheism, which holds force as eternal and seeks to derive the present world from it. Pantheism attributes various names to this force—spirit, reason, will

—yet it does not refer to a personal God endowed with intellect and will but to an unconscious, irrational impulse that only becomes conscious and rational through the process of human development.

In both directions, materialism (the doctrine of the material) and pantheism (al-Goddism), at the beginning of the development of the world, present a principle which is either more akin to matter or more akin to force, yet it remains an enigma, an unclear conception. It is less a positive entity and more a negation, lacking any definitive form, merely a possibility of becoming anything. This principle is not an entity but an incomprehensible thing with infinite potential, a deified derivative of thought, a substitute for the one true God, upon which the scientific man erroneously places his trust to explain the world, ascribing to it no more reality than to the gods of the nations.

The Holy Scriptures, however, take a markedly different course. The account of the origin of all things is not offered as a fruit of human inquiry or for the sake of philosophical explanation, but to reveal the one true God and to direct our trust towards Him alone. It is not derived from the world, but from God. God, not the world, is eternal. Before the mountains were brought forth and the earth and the world were formed, from everlasting to everlasting, He is God (Ps. 90:2). He is Jehovah, the One who is, was, and shall be, exalted above all things, a fullness of unchangeable being. Distinct from Him, the world has come into being and is continually becoming. The Scriptures, above all, guard against any confusion of God with His creation. They root out all unbelief and idolatry, declaring that God, as Creator, is essentially separate from His creatures.

As a creature, the whole world has its origin solely in God. There is no substance, no eternal power apart from Him, but heaven and earth and all things are called into existence by His command. The Scriptures express this with the term "create." In a broader sense, this word also applies to the works of maintenance (Ps. 104:30; Is. 45:7), but in a narrower sense, it signifies that God brought all things out of nothing. Though the specific phrase "out of nothing" does not appear in Scripture, it is implied in the declaration that the world was created by the will of God (Rev. 4:11) and that what is seen was not made out of what is visible (Heb. 11:3). Thus, while the phrase "out of nothing" can be misconstrued, it rightly conveys that the world was not formed from any preexisting matter or force but was created by God's sovereign will. According to Scripture, God is not merely the former but the Creator of the world. Humanly speaking, He existed alone before all things and, by His counsel and will, brought the world into being. The existence of the world was preceded by a state of complete non-being, hence it is fitting to say that God created the world out of nothing.

This is the clear testimony of Holy Scripture: that God existed from eternity (Ps. 90:2), yet the world had a beginning (Gen. 1:1). It is often affirmed that God has acted, chosen, and loved before the foundation of the world (John 17:24; Eph. 1:4). He is so mighty that He need only speak for something to come into existence (Ps. 33:9), and He can call into being things that are not, as though they were (Rom. 4:17). By His will alone, He brought forth the world (Rev. 4:11); He created everything, the heavens and the earth and all that is within them (Ex. 20:11; Neh. 9:6). All things are from Him, through Him, and to Him (Rom. 11:36). Therefore, He is the Almighty Possessor of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19, 22), who accomplishes all

that pleases Him. His power knows no bounds, and all creatures depend utterly upon Him, so that they cannot move or stir without His will (Ps. 115:3; Dan. 4:35). Scripture acknowledges no unformed, eternal substance apart from God; He is the sole and absolute cause of all that exists and all that transpires. Visible things were not made from things that appear; rather, the entire world was framed by the word of God (Heb. 11:3).

If God, the eternal and perfect Being, created the world by His will, we must naturally inquire why and for what purpose He called it into being. Science and philosophy have long sought to make the world necessary and to deduce it from the essence of God. In so doing, they have taken two divergent paths. Some propose that God is so overflowing and abundant that He cannot contain Himself, lacking the power over His own being, and thus the world flowed out from Him like a stream from a well or water from an overflowing vessel. Others contend that God is impoverished and empty in Himself, a mere hungry, wanting will, and that He brought forth the world to replenish Himself and satisfy His need. In both views, the world is deemed necessary to God, either to relieve Him of His abundance or to fulfill His lack.

Both notions are utterly foreign to Scripture. The Holy Writ takes an entirely different and diametrically opposed stance. According to these erroneous ideas, the center of gravity shifts from God to the world, rendering God subservient to the world; God is diminished, and the world is exalted, as though the world serves to redeem and sanctify God, who, through excess or lack, is insufficient in Himself. Though this blasphemous thought finds expression even among some esteemed thinkers today, Scripture, which is the Word of God

and advocates for Him from beginning to end, declares emphatically and unequivocally that God does not exist for the world's sake, but the entire world with all its creatures exists for God, for His sake and to His honor.

God is self-sufficient and complete within Himself. He needs not the world nor any creature to perfect His being. Can a man be profitable to God? Does the Almighty gain if you are righteous, or is He benefited if you perfect your ways? (Job 22:2-3). Man's righteousness adds nothing to Him, and his wickedness detracts nothing from Him. He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything, for He Himself gives to all life, breath, and all things (Acts 17:25). There is no compulsion or necessity within the nature of God to create the world. Creation is entirely a free act of God, not driven by any necessity of righteousness, though His righteousness is revealed in the world, for to whom could God be indebted? Nor is it to be deduced from the goodness and love of God, though both are manifest in the world, for the triune God's life of love required no object of love outside of Himself. Creation rests solely upon God's power, His eternal good pleasure, and His absolute sovereignty (Rev. 4:11).

This does not imply, however, that the creation of the world was an arbitrary act devoid of reason. We must humbly submit to God's sovereignty as the ultimate resolution of all contradictions, learning thereby quiet confidence and filial obedience. Yet, God indeed had wise and holy reasons for His act.

Scripture reveals this primarily by describing creation as the work of the triune God. When God creates man, He first consults within

Himself, saying, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Thus, all God's works are founded upon divine counsel. Before creation, He consulted wisdom (Job 28:20ff; Prov. 8:22ff). In time, He created all things by the Word, which was in the beginning with God and was God (John 1:1-3; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), and by the Spirit, who searches the depths of God, quickens the creatures, and adorns the heavens (Job 26:13; 33:4; 1 Cor. 2:10). “In wisdom hast Thou made them all; the earth is full of Thy riches” (Ps. 104:24).

Moreover, Scripture teaches that God created, sustains, and governs all things for His own glory. The purpose for which creatures were made cannot lie within them, as the determination of the end precedes the means. Thus, Scripture declares generally that as all things are from God, so also all things are through Him and to Him (Rom. 11:36). This is further elaborated: the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1); God glorifies Himself in Pharaoh (Ex. 14:17) and in the blind man (John 9:3); He bestows all benefits of grace for His name’s sake (Isa. 43:25; Eph. 1:6); Christ came to glorify the Father (John 17:4); and one day all knees will bow and acknowledge His glory (Phil. 2:11). God desires to manifest the virtues of His triune being through creation, thereby obtaining glory and honor from all that He has made. Yet, for this self-glorification, God needs not the world, for the creature cannot independently enhance His honor. It is always God Himself who, with or without the creature, glorifies His own name and delights in Himself. Thus, God never seeks the creature as if it could offer Him something He lacks or take away something He possesses. The entire world is but a mirror reflecting His virtues. He remains eternally at rest in Himself, the highest good, blessed in His own salvation.

Scripture not only declares that God, by His will, brought forth the world out of nothing but also reveals something of the manner in which this creation occurred.

It commences with the proclamation that God, in the beginning, created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). This beginning marks the inception of those things which received creation. It is the commencement when God, who is without beginning, and the Word, which is with God and is God Himself, already existed from eternity (John 1:1). However, it is at this point that all created entities began to be. Time and space, too, found their genesis then. These two are not independent entities, produced by a distinct act of divine power; the creation narrative contains no direct reference to them. Rather, time and space are the necessary conditions for the existence of created things. God alone is eternal and omnipresent; all creatures, by contrast, are bound by time and space, albeit in varied manners. Time allows a thing to exist in a succession of moments, enabling things to follow one after another; space allows a thing to expand in all directions, permitting things to coexist side by side. Thus, in the very moment of creation, time and space came into being as their essential forms of existence. They did not preexist as void forms waiting to encompass creatures; for where there is nothing, there is neither time nor space. Nor were they created independently, alongside creatures, and added externally. They were brought into existence in and with the creatures as the forms in which they necessarily exist as limited, finite beings. Thus, Augustine aptly stated that God did not create the world within time, as if within a preexisting condition, but He created it simultaneously with time and time with the world.

Moreover, the first verse of Genesis asserts that God, in the beginning, created the heavens and the earth. By heavens and earth, Scripture here, as elsewhere (Gen. 2:1, 4; Exod. 20:11), denotes the entire world, the whole universe, which, from the outset, according to God's will, is divided into two realms: the earth with all that is upon and within it, and the heavens, encompassing all that is outside and above the earth. Thus, the heavens, in Scriptural terms, include the firmament with the sky and clouds (Gen. 1:8, 20), the stars, which are the host of heaven (Deut. 4:19; Ps. 8:4), and finally, the third heaven, or the heaven of heavens, the dwelling place of God and the angels (1 Kings 8:27; Ps. 2:4; 115:16; Matt. 6:9). When the first verse of Genesis states that God created the heavens and the earth in the beginning, this must not be construed merely as a heading or summary of what follows, nor should it be understood as indicating that, with the act described in Genesis 1:1, the heavens and earth were created in their perfected state.

The first interpretation is refuted by the fact that the second verse begins with the conjunction “and”: “And the earth was without form and void.” This continuation indicates that the narrative progresses, adding a subsequent fact to the initial one stated in verse 1. The second interpretation is implausible, as the heavens, defined as sky and clouds, are only established in Genesis 1:8, and both heaven and earth are only described as complete and finished in Genesis 2:1.

Although we cannot assert with absolute certainty, it is nevertheless probable that the heaven of heavens, the dwelling place of God, was established at the initial act of creation recounted in Genesis 1:1, and that the angels were brought forth at that time. For in Job 38:4-7, the Lord, answering Job from the tempest, declares that no man was

present when He laid the earth's foundations and set its cornerstone, but that this work was accomplished amidst the jubilant singing of the morning stars and the shouting for joy of the sons of God, that is, the angels. Thus, the angels were already present at the formation of the earth and the creation of man.

Yet, concerning the creation of the heaven of heavens and its angels, we are given scant detail. After a brief mention in the first verse, the Genesis narrative swiftly transitions to a more detailed account of the earth's preparation in the second verse. This preparation was necessary because the earth, though created, was initially formless and void, shrouded in darkness. The text does not imply that the earth was desolate or ruined, as some have surmised, who speculate a divine judgment upon the completed earth due to the angels' fall. Rather, Genesis 1:2 merely states that the earth was without form, signifying an unstructured, unshaped state, with no distinction yet made between light and darkness, waters and waters, earth and seas. It was the creative acts of God, as described in Genesis 1:3-10, that dispelled the earth's formlessness. Similarly, the earth was empty, devoid of vegetation, trees, and living creatures; it was through God's subsequent works, listed in Genesis 1:11ff, that this emptiness was filled. For God did not create the earth to remain void, but to be inhabited (Isa. 45:18). The initial series of works begins with the creation of light, introducing separation, form, color, and tone. The subsequent series commences with the creation of the luminaries—the sun, moon, and stars—and serves to populate the earth with inhabitants: birds, fish, animals, and humans.

According to the repeated testimony of Scripture (Gen. 2:1-2; Exod. 20:11; 31:17), the entire work of creation was accomplished in six

days. Nevertheless, there has always been a notable liberty of interpretation and a remarkable divergence of opinion regarding the nature of these days. Even Augustine held that God created everything simultaneously, and that the six days were not sequential periods of time, but merely perspectives from which the order and rank of creatures could be viewed. Conversely, there are many who believe the days of creation to be far longer than twenty-four hours.

Scripture, however, speaks quite definitively of days, delineated from morning to evening, forming the basis for the division of the week and the festal calendar among Israel. Nonetheless, the scriptural text contains elements that compel us to consider these days as being other than our ordinary, earth-rotational days.

Firstly, it is uncertain whether the account in Genesis 1:1-2 precedes the first day or is part of it. The argument for the former is that the first day, according to verse 5, begins with the creation of light and concludes after the evening and the night of the following morning. However, even if one includes the events of Genesis 1:1-2 in the first day, the result is an unusual day, initially enveloped in darkness; the duration of this darkness, which preceded the creation of light, is not specified.

Secondly, the first three days, as described in Genesis 1:3-13, were markedly different from our days. Our 24-hour days are defined by the earth's rotation on its axis and its position relative to the sun. Yet, the first three days could not have been formed in this manner, for while they alternated with the appearance and disappearance of light, Genesis informs us that the sun, moon, and stars were not made until the fourth day.

Thirdly, it is possible that the second series of three days were similar to our ordinary days. However, considering that the fall of angels and men, as well as the subsequent deluge, caused significant changes in the cosmos (Gen. 3:14f; Matt. 4:8-9; Rom. 8:20f), and that the period of creation is inherently different from the period of normal growth, it is conceivable that the second series of three days were also quite unlike our own.

Lastly, it is worth noting that all the events described in Genesis 1 and 2 as occurring on the sixth day seem too numerous to be confined within the limits of a day equivalent to ours. On this one day, Scripture recounts the creation of animals (Gen. 1:24-25), the creation of Adam (Gen. 1:26; 2:7), the planting of the garden (Gen. 2:8-14), the proclamation of the commandment (Gen. 2:16-17), the bringing of animals to Adam and his naming of them (Gen. 2:18-20), Adam's sleep, and the creation of Eve (Gen. 2:21-23).

Yet, the six days remain the creation week, during which the heavens, the earth, and all their hosts were completed. They signify the sequential order in which creatures received their existence, while also indicating their rank and relationship to one another. This mirrors the observable reality that the formless precedes the formed, the inorganic precedes the organic, plants precede animals, and animals precede man. Man is and remains the crown of creation; the preparation of the earth culminates in him. Hence, Scripture speaks little of the creation of the heavens and the angels, focusing primarily on the earth. Astronomically, the earth may seem small and insignificant; it may be surpassed in mass and gravity by numerous planets, suns, and stars. Yet, in a religious and moral sense, it remains the center of the universe, chosen as the abode for mankind,

the battlefield for the great struggle against evil, and the foundation for the kingdom of heaven.

All created things are comprehended in Scripture under the names of heaven and earth and all their host (Gen. 2:1), or also under the term "world." The original words, which our Bible renders as "world," at times refer to the earth as a globe or circle (1 Sam. 2:8; Prov. 8:31), and at other times to the earth as the dwelling place of mankind, insofar as it is inhabited by humanity (Matt. 24:14; Luke 2:1). Sometimes, these terms highlight the world's temporary, changing, and transient nature (Ps. 49:2; Luke 1:70; Eph. 1:21), while at other times they refer to the world as the unity and totality of all creatures (John 1:10; Acts 17:24). Particularly, these latter two meanings are rich in content. One can, as it were, view the world from two perspectives: one can see it in its breadth and in its length.

In the first case, it is a unity, a coherent whole, but within that unity, it reveals an incalculably rich diversity. From the beginning, being created and formed, it comprises heaven and earth, visible and invisible things. From the celestial bodies of astronomy to human beings, animals, and plants, living and lifeless, animated and inanimate entities. And all these creatures are infinitely varied among themselves; among the angels, there are thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers; among humans, there are men and women, parents and children, authorities and subjects, peoples and nations, tongues and languages. Similarly, plants and animals, and in a sense also minerals, are divided into classes and groups, families and genera, species and varieties. All these creatures retain, within certain limits, their own nature, which they have received from God (Gen. 1:11, 21ff), and are thus subject to their own laws. They exist

not only sequentially, as created one after another and continuing in their lower or higher ranks, but also coexist, maintaining their existence side by side up to the present day. Creation is not uniform but multiform, and in its entirety and in all its parts, it displays the richest and most beautiful variety.

Simultaneously, the world continues its existence and development through time. Although everything God created was very good (Gen. 1:31), this does not imply that it was already all it could and should be. Just as man, though created in God's image, received a calling and destiny to fulfill through works, so the world, at its creation, was not at its end but at its beginning. It embarked on a long history, a history of centuries, wherein it revealed ever more richly and clearly the virtues of God. Creation and development are thus not mutually exclusive; creation is the genesis and the foundation of all development. Because God created a world with incalculable diversity, where various creatures possess their own nature and, within that nature, their own thoughts, powers, and laws, development is possible. All development derives its origin, direction, and goal from this creation. Even though sin has interfered with and marred this development, God nonetheless fulfills His counsel, upholds the world, and guides it to its ultimate destination.

When Scripture speaks of the world in this manner, it implicitly affirms the existence of but one world. Philosophers have often speculated otherwise. Many hold the view that multiple worlds exist, that not only the earth but also other planets are inhabited by living and thinking beings. The notion that various worlds have existed successively, with the present world merely one in a long sequence of worlds, has also been popular. Some even propose that everything

existing today has existed before in exactly the same form and will return again, suggesting a perpetual cycle of appearance and disappearance, rise and fall.

The Scriptures remain silent on these conjectures and imaginings. It declares that this world was created by God in the beginning, progresses through a history of centuries, and culminates in the eternal sabbath rest reserved for the people of God. Furthermore, Scripture reveals nothing about the habitability of planets other than the earth. It acknowledges the infinite diversity of the world, noting the existence of humans and angels, and of heaven and earth. However, it asserts that only man was created in God's image, that the Son of God assumed human nature, not angelic, and that the kingdom of heaven is established and realized on this earth.

Moreover, Scripture teaches that the world is finite. This first means it had a beginning and was created simultaneously with time. The question of the world's duration is secondary; whether it has existed for thousands or millions of years longer than is actually the case, it remains finite and cannot attain the eternality that belongs to God. The world, being created in and with time, will never become eternal as God is eternal. This is significant, for Scripture, which teaches the world's beginning, also maintains it will not have an end in its substance and essence, though its present form will pass away. Even if the world, humanity, and angels continue indefinitely into the future, they remain creatures and will never partake in the eternity that belongs to God. The world exists within time and continues therein, though in another dispensation, time may be reckoned by a completely different measure than it is today.

Likewise, the world remains bound by space. Modern science has vastly extended our vision; the world appears far larger than it did to our ancestors. We are awed by the number and magnitude of the stars, each a world unto itself, and the distances at which these stars are situated from our earth defy our comprehension. Yet, the world cannot be conceived as infinite, for God alone is infinite. The world, though immense, is not infinite in degree but in essence. We cannot conceive of time and space outside the world; we cannot imagine reaching the universe's boundary and staring into a void. Time and space extend as far as the world exists, and as long as they exist, they are filled with created things. Yet, all these, even if they surpass our understanding and imagination, remain finite. A sum of finite parts, however great, never results in infinity. Eternal, omnipresent, and infinite is God alone.

Finally, Scripture instructs us to hold firmly that the world is good. To assert this in our present age requires considerable boldness. Though the eighteenth century was marked by an optimistic outlook, viewing everything through the most favorable lens and asserting that God had created the best of all possible worlds, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have taken a far more dismal view of life, the world, and society. Today, poets, philosophers, and artists proclaim that everything is misery, that the world is as wretched as it can be, and that if it were any worse, it would be unbearable. Many contend that all existence is only fit for destruction. Some, therefore, seek to indulge in the fleeting pleasures of life with the motto: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Others succumb to weariness and idleness, or fervently place their hopes in a future utopia, the afterlife, or the nirvana that the present denies them.

Yet Scripture maintains its own stance on this matter. It declares, first, that the world was good, indeed very good, as it came forth from the hand of God (Gen. 1:31). Nowhere is the fragility and transience of life, the smallness and insignificance of all that exists, and the depth and pain of suffering more poignantly described than in the Holy Scriptures. But it does not end there. It further affirms that even in this fallen, guilty, and vain world, God's good pleasure is being accomplished; and from the ultimate destination toward which the world is being led, it may again be called good. Despite sin, it remains a means through which God glorifies His virtues, an instrument for the honor of His name. Finally, Scripture concludes with the marvelous promise that this world, with all its suffering and tribulation, will become good for us if we submit our will to the honor of God and make it subservient. "All things work together for good to those who love God" (Rom. 8:28); they even learn to glory in tribulation (Rom. 5:3); their faith is the victory that overcomes the world (1 John 5:4).

These reflections naturally lead us from creation to Providence. From the very moment the world and each of its creatures are brought into being by God's creative act, they pass immediately into the care of His providence. There is no gradual transition here, much less a separation. For just as creatures, by their very nature, cannot exist by themselves, so they cannot sustain themselves for even a single moment. Providence immediately joins Creation, and Creation passes directly into Providence.

This reveals the intimate and inseparable connection between creation and providence. It is of paramount importance to uphold this indissoluble bond against all forms of deism. Deism posits that

while creation occurred by God's hand, He subsequently withdrew from the world, leaving it to operate independently. This notion suggests that creation merely granted the world an autonomous existence, a view endorsed by thinkers such as Kant and Darwin. According to this perspective, God endowed the world with complete autonomy and a plenitude of gifts and powers, enabling it to sustain and govern itself, much like a clock that, once wound, runs its course and eventually winds down. Consequently, deism asserts that the human mind requires no revelation, capable as it is of discovering all necessary truths through its own faculties. Deism naturally leads to rationalism, the belief that reason alone can uncover all truth. From this follows Pelagianism, which attributes to human will the power to achieve salvation independently, suggesting that man's will, like his reason, is self-sufficient and does not require a mediator for redemption.

In opposition to this view, it is crucial to maintain the link between creation and providence. The Scriptures uphold this connection, describing providence as giving life (Job 33:4; Neh. 9:6), renewing (Ps. 104:30), preserving (Ps. 36:7), speaking (Ps. 33:9), willing (Rev. 4:11), working (John 5:17), sustaining by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3), caring (1 Pet. 5:7), and even creating (Ps. 104:30; Isa. 45:7; Amos 4:13). These expressions make it clear that after creation, God did not abandon the world to its own devices or merely observe from afar. The term 'providence' should never be misconstrued to marginalize the living God and His continuous activity. Providence means not only that God foresees and anticipates all things, but also that He provides for all the world's needs (Gen. 22:8; 1 Sam. 16:1; Ezek. 20:6; Heb. 11:40). It is an act of both God's intellect and will,

an execution of His counsel, by which He sustains the world from moment to moment.

Thus, maintenance, typically seen as the primary activity of providence, is not a passive observation, but an active sustaining and preserving in the truest sense. The Heidelberg Catechism eloquently describes providence as the omnipotent and omnipresent power of God, by which He upholds heaven and earth and all things therein, as with His hand. From God emanates almighty and divine power, necessary for the continuation of the world just as it was for its creation. Without this power, no creature could exist for even a moment; the instant God withdrew His hand and withheld His power, creation would collapse into nothingness. All existence and being flow from God's Word and Spirit, as He commands and wills (Ps. 104:30; 107:26; Ps. 33:9; 147:15; Rev. 4:11).

That power does not operate from a distance but from proximity; it is an omnipresent power. God is present with all His virtues, with His entire being, throughout the entire world and within all creatures. In Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). He is not far from any one of us (Acts 17:27); He is a God of nearness; no one can hide in a corner where the Lord does not see him; He fills the heavens and the earth (Jer. 23:23-24). Who can go before His Spirit, and who can flee from His presence? He is in heaven and in Sheol, at the end of the sea and in the depths of darkness (Ps. 139:7-12). His providence, His sustaining power, extends to all creatures, to the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28), the birds of the air (Matt. 6:26), and even the hairs of our head (Matt. 10:30). All creatures exist according to their nature, as long as they exist, and as they exist, by the power of God; as they are of Him, so they are through Him (Rom. 11:36).

The Son, through whom God made the world, continually upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:2-3); all things consist in Him who is before all things (Col. 1:17), and are created and renewed by His Spirit (Ps. 104:30).

Given this intimate relationship between creation and providence, the latter has sometimes been termed a continuous or ongoing creation. This term can be understood rightly, but it must be guarded against misunderstanding. For with the same seriousness with which we must uphold the connection and similarity between creation and providence, we must also recognize and respect the distinction between them. Just as in the first case we might fall into deism (belief in a distant, uninvolved God), so in the second case, if we ignore these distinctions, we risk falling into the error of pantheism (equating God with the world). This view erases the distinction between God and the world, identifying them as two aspects of the same reality; God is then conceived as the essence of the world, and the world as the manifestation of God; they are related as the ocean and its waves, as being and its forms, as the invisible and the visible sides of the same whole.

Scripture guards against this error with no less vigilance than against deism. This is evident from the fact that God is not only depicted as having begun the work of creation, but as having rested after the completion of creation (Gen. 2:2; Exod. 20:11; 31:17). In creation, something is accomplished that then reaches its completion. As was clearly demonstrated above, God's resting is not a cessation of all work, for providence is also His work (John 5:17), but it signifies the completion of that particular work indicated by creation. If creation and providence can be related as work and rest, this implies beyond

any doubt that they, however closely related and connected, are still distinct. Creation is the bringing forth from nothing, whereas providence is the preservation and continuation of the existence once given. Therefore, although the world does not become independent through creation, for an independent creature is an inherent contradiction, it nonetheless receives a being and existence distinct from the essence of God. God and the world are distinguished not merely in name or form, but in essence; they differ from one another as eternity differs from time, as infinity differs from finitude, as Creator differs from creature.

It is of utmost importance to uphold the essential distinction between God and the world. For he who misunderstands or denies this distinction corrupts religion, reducing God to the level of the creature, and thus becomes guilty of the very sin Paul charges against the Gentiles: "Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him" (Rom. 1:21). Moreover, another consideration compels us never to lose sight of the distinction between God and the world, between creation and providence.

If God is not truly distinct from mankind, then all human thoughts and actions must be immediately and directly attributed to God; thus, sin would be His work, and the concept of sin would vanish.

Now, Scripture asserts most emphatically that man, with all his thoughts and deeds, including his sins, is under God's control; man is never independent of God. "The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man" (Ps. 33:13); "He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds" (Ps. 33:15); "He fixed the boundaries of the peoples" (Deut. 32:8; Acts 17:26); "He directs their

steps" (Prov. 5:21; 16:9; Jer. 10:23), and "He does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth" (Dan. 4:35); humans are "in his hand as clay in the potter's hand, and as a saw in the hand of the one who uses it" (Isa. 29:16; 45:9; Jer. 18:5; Rom. 9:20-21). When man becomes a sinner, he does not thereby make himself free from God; rather, his dependence merely takes on a different character. It loses its reasonable and moral nature and becomes mere creaturely subjection; man, who becomes a slave to sin, reduces himself in God's hand to a mere instrument. Thus, Scripture also declares that God makes man stubborn, hardens and blinds him (Ex. 4:21; Deut. 2:30; Josh. 11:20; Rom. 9:18), that He sends a lying spirit into the mouths of the prophets (1 Kings 22:23), that He incites David through Satan to number the people (2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Chron. 21:1), that He commands Shimei to curse David (2 Sam. 16:10), that He gives men over to their sins (Rom. 1:24), that He sends a delusion (2 Thess. 2:11), and makes Christ not only a resurrection but also a fall for many (Luke 2:34).

Yet, despite God's providence involving itself with sin, Scripture maintains with equal firmness that sin originates not in God but in man, and that the blame lies with man alone. The Lord is just and holy, far removed from iniquity (Deut. 32:4; Job 34:10); a light without darkness (1 John 1:5), tempting no one (James 1:13), an abundant fountain of all that is good and pure (Ps. 36:9; James 1:17). He forbids sin in His law (Exod. 20) and in the conscience of every man (Rom. 2:14-15), takes no pleasure in wickedness (Ps. 5:4), but hates it and is wrathful against it (Rom. 1:18), and threatens it with temporal and eternal punishment (Rom. 2:8).

These two tenets of Scripture, which affirm that sin is under God's sovereign control from beginning to end and yet remains the responsibility of mankind, can only be reconciled if God and the world are not separated yet remain essentially distinct. This is the aim of theology when it speaks of cooperation in God's providence as the second aspect, following preservation. It seeks to demonstrate that God is the primary cause of all that exists and occurs, yet creatures, under, in, and through Him, act as secondary causes, cooperating with the primary cause. Even with inanimate and insensate creatures, we can speak of secondary causes, for although God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust, He employs the sun and clouds as instruments through which He dispenses light and rain upon the earth. However, this distinction is far more significant with rational creatures. For they have received from God a mind and a will to govern and direct themselves. In rational creatures, too, all existence, life, gifts, and power emanate from God, and they remain under the dominion of His providence regardless of how they use those gifts and powers. Yet, there is a difference between the primary and secondary causes, between God and man. Just as God works in mankind to will and to do His good pleasure, and yet man himself wills and acts; so, and even more so, it is God who gives life and power, but it is man alone who commits sin and bears its guilt. The mysteries of God's providence are beyond our full comprehension, but the confession that God and the world are never separate but always distinct guides us toward the path where the solution must be sought and preserves us from straying to either extreme.

Thus understood, the doctrine of creation and providence is rich in encouragement and comfort. There is much in life that depresses and

saps the will to live and act. Not only the adversities and disappointments encountered on life's journey, not only the dreadful disasters and calamities that sometimes cause untold human suffering and death, but also the routine course of life often raises doubts about God's providence. Is not the mystery of life and the destiny of all human beings fraught with anxiety and fear? Do we not often feel that God has a quarrel with His creatures, and that we perish through His wrath and are terrified by His anger? Indeed, not only the unbelievers and the simple-minded, but also the children of God, especially the most profound and serious among them, are gripped by the sobering gravity of reality. At times, the question arises from the heart to the lips, whether mankind might have been created by God in vain.

Yet, from such doubt, faith in God's creation and providence lifts their heads once more. It is not the devil but God, the Almighty, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who created the world. It is wholly and entirely the work of His hands alone. And having created it, He has not abandoned it. He upholds it by His omnipotent and omnipresent power; He intervenes in all creatures with His might, and He governs them in such a way that they all contribute to and fulfill His appointed ends. God's providence, which includes preservation and cooperation, also encompasses governance. God reigns; He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15; Rev. 19:16), and His kingdom endures forever (1 Tim. 1:17). Neither chance nor fate, neither caprice nor compulsion, neither whimsical fancy nor iron necessity, govern nature and history, the life and destiny of humanity. Rather, behind all secondary causes lies and operates the almighty will of an all-powerful God and faithful Father.

It is evident that none can truly believe this in their heart and confess it with their mouth, save those who know themselves to be children of God. Faith in providence is intimately connected with faith in salvation.

Indeed, God's providence is a truth that can be partially discerned through His general revelation in nature and history. Pagans have often spoken of it and described it in admirable terms; one said that the gods see and hear everything, are present everywhere, and care for all things simultaneously; another attested that the order and arrangement of the universe is maintained by God and for God's sake. Yet, none of them knew the Christian confession that the God who upholds and governs all things is their God and Father for the sake of His Son, Christ. Thus, their faith in God's providence was often shaken by doubt and proved unable to withstand life's vicissitudes. The eighteenth century, in its optimism, believed that God had created the best of all possible worlds. However, when the city of Lisbon was largely destroyed by a terrible earthquake in 1755, many began to blaspheme God's providence and deny His existence. But the Christian, who has experienced God's love in the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of his soul, boasts with the apostle Paul that no tribulation, distress, persecution, hunger, danger, or sword shall separate him from that love (Rom. 8:35). Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation (Hab. 3:17-18).

In this joy of heart, he calls upon the whole earth to praise the Lord: The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be

glad! (Ps. 97:1).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the doctrine of the Trinity shape our understanding of creation and providence?

- Reflect on the relationship between the Triune God and His works in nature and grace, and how this impacts your view of God's continual activity in the world.

2. What is the significance of God creating the world through His Word and wisdom, as described in John 1:3 and Proverbs 8:22ff?

- Consider how the involvement of the Word (Christ) and wisdom in creation reveals the nature and character of God.

3. How does the biblical concept of creation "ex nihilo" (out of nothing) challenge philosophical and scientific explanations of the world's origin?

- Discuss the implications of God creating everything by His will alone and how this differs from materialistic and pantheistic views.

4. What role does God's counsel and will play in the creation and governance of the world?

- Reflect on passages such as Psalm 33:11 and Ephesians 1:11 that emphasize God's sovereign plan and how this shapes our understanding of His providence.

5. In what ways does the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2 highlight the intentionality and orderliness of God's creative work?

- Analyze the structure and sequence of the six days of creation and the significance of God resting on the seventh day.

6. How does the idea of providence, as described in the chapter, provide comfort and assurance to believers?

- Consider the doctrine of God's continuous involvement in sustaining and governing the world and how this impacts your trust in His care.

7. What are the dangers of deism and pantheism, and how does the doctrine of providence counter these errors?

- Discuss the importance of maintaining the distinction between God and His creation while recognizing His active presence and governance in the world.

8. How does Scripture reconcile the sovereignty of God with human responsibility and the reality of sin?

- Reflect on passages like Romans 9:20-21 and James 1:13 that address the relationship between God's control and human actions.

9. What practical implications does the belief in God's providence have for facing life's challenges and uncertainties?

- Consider how the knowledge of God's sovereign control and loving care can strengthen your faith and resilience in difficult

times.

10 . How does the understanding of creation and providence enhance our worship and praise of God?

- Reflect on Psalm 104 and other passages that celebrate God's creative power and providential care, and how this deepens our adoration and trust in Him.

12. Origin, Being, and Destiny of Mankind

The narrative of the origin of heaven and earth reaches its culmination in the first chapter of Genesis with the creation of mankind. The creation of other creatures—heaven and earth, sun and moon and stars, plants and animals—is recorded briefly, and the creation of angels is not mentioned at all. But when Scripture comes to man, it lingers, detailing not only the fact but also the manner of his creation, and revisits this subject extensively in the second chapter of Genesis.

This special attention to the origin of man in itself signifies that man is the end and goal, the head and crown of the entire work of creation. Yet, there are several additional elements that underscore man's rank and value, which surpasses all other creatures.

Firstly, there is the special counsel of God preceding the creation of man. When other creatures were created, it is simply stated that God

spoke, calling them into existence. But when God creates man, He first consults within Himself, arousing Himself to create man according to His will.

This deliberation indicates that the creation of mankind rests particularly on Divine wisdom, goodness, and omnipotence. Nothing is created by chance, but in the creation of mankind, the counsel and decision of God are more clearly revealed than in other creatures.

Furthermore, in this divine counsel, special emphasis is placed on the fact that man is created in God's image and likeness, establishing a relationship with God that is completely different from that of all other creatures. No other creature, not even angels, are said in Scripture to be created in the image of God and to bear His image. While they may reflect one or more of God's attributes, man alone is described as being created in God's image and likeness.

Scripture also highlights that God did not create merely one man, but He created humans in His image. At the conclusion of Genesis 1:27, these humans are identified as male and female. Not the man alone, nor the woman alone, but both together in relationship and covenant with each other are bearers of the image of God. Thus, they are not merely so for themselves, but, according to the blessing of multiplication pronounced upon them in verse 28, they are so also in and with all their offspring. The human race, in each of its members and as a whole, was originally created in the image and likeness of God.

Furthermore, it is explicitly mentioned that the creation of mankind in the image of God must chiefly be manifested in the dominion over all living beings and in the subjection of all creation to God. Because

man is the son of God, he is also king of the earth. The filial relationship with God and the inheritance of the world are already inseparably connected in creation.

The narrative of the creation of mankind in the first chapter of Genesis is expanded and completed in the second chapter (Gen. 2:4-25). It is erroneous to refer to this second chapter as a separate creation account. The creation of heaven and earth is presupposed, and in verse 4 is mentioned briefly, setting the stage for God's formation of man from the dust of the ground (verse 7). The emphasis in this second chapter is entirely on the creation of man and the manner of his formation. In these particulars, the distinction between the first and second chapters of Genesis is evident.

The first chapter recounts the creation of heaven and earth and culminates with man. Man is the final creature brought into existence by God's omnipotence; he is the culmination of the series of creatures, the ruler of nature, the king of the earth. The second chapter, beginning with man, places him at the center, detailing the events of his creation, how both man and woman were formed, the residence given to man, the vocation assigned to him, and the destiny bestowed upon him. The first chapter portrays mankind as the apex of creation; the second as the commencement of history. The first chapter can be summarized as the work of creation, while the second chapter can aptly be titled Paradise.

Three specific details are conveyed in this second chapter regarding man's origin, supplementing the general account given in the first chapter.

First, there is an extensive discussion of man's initial dwelling place. The first chapter only states generally that man was created in the image of God and given dominion over the world. It does not specify where on the vast earth man first beheld the light of day or where he initially resided. The second chapter fills in this detail. When God created the heavens and the earth, bringing forth the sun, moon, stars, plants, birds, and animals of water and land, no particular place had yet been prepared for man's habitation. Thus, before creating mankind, God prepares a garden, a paradise, in the region of Eden, to the east of Palestine. This garden is specially arranged; God causes all kinds of trees to sprout from the ground, trees desirable for appearance and good for food. Among these trees, two are specifically named: the tree of life, planted in the center of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The garden is situated such that a river flows through it, originating in Eden and splitting into four branches: the Pison, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates.

Over the centuries, considerable effort and labor have been devoted to determining the precise location of Eden and the Garden of Eden. Various hypotheses have been proposed regarding the singular river that flowed through the garden and out of Eden, the four rivers into which it divided, and the specific names of the Eden landscape and the garden, a distinct area within it. Yet, all these hypotheses remain speculative; none can be conclusively proven. Two views, however, are notably preferable. One posits Eden to the north, in Armenia; the other locates it further south, in Babylonia. The decision between these two views is challenging, for the data provided in Scripture no longer suffice to pinpoint the exact location with certainty. However, considering that mankind, originating from Adam and Eve, though banished from Eden, continued to dwell nearby (Gen. 4:16), that

Noah's ark rested on Mount Ararat in eastern Armenia after the flood (Gen. 8:4), and that humanity spread from Babel over the earth (Gen. 11:8-9), we may conclude that the cradle of mankind lies in the region bordered by Armenia in the north and Shinar in the south. Recent scientific findings have reinforced this Scriptural teaching. Although past speculations varied about mankind's original habitation, pointing to different parts of the world, modern ethnology, the history of civilization, linguistics, and historical studies increasingly identify Asia as the continent where mankind first arose.

A second notable aspect in Genesis 2 is the commandment given to the first man, a test of obedience. This first man, simply called "man" (ha-adam), was so named because for a time he was alone, without a companion; only in Genesis 4:25 does the name "Adam" appear without the article, thus becoming a proper name. This clearly indicates that the first man, who was initially the only man, was the origin and head of the human race. As such, he received a twofold task: first, to cultivate and guard the Garden of Eden, and second, to eat freely from all the trees in the garden, except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The first task describes man's relationship to the earth; the second, his relationship to heaven. Adam must subdue and govern the earth in two senses: he must cultivate it, extracting from it all the treasures God has placed within it for mankind, even to its very depths; and he must guard it, securing it, protecting it from all evil powers that threaten it, safeguarding it from the bondage of corruption under which all creation now groans.

However, man can only fulfill his earthly vocation if he maintains his bond with heaven, heeding God's word and, despite all temptations, continuing in obedience to His commandment. These two tasks are fundamentally one: Adam must rule over the earth, not through idleness, but by the diligent labor of his mind, heart, and hands.

But to rule effectively, man must serve God, his Creator and Lawgiver. Work and rest, dominion and service, earthly and heavenly calling, civilization and religion, culture and worship—these are intertwined from the beginning, belonging together and encompassing the great, holy, and glorious destiny of mankind. The entire culture, encompassing all human endeavors to subjugate the earth—agriculture, animal husbandry, industry, trade, science, and more—is the fulfillment of a divine calling. However, for this to remain true, these endeavors must be undertaken in dependence upon and obedience to God's Word. Religion must be the principle that inspires and sanctifies all life in service to God.

The third special feature is the gift of woman and the institution of marriage. Adam had received much. Although formed from the dust of the earth, he bore the image of God. He was placed in a garden of beauty, abundant with everything desirable to the eye and good for food. He was called to cultivate the garden and subdue the earth through pleasant labor, living in accordance with God's command to eat freely from all the trees except one. Yet, despite these rich endowments, the first man was grateful but not wholly satisfied. God Himself identified the cause: Adam's loneliness. "It is not good that man should be alone." Man was not designed for solitude; he was created for companionship. His nature is inherently sociable; he must express, reveal, and share. He must pour out his heart,

communicate his affections, and share his experiences with a being who can understand, sympathize, and empathize with him. Solitude is poverty, desolation, slow languishing, and collapse. How lonely it is to be alone!

He who created mankind with such a need for communication and companionship is also the one who can satisfy this need. God alone can provide a companion suitable for man. Thus, it is described in verses 19-21 that the Lord formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to Adam to see if any might be a suitable companion for him. The purpose of these verses is not to indicate the chronological order of the creation of animals and man, but to demonstrate the factual order, the hierarchy, and the degree of kinship between these two kinds of creatures. This hierarchy is indicated by the first man when he gave names to the animals.

Adam, therefore, comprehended all these creatures; he understood their nature, could classify and assign to each its rightful place in the grand scheme of creation. Thus, when he did not find among them any creature akin to himself, it was not due to ignorance or prideful folly, but because there existed a fundamental difference between him and all other creatures—not merely a difference in degree but in essence. There are various similarities between animals and man; both are physical beings, sharing earthly needs and desires for sustenance, procreation, and growth. Both possess the senses of smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing, and engage in lower cognitive activities such as perception, representation, and the association of ideas. Yet man is distinct from the animal; he possesses reason and will, and thereby language, religion, morality, law, science, and art. Though formed from the dust of the earth, he received the breath of

life from above. He is a physical being, but also a spiritual one, endowed with reason and morality. Thus, Adam found none among all creatures that was akin to him and could serve as his helper. He named them all, but none merited the exalted, royal name of man.

When man could not find what he sought, God provided it for him without his knowledge or effort, through no fault of his own. The best gifts fall into our laps as blessings without toil or cost. We do not earn them; we receive them freely. The richest and most precious gift given to man on earth is woman; and she was given to him while he was in a deep sleep, unconscious, without exertion of will or labor of hand. Seeking, longing, recognizing the need, and praying precede it; then God bestows the gift freely, without our aid. He leads the man to the woman as if by His own hand.

The first sensation Adam feels upon awakening and beholding the woman before him is one of admiration and gratitude. He does not find her strange but immediately recognizes her as of the same nature as himself. His recognition is a re-acknowledgment of what he felt was missing and sought, but could not provide for himself. His admiration is expressed in the first wedding song to resonate on earth: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man" (Gen. 2:23). Thus, Adam remains the principle and head of the human race; the woman is not created beside him, but from him (1 Cor. 11:8). Just as the material for Adam's body was taken from the earth, so Adam's side forms the basis for Eve's existence. Yet, as the first man was made from the dust of the earth by the breath of life from above, so the first woman was made from Adam's side by the creative omnipotence of God. She is of Adam and yet distinct from him; she is

related to him and yet different; she belongs to the same species and yet holds her own place within it; she is dependent yet free; she is from Adam but owes her existence to God alone. Thus, she serves as a helper for man, enabling him to fulfill his calling to rule over the earth—not as a mistress, much less as a slave, but as an independent and free being who received her existence not from man but from God. She is accountable to Him and was given to man as a free, unmerited gift.

Thus does Scripture recount the origin of man, both male and female, and thus does it conceive the institution of marriage and the commencement of the human race. However, in our present age, under the banner and authority of science, we are presented with an entirely different narrative. This alternative perspective is increasingly permeating the minds of the populace and holds profound implications for the whole view of the world and life. It is therefore necessary to spend some time examining the foundations upon which this modern view is built.

Should one dismiss the Scriptural account of the origin of mankind, it becomes imperative to seek another explanation. Man exists; hence, we cannot avoid the inquiry into his origins. If his existence is not attributable to the creative omnipotence of God, then he must have come into being through some other means. Thus arises the notion that man gradually evolved from lower creatures, ascending to his current exalted state. Development, or evolution, is the key concept now employed to resolve all questions concerning the origin and nature of creatures. Rejecting the doctrine of creation necessitates the presumption that something existed from the beginning, for it is impossible to create something out of nothing.

Consequently, it is postulated, albeit arbitrarily and implausibly, that matter, power, and motion are eternal, and that our solar system was preceded by a chaotic, gaseous mass. From this primordial chaos, development began, eventually giving rise to our world and all its inhabitants.

Through development, the solar system and the earth came into being; development formed the earth's strata and minerals; development, over an immeasurable series of years, brought forth life from the lifeless; development gradually produced plants, animals, and humans. In the realm of mankind, it is development that has brought about the division of genders, the institution of marriage, the family, society, the state, language, religion, morality, law, science, art, and all other cultural goods in an orderly fashion. Assuming this single premise—that matter, power, and motion are eternal—one concludes that God is entirely unnecessary. The world, it is believed, contains within itself all the explanations required; science, so it is claimed, has rendered God superfluous.

The theory of development further explicates the origin of mankind in this manner: When the earth cooled sufficiently to support living beings, life presumably emerged under the prevailing conditions. Initially, lifeless protein compounds formed, acquiring diverse properties through various influences. These protein compounds, through connection and mixture, produced protoplasm, the first germ of life. Thus began biogenetic development, the development of living beings, which may have spanned a hundred million years.

This protoplasm forms the fundamental, protein-like independence of the cell, now generally considered the basic component of all living

beings—plants, animals, and mankind alike. Single-celled protozoa or moners, as the earliest living organisms are termed, represent the oldest forms of life. Through the gradual processes of becoming either motionless or mobile, these primitive cells developed into plants or animals, respectively. Among animals, the infusoria (the smallest worms) are the most rudimentary. From these, through various transitions and intermediate forms, higher types of animals gradually emerged, known as vertebrates, articulates, molluscs, and rays. Vertebrates are further classified into four classes: fish, amphibians, birds, and mammals. Mammals are subdivided into three orders: monotremes, marsupials, and placentals, which in turn are categorized into rodents, ungulates, carnivores, and predators. The primates, another significant group, are divided into three classes: prosimians, monkeys, and apes.

When comparing mankind to these various animals in terms of body structure, it appears, according to the theory of evolution, that he is increasingly closely related to the vertebrates, mammals, placentals, and most closely to the great apes, represented by the orangutan and gibbon in Asia and the gorilla and chimpanzee in Africa. These great apes are considered man's nearest kin, differing from him in size, shape, and other features, yet similar in the fundamental aspects of their physique. Nevertheless, man does not descend from any living species of ape but from a long-extinct man-ape, posited as a common ancestor to both apes and humans. Thus, while apes and humans share a common lineage, they are related as distant cousins rather than siblings.

Such is the premise of the development theory. This is how it envisions the course of events. However, it also endeavors to explain

how this transformation occurred. It proposes an unbroken, ascending series from plants to animals to human beings, yet must demonstrate that such development is feasible—for instance, how an ape could gradually transform into a human. Charles Darwin attempted to provide such an explanation in 1859. He observed that plants and animals, such as roses and pigeons, can be significantly modified through artificial selection in cultivation, which led him to speculate whether a similar process might occur in nature—not an artificial selection guided by human hands, but an unconscious, involuntary, natural selection.

This idea sparked a revolution in his thinking. By embracing the concept of natural selection, he believed he could explain how plants and animals gradually change and transform, overcoming disadvantages and gaining advantages, thereby better equipping themselves for the struggle for existence and outlasting others. For, in the entire creation, life is perpetually a struggle for existence. On the surface, nature appears peaceful, but this is an illusion. In truth, everywhere there is a battle for life and the necessities of life, because the earth is too limited and too poor to provide sufficient sustenance for all living creatures. Millions perish from want; only the strongest survive. These strongest individuals, distinguished by certain advantageous traits, pass these beneficial characteristics to their offspring through heredity.

Thus, there is progress and ever higher development. According to Darwin, natural selection, the struggle for existence, and the inheritance of old and newly acquired traits explained the emergence of new species and the transition from animal to man.

In judging this theory of development, it is necessary, first of all, to sharply distinguish between the facts on which it relies and the philosophical interpretations it attaches to them. The facts consist primarily of the observation that man shares many characteristics with other living creatures, particularly the higher species, and among these, especially the apes. These facts were largely known before; the similarity in physique, in various bodily organs and their functions, in the senses, in sensations and perceptions, and in the representations and connections thereof, is immediately evident to all and cannot be denied. However, the dissecting sciences, the sciences of life, of life's phenomena, and of its functions, along with spiritual science, have in recent times investigated these features much more deeply and accurately, thereby increasing their number and significance. Various other sciences have also contributed to confirming and extending these similarities between man and animal. The study of the human body in the womb before birth showed that in its earliest stages, man resembled fish, amphibians, and lower mammals. Paleontology, studying ancient conditions, discovered human remains such as skeletons, bones, skulls, tools, decorations, dwellings, etc., indicating that centuries ago, man lived in a very simple manner in some regions of the earth. Ethnologists have learned about tribes and peoples who are spiritually and physically separated from civilized nations by a great distance.

When these facts, gathered from different sources, became known, philosophical thought hastened to relate them and merge them into one system—the system of the gradual development of all things, especially mankind. This idea of development did not arise solely from these facts; it had long been advocated by various philosophers and was now applied to the partly newly discovered facts. The old

system was believed to now rest on established facts; a cry of joy went up that all the riddles of the world, except one—the riddle of eternal matter and power—had been solved and all secrets uncovered. But scarcely had this proud edifice of developmental theory been completed when the attack and the demolition began. Darwinism, said a famous philosopher, emerged in the sixties, held its triumphal march in the seventies, was at its height in the eighties, was doubted by a few in the nineties, and since the end of the last century, has been strongly opposed by many.

The first and sharpest attack was directed against the explanation Darwin had attempted to give of the origin of various species. The struggle for existence and natural selection failed to provide the service to which they had been called. While it is true that in the world of plants, animals, and mankind there is often a fearful struggle that significantly influences their nature and existence, it is by no means proven that this struggle can produce new species. It can help strengthen aptitudes and abilities, organs and powers through exercise and effort; it can develop what is, but it cannot produce what does not exist. It is also an exaggeration to claim, as everyone knows from personal experience, that there is always conflict everywhere and nothing but conflict.

There is not only hatred and enmity; there is also love, cooperation, and helpfulness in the world. The doctrine that proclaims a war of all against all as the sole principle is as one-sided as the idyllic view of the eighteenth century, which found peace and tranquility everywhere in nature. There is ample room at the great table of nature, and the earth, which God gave to mankind as a dwelling place, is inexhaustibly rich. Many facts and phenomena have nothing

at all to do with a struggle for existence. Who can say what the colors and shapes of snail shells, the black color of the ventral skin of many vertebrates, the graying of hair in old age, or the reddening of leaves in autumn have to do with the struggle for life? It is also not true that in this struggle the strongest specimens always and exclusively win while the weakest always perish. Often, so-called coincidence, a fortunate or unfortunate circumstance, mocks all our calculations. A strong man may be taken away in his prime, while a weak and infirm man or woman may extend life into old age.

A Dutch scientist has thus proposed an alternative to Darwin's natural selection: the theory of mutation, which suggests that changes in species do not occur gradually and regularly but sometimes suddenly and in leaps. Yet, the question remains whether such changes are merely variations within a species or whether they give rise to new species. The answer to this question hinges upon the definition of the concept of species.

Moreover, not only have the struggle for existence, natural selection, and survival of the fittest been called into question, but also the inheritance of acquired characteristics, which Darwin deemed essential for accelerating development, has lost credibility with many. The transmission of natural, innate qualities from parents to offspring, by its very nature, argues more against than for Darwinism because it underscores the constancy of species. For centuries, humans have begotten only humans. However, there is so much disagreement today regarding the inheritance of characteristics acquired later in life that nothing can be stated with certainty. What is certain is that acquired characteristics often are not passed on from parents to children. For example, circumcision has been

practiced by some peoples for centuries, yet it leaves no trace on their descendants; it must be performed on each child anew. Inheritance occurs only within certain limits and does not alter the species. If a change is produced artificially, it must also be maintained artificially, or it will be lost. Neither heredity nor mutability is adequately explained by Darwinism; both are facts whose existence is undeniable, but their coherence and connection remain beyond our current understanding.

Increasingly, therefore, scientists have abandoned Darwinism in its strict sense, namely the attempt to explain species change through the struggle for existence, natural selection, and the inheritance of acquired characteristics. The prophecy of one of the earliest and most significant opponents of Darwin's theory has been fulfilled, that this attempt to explain the mysteries of life would not endure beyond the nineteenth century. More importantly, criticism has not only challenged Darwin's method of explanation but also the theory of development itself. Of course, facts remain facts and cannot and should not be denied. But the theory built upon these facts by human reasoning has been found more and more to be inconsistent with them and even in conflict with them.

Geology, the study of the earth's strata, has revealed that lower and higher animal species did not appear sequentially but have existed side by side since the earliest times. Paleontology has failed to provide conclusive evidence for the existence of transitional forms between various species of organic beings, which, according to Darwin's theory of gradual evolution through minute changes, should be abundant. Furthermore, the eagerly sought and diligently pursued transitional form between monkey and man has not yet

been discovered. The study of the development of the human body in the womb does show some external resemblance to the development of other animal bodies before birth; however, this resemblance is merely superficial. From an animal embryo, a human being never develops, and conversely, from a human embryo, an animal never emerges. From the moment of conception, human beings and animals diverge, even if the inner difference is not perceptible to us. Biology, the science of life and its phenomena, has thus far offered scant support for the assumption that life arose spontaneously. Many now accept the impossibility of such spontaneous generation and have revived the earlier notion of a special life force. As research continues, physics and chemistry have uncovered more mysteries and wonders in the realm of the infinitely small, leading many back to the view that the ultimate constituents of things are not substances but forces. Moreover, all attempts to explain consciousness, free will, reason, conscience, language, religion, morality, and other such phenomena solely from the standpoint of development have met with no favorable outcome. The origins of these phenomena, as well as those of all things, remain shrouded in mystery to science.

It is crucial to observe that when man appears in history, he is already fully man in body and soul, possessing all the human qualities and activities that science seeks to investigate. Nowhere are people found devoid of mind and will, reason and conscience, thought and language, religion and morality, marriage and family, and so on. If all these characteristics and phenomena had developed gradually, such development must have taken place in prehistoric times—those times of which we have no direct knowledge and can only infer from scant pieces of information from later periods.

Science, in its endeavor to penetrate prehistoric times and uncover the origins of things, must necessarily resort to guesses, conjectures, and suppositions, which are not amenable to strict proof. The theory of development, particularly the theory of the descent of man from animals, lacks support from historical facts. It remains, in essence, a philosophical worldview that seeks to explain all things and phenomena without recourse to God, relying solely on itself. One of its proponents candidly admitted: there remains only the choice between the theory of descent and the miracle; since the latter is deemed scientifically impossible, we are compelled to embrace the former. This admission reveals that the theory of descent is not the product of rigorous science but a postulate of materialistic or pantheistic philosophy. It is not, as someone aptly put it years ago, a hypothesis to explain facts but a construct that seeks to confirm a pre-existing hypothesis.

The idea of man's origin is intimately linked to his essence. Many today speak differently, suggesting that, regardless of how the world and mankind were conceived or developed in the past, they are as they are today and remain the same for all humanity.

The latter is, of course, perfectly true; reality remains unchanged, whether we conceive of it correctly or incorrectly. The same applies, in the same sense, to the origin of things. Whether we imagine that the world and mankind came to be this way or that, whether we believe they gradually developed from themselves over centuries through minor changes, the origin of things is not altered in the slightest. The world has become what it is, not what we think or wish it to be. However, the idea of the origin of things is inseparable from the idea of their nature.

If the first is wrong, the second cannot be right. If we think that the earth and all the kingdoms of nature, all creatures, and particularly mankind, came into being without God, solely as a result of the development of forces within the world, it goes without saying that such a thought must profoundly influence our conception of the nature of the world and of mankind.

The world and man remain completely the same in themselves and are independent of our conception; but for us, their value and significance change, increase, or decrease as we think differently about their origin and creation.

This is so evident that it requires no further explanation or confirmation. However, since the opinion that we can think whatever we like about the origin of things because their essence remains the same for us recurs repeatedly—in the teaching of Scripture, the religion of Israel, the person of Christ, religion, morality, and so forth —it may be useful to demonstrate the falsity of this opinion more fully, especially in the teaching concerning the nature of man. This is not difficult. For if man has gradually developed from the animal, without God, solely by blindly working natural forces, it follows that he cannot essentially differ from the animal and remains an animal even in his highest development. There is then no place for a soul distinct from the body, for moral freedom and personal immortality; and religion, truth, morality, and beauty lose their absolute character.

These conclusions are not imposed by us on the proponents of the theory of evolution but are derived by them from it. Darwin, for instance, asserts that our unmarried women, if mankind had been

raised under conditions identical to those of the honeybees, would consider it a sacred duty, like the worker bees, to kill their brothers, and mothers would try to kill their fertile daughters, without anyone thinking to intervene. Good and evil, like true and false, become relative concepts, whose sense and value, like fashion, are subject to change over time and place. Similarly, others suggest that religion has only been a temporary aid, used by mankind in its powerlessness in the struggle against nature, and which now serves as a sedative for the masses, but which will naturally die out and disappear when mankind attains full freedom. Sin and crime, fornication and murder, do not make man guilty but are residual effects of the uncivilized state in which mankind once lived, diminishing as mankind develops and society improves. Criminals are to be considered as children, animals, or the mentally ill, and must be treated accordingly; prisons should give way to institutions of improvement. In a word, if man is not of divine but of animal origin and has gradually elevated himself, he owes everything to himself, is his own legislator, master, and lord. All these conclusions of the materialistic or pantheistic theory of development are clearly manifested in contemporary science, as well as in literature, art, and the practice of life.

But reality instructs us quite differently. Man may well imagine that he has achieved everything by his own power and is bound by nothing. Yet, he remains a dependent creature in all respects; he cannot act according to his own desires without consequence. In his physical life, he is subject to the immutable laws governing respiration and circulation, digestion and reproduction. Should he contravene these laws and disregard them, he harms his health and undermines his very life. The same holds true for his soul and

spiritual life. Man cannot think as he pleases; he is bound by laws of thought which he neither devised nor bestowed upon himself, but which are embedded within him and manifest themselves naturally. Should he fail to adhere to these laws, he entraps himself in error and falsehood. Likewise, man cannot will and act as he wishes; his will is subject to the discipline of reason and conscience. If he neglects this discipline and reduces his will and actions to mere arbitrariness, he will suffer self-accusation, self-reproach, regret, and the gnawing remorse of conscience.

Thus, the life of the soul is not founded on caprice any more than the physical life is. It is not a state of lawlessness and anarchy but is governed by laws from all sides and in all its activities. It is subject to the rules of truth, goodness, and beauty, thereby proving that it did not create itself. In sum, man carries within him his own nature, his own essence, which can never be violated with impunity. So powerful is nature in this respect that even adherents of the theory of evolution speak of human nature, unique human characteristics, prescribed laws of thought and conduct, and an innate religious disposition. Therefore, the idea of human nature stands in conflict with that of his origin as proposed by evolutionary theory.

In Scripture, however, there is perfect harmony between origin and nature. Man's being corresponds to his origin. Formed from the dust of the earth, yet receiving the breath of life from above, man was created by God Himself, thus possessing an individual nature. This essence is that he is made in the image of God and reflects His likeness.

Through this image, mankind is distinguished from both animals and angels. He shares traits with both, yet differs from them in his unique nature.

Animals, like all creatures, were also created by God; they did not come into existence on their own, but by a special act of God. They were created in various species, just as the plants were. All human beings descend from one pair of parents, forming one family. This is not the case with animals; they have, so to speak, different progenitors. It is noteworthy that zoology has not been able to reduce all animals to a single type; instead, it divides them into several major groups or basic forms.

Furthermore, most animals are not distributed worldwide but are confined to specific regions; fish inhabit the waters, birds the air, and land animals are mostly bound to certain countries: the polar bear is found only in the far north, and the platypus only in Australia. Genesis, therefore, specifically states that God created the plants and animals according to their kinds, that is, in species. This does not imply that the species originally created by God are identical to those into which animals are now divided by science, such as by Linnaeus. Our classification is fallible and open to revision, for our zoology remains imperfect and we do not fully comprehend how to classify the species.

The artificial, scientific concept of species is indeed difficult to establish and is entirely different from the natural concept of species, which we are still endeavoring to comprehend. Secondly, throughout the course of time, a vast number of animals have become extinct or extirpated. From the remains preserved intact or damaged within the

earth's strata, it becomes evident that various animal species, such as the mammoth, cave hyena, and ichthyosaur, once lived in abundance in earlier times but no longer exist today. Thirdly, it is certain that, due to various influences, the animal kingdom has undergone significant modifications and changes, often making it difficult or even impossible for us to restore it to its original form.

Moreover, it is notable in the creation of animals, as it is with plants, that although they come into being by a special act of divine power, nature indirectly plays a role. In Genesis 1:11, it is said, "Let the earth bring forth vegetation, seed-yielding plants, and fruit trees," and the earth brought them forth, as stated in verse 12. Similarly, in Genesis 1:20, it is declared, "Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creatures that have life," and so it came to pass, as noted in verse 21. Likewise, in verse 24, it is stated, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle, creeping things, and beasts of the earth after their kind," and it was so. Thus, with all plants and animals, nature itself is employed by God as an instrument; it is she who, though enabled and made fit for the task by God's Word, brings forth all these living creatures in a great variety of species.

This peculiar origin of animals sheds light on their being. It shows that animals are far more closely connected with the earth and nature than mankind. Animals are living beings, and as such, they are distinguished from inorganic, lifeless creatures; they are therefore often called living souls in Genesis 1:20, 21, 24. In the general sense of the principle of life, animals also have a soul, as noted in Genesis 2:19 and 9:4, 10, 12, 16. However, this vital principle of the soul in animals is so closely bound to nature and

metabolism that they cannot attain independence and autonomy and cannot continue to exist independently of metabolism.

Therefore, the soul of the animal perishes with death. From this, it follows that animals, at least the higher species, share the same senses as man and can perceive (hear, see, smell, taste, touch), form ideas, and connect these ideas with each other. Yet, animals lack reason; they cannot detach ideas from the particular, individual, and concrete, which clings to them. They cannot convert these ideas into concepts, raise them to abstractions, link these abstractions to judgments, draw conclusions from these judgments, and execute these conclusions by an act of will. Animals possess perceptions, representations, and connections of representations; they have instincts, desires, and drives. But they lack the higher faculty of knowledge and desire characteristic of man; they possess neither reason nor will. This distinction is reflected in the fact that animals have no language, no religion, no morality, and no sense of beauty; they have no conception of God, the unseen, the true, the good, and the beautiful.

In all these respects, man is vastly superior to the animal; there is no gradual transition between the two, but rather a chasm. What constitutes man's actual being—his reason and will, his thought and language, his religion and morality—is foreign to the animal. Thus, the animal cannot understand man, but man can understand the animal. Contemporary psychology seeks to explain the human soul from that of the animal, but in doing so, it takes the opposite approach. The soul of man is the key to explaining the soul of the animal; the animal lacks what man possesses, but man also shares characteristics typical of the animal.

This is not to imply that man already comprehends the animal through and through. The entire world presents itself as a problem to man, a mystery he seeks and is capable of seeking to unravel. Every animal is a living enigma. The significance of the animal does not consist merely in its utility to man, in providing him with food, shelter, clothing, and adornments. There is far more to the subjugation and dominion of the earth than mankind's selfish exploitation of everything for his benefit. The animal world holds profound importance for our science and art, our religion and morality. God communicates with us, profoundly and abundantly, through His creation. His thoughts and words speak to us from the entire world, from the realm of plants and animals. When botany and zoology trace these divine thoughts, they become wondrous sciences, deserving respect from all, especially Christians. Moreover, consider the ethical significance of the animal world for mankind! Animals delineate the boundary below which man must not sink and above which he must rise. Man can debase himself to a level lower than that of animals if he numbs the light of reason, severs his connection with heaven, and seeks all his lust and pleasure in the earth. Animals symbolize our virtues and vices: the dog represents loyalty, the spider diligence, the lion courage, the sheep simplicity, the dove sincerity, the stag a soul that thirsts after God. Conversely, the fox symbolizes cunning, the worm misery, the tiger cruelty, the swine baseness, the serpent the devil's guile, and the monkey, which most closely resembles man in form, demonstrates what mere physical excellence without the spirit from above amounts to. In the monkey, man sees a caricature of himself.

As man is distinguished from animals by the image of God, so too is he set apart from angels by the same image. The existence of such

beings cannot be proven by scientific means apart from the Scriptures; science knows nothing of them, neither can it argue for nor demonstrate their non-existence. Yet, it is noteworthy that belief in beings superior to man is found among all peoples and religions. Even after rejecting the Scriptures' testimony to the existence of angels, people revert to believing in supernatural beings in various superstitious forms. Our current generation provides ample evidence of this phenomenon. Angels and devils may no longer be believed in, but belief in silent forces, mysterious natural powers, ghosts, spirit apparitions, revelations of the dead, animated stars, inhabited planets, living atoms, and the like, has resurfaced in many circles. Whether based on deception or reality, such beliefs are addressed in the Scriptures. They prohibit all forms of soothsaying (Lev. 19:31, 20:27, Deut. 18:10-14), sorcery (Deut. 18:10, Jer. 27:10, Rev. 21:8), star-worship (Lev. 19:26, Isa. 47:13, Mic. 5:11), consultation of the dead or demons (Deut. 18:11), and all practices of guile or consultation of oracles (Lev. 19:26, Deut. 18:10), conjuration with magic formulas (Deut. 18:11, Isa. 47:9), and thus put an end to all superstition as well as unbelief. Christianity and superstition are sworn enemies, and it is not science, enlightenment, or civilization, but faith in God's Word, that delivers us from them. The Scriptures fundamentally place man in dependence on God, and thereby liberate him from all creatures. They establish man in the right relation to nature and thus make possible the true science of nature.

Scripture affirms the existence of angels, not as mythical constructs of human imagination, nor as personifications of mysterious forces, nor as beings who have ascended to a higher rank, but as spiritual entities created by God, subject to His will, and called to His service. These beings, therefore, can be clearly understood through the light

of Scripture and bear no resemblance to the mythological figures of pagan religions. They surpass men in knowledge (Matt. 18:10, 24:36) and power (Ps. 103:20, Col. 1:16), yet they are created by the same God and through the same Word (John 1:3, Col. 1:16), and possess the same rational and moral nature. Thus, it is said of the good angels that they obey God's voice and do His will (Ps. 103:20, 21), and of the evil angels that they do not abide in the truth (John 8:44), are subject to temptation (Eph. 6:11), and sin (2 Pet. 2:4).

Despite this similarity, there is a significant distinction between angels and men. The primary difference is that angels are not composed of soul and body but are pure spirits (Heb. 1:14). The appearances of angels in human form, as in Gen. 18:3 and Rev. 19:14, indicate temporary forms of manifestation that varied according to the nature of their mission. Angels are never referred to as souls or living souls, as are animals and men. The soul and spirit are distinct in that the soul is inherently spiritual, incorporeal, unseen, and even in man forms a spiritual independence. However, the soul is always a spiritual force or entity designed to inhabit a body; without a body, it is incomplete and imperfect. The soul is the spirit organized into physical life. Such a soul characterizes animals and particularly mankind. If man loses his body through death, he continues to exist, but in a deprived, naked condition, so that the resurrection at the last day restores that loss. But angels are not souls; they were never intended for corporeal life and thus have heaven, not earth, as their dwelling place; they are pure spirits. This endows them with great advantages over human beings, for they are superior in knowledge and power, have a much freer relation to time and space, can move more easily, and are thus eminently suitable for carrying out God's commands on earth.

However, these advantages come with a significant distinction. Because angels are pure spirits, they exist apart from one another in a relative sense. They were all created simultaneously in the beginning and have lived and continue to live side by side. They do not form an organic whole, not one family. Nevertheless, there is a natural order among them. According to Scripture, there are thousands upon thousands of angels (Deut. 33:2, Dan. 7:10, Rev. 5:11), divided into classes such as Cherubim (Gen. 3:24), Seraphim (Isa. 6:2-6), thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers (Eph. 1:21, 3:10, Col. 1:16, 2:10), and distinguished among themselves in rank. Gabriel and Michael occupy special places among them (Dan. 8:16, 9:21, 10:13, 21, Luke 1:19, 26). Yet, they do not form one family, do not share each other's blood, and did not originate from one another. We speak of a single humanity, but not of a single "angelic race." When Christ assumed human nature, He became related to all men, their blood relative, their brother in the flesh. But angels live side by side, each independently, so that one portion could fall while another remained faithful to God.

There is a third distinction to consider: since angels are spirits and thus not tied to the earth, and since they are not related by blood to one another, lacking the bonds of men and women, fathers and mothers, parents and children, brothers and sisters, there is a fundamental separation among them. Though angels may be more powerful than humans, they are not as versatile, having far fewer relational ties. The richness and depth of human emotional life surpass that of the angels. It is true, as Jesus states in Matthew 22:30, that marriage will cease in the resurrection, but the relationships on earth have profoundly enriched the spiritual

treasures of humanity, and these treasures will not be lost in the resurrection; they will be preserved for eternity.

Consider that the richest revelation God has granted us lies in His name as Father, in the name of His Son, who became like us, serving as our prophet, priest, and king, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, who is poured out upon the congregation and makes God dwell within us. Reflecting on all this, we realize it is not the angels but humanity that is made in God's image. Angels witness His power, wisdom, and goodness, but human beings partake in His eternal mercy. God is their Lord, but not their Father; Christ is their Head, but not their Reconciler and Savior; the Holy Spirit is their Guide, but He does not testify within them that they are children and heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. Here on earth, the great battle between heaven and hell is waged; here, the congregation is formed into the body of the Son; here, the decisive struggle is fought, and the final triumph over God’s enemies is achieved. Thus, angels desire to look into these mysteries of salvation revealed here, and they seek to learn from the church the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10, 1 Pet. 1:12).

Angels, therefore, have many relations with us, and we with them. Faith in the existence and activity of angels is not of the same value as the faith with which we trust in God and love, fear, and honor Him wholeheartedly. We may not place our trust in any creature, not even in an angel; we may not worship them or offer them any religious tribute (Deut. 6:13, Matt. 4:10, Rev. 22:9). Guardian angels, purportedly assigned to each person, and the intercession of angels on our behalf are not mentioned in Scripture. However, this does not render belief in angels indifferent or worthless. On the contrary, they held an important place during the time of revelation; they appear at

all critical points in the life of Jesus and will one day accompany Him on the clouds of heaven. They rejoice at the conversion of sinners (Luke 15:10), watch over the faithful (Ps. 34:7, 91:11), protect the little ones (Matt. 18:10), follow the church through history (Eph. 3:10), and carry the children of God to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22).

Therefore, let us remember them with reverence and speak of them with honor; let us bring them joy through our conversion; follow their example in serving God and obeying His word; let them witness the manifold wisdom of God in our hearts, lives, and in the whole congregation; let us be mindful of their fellowship, and together with them, proclaim the mighty works of God. Thus, there is a distinction between angels and men, but no conflict; diversity, but also unity; separation, but also fellowship. When we come to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, we also come to the innumerable hosts of angels and with them restore the bond of unity and love that sin had broken. In God's great and rich creation, they and we each have our own place and accomplish our own tasks. Angels are the sons, the mighty warriors, the hosts of God; men were created in His image and are His offspring.

If the image of God is the distinctive mark of humanity, we must grasp clearly what it entails.

In Genesis 1:26, it is recorded that God created mankind in His own image and likeness, granting them dominion over all creatures, particularly over all living beings. Three aspects demand our attention. First, the resemblance between God and man is conveyed through two terms: image and likeness. These words are not, as some

have surmised, different in content but are meant to complement and reinforce each other. Together they signify that man is not a mere semblance, nor a flawed representation, but a perfect, true image of God. Just as man is on a smaller scale, so is God on an infinitely larger scale, for man is like God. Man is infinitely lower than God and yet related to Him; as a creature, he is utterly dependent on God, and yet, as a human being, he possesses independence and freedom. Bondage and freedom, dependence and independence, an immeasurable distance from and an intimate relationship with God are marvelously, incomprehensibly united in man. How a puny creature can at the same time be the image of God transcends our understanding.

Secondly, it is stated that God created mankind in His image and likeness. From the beginning, it was His design not to create a solitary individual in His image but a multitude. Hence, He created man and woman from the outset, not isolated from each other, but in relationship and fellowship, verse 27. Not in the man alone, nor in the woman alone, but in both together, and in each of them in a unique manner and aspect, the image of God is manifested.

It has been argued contrariwise, citing 1 Corinthians 11:7, where Paul declares that the man is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man. This passage has often been misapplied to deny the woman the image of God and to degrade her below the man. However, the Apostle speaks not of man and woman in their essence, but in their marital relationship. He asserts that the man, not the woman, is the head; deriving this from the fact that the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. The man was created first, made first in God's image, and in him, God first revealed His glory. If

the woman shares in this, it is secondarily, indirectly, from and through the man. She indeed received the image of God, but subsequent to man, in dependence upon him, through his mediation. Therefore, the man is the image and glory of God directly and originally; the woman is this in a derived manner, being the glory of the man. What is written in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 must be seen in conjunction. The manner in which the woman is created in Genesis 2 elucidates how she and the man together bear the image of God, as stated in Genesis 1:27. This further clarifies that the image of God rests in a multitude of people, with diverse genders, gifts, and powers—that is, in mankind—and that after the fall, it receives its full development in the new humanity, in the church of Christ.

Thirdly, Genesis 1:26 reveals that God had a specific purpose in creating man in His own image: that man should exercise dominion over all living creatures and should fill and subdue the earth through multiplication and expansion. If we encapsulate this subjugation of the earth under the now common term of culture, then this, in its broadest sense, is the purpose for which God created man in His image. Thus, cult and culture, religion and civilization, Christianity and humanity are not at odds with one another, but rather, the image of God was bestowed upon man for this very purpose—that he might manifest it through his dominion over the entire earth. This dominion is not limited to the oldest professions such as hunting, fishing, agriculture, and stock-breeding, but extends to trade and industry, finance and credit, the exploitation of mines and mountains, science and the arts. All this culture does not terminate in man, but through man, who is the image of God and who imprints his spirit on all his works, it returns to God, who is the First and the Last.

The content of this image of God is more fully unfolded in the rest of Revelation. Notably, even after the fall, man continues to be called the image of God.

In Genesis 5:1-3, it is noted that God created man and woman together in His image and blessed them, and that Adam begat a son in his own likeness and image. In Genesis 9:6, the prohibition against killing man is grounded in the fact that God made him in His image. The psalmist, in the beautiful eighth psalm, extols the glory and majesty of the Lord, which are most splendidly manifested in heaven and earth, above all in man and his sovereignty over all the works of God's hands. When Paul addressed the Athenians on the Areopagus, he approvingly cited one of their poets: "For we are also His offspring." In James 3:9, the apostle highlights the evil of the tongue by noting the contradiction that through it we bless God and the Father and curse those made in His image. Thus, Scripture not only calls fallen man the image of God but continues to regard and treat him as such, always seeing in him a rational, moral being, accountable to God for all his thoughts, words, and deeds, and obligated to serve Him.

Nevertheless, we also find the notion that man has lost the image of God through sin. Although this is not explicitly stated, it can be clearly deduced from the entire teaching of Scripture concerning sinful man. As will be shown later, sin has stripped man of innocence, righteousness, and holiness; it has corrupted his heart, darkened his mind, inclined his will to evil, and consigned his mind and body with all its members to the service of unrighteousness. Hence, he must be transformed, born again, justified, washed, and sanctified. He can only partake of these benefits through union with

Christ, who is the Image of God (2 Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15), and to whose image we must be conformed (Rom. 8:29). The new man, put on by faith in this fellowship, is therefore created according to God's will in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24). The virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, which the believer acquires through union with Christ, have their origin, example, and ultimate goal in God, and make man partakers of the divine nature once again (2 Pet. 1:4).

This teaching of Scripture forms the basis for the distinction typically made in Reformed theology between the image of God in a broader and a narrower sense. If, on one hand, man still retains the image and lineage of God after his fall and disobedience, and on the other hand, has lost those virtues which specifically conform him to God through sin and only regains them in communion with Christ, then both aspects are in harmony only if the image of God encompasses something more than exclusively the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. This was acknowledged by the Reformed and upheld against the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics.

The Lutherans do not distinguish between the image of God in a broader and a narrower sense; and even when they do make such a distinction, they place little emphasis on it and fail to grasp its full significance. For them, the image of God coincides with the original righteousness, which encompasses the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. They acknowledge only the image of God in a narrower sense and feel no compulsion to relate this image to the entirety of human nature. The religious and moral life of man forms its own separate domain; it is not interconnected with, nor

does it influence, the work to which man is called in society, state, art, and science. If the Lutheran Christian partakes of the forgiveness of sins and communion with God through faith, this suffices for him; he rests in this assurance and does not concern himself with connecting this spiritual life back to God's counsel and election, or forward to mankind's entire earthly vocation.

Consequently, when man loses the original righteousness through sin, he is deprived of the entire image of God; he retains nothing of it, not even minor remnants. He is likened to a stick and a block, thus diminishing and misapprehending the rational and moral nature that still belongs to him.

Conversely, the Roman Catholics do distinguish between the image of God in a broader and a narrower sense, although they often misapply these terms; they also strive to establish a connection between the two. However, this connection is not intrinsic but extrinsic; it is not grounded in both natures but is artificial, not organic but mechanical. The Roman Catholics propose that without the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (the image of God in the narrow sense), man is conceivable and can exist in reality. In such a state, man still possesses a religious and moral life, but only to the degree and extent that can flow from natural religion and natural morals; it remains confined to and within this earth and can never lead him to heavenly bliss and the direct vision of God. Moreover, while it is theoretically possible for such a natural man, devoid of the image of God in the narrow sense, to fulfill the duties of natural religion and the natural moral law as required, in reality, this is extremely difficult because man is a material, bodily, and sensual being. This sensual nature of man is always accompanied by lust, and

although this lust is not inherently sinful, it nevertheless presents a significant occasion for sin. By its very nature, it is opposed to the spirit, being fleshly, and poses a constant danger of overpowering reason and will through the power of the flesh.

For these reasons, God has freely added to natural man the image of God in the narrow sense. God could have created man without this image; but foreseeing that man would easily become prey to fleshly lusts, and desiring to elevate man to a higher state of salvation than is possible on earth, namely to heavenly glory in His immediate presence, God endowed man with original righteousness. This supernatural addition raised man from his natural state to a higher, supernatural position, achieving two purposes. Firstly, with the aid of this supernatural gift, man could easily restrain, control, and suppress his natural fleshly lusts. Secondly, by fulfilling the supernatural duties prescribed by original righteousness (the image of God in a narrower sense), he could also attain a corresponding supernatural blessedness. Thus, the supernatural addition of original righteousness serves two purposes for Rome: it acts as a rein for the flesh and simultaneously paves the way of merit to heaven.

Between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics, the Reformed hold their distinct position. According to Holy Scripture, the image of God is broader and more extensive than original righteousness; for while the latter has been lost through sin, man still bears the designation of the image and family of God. There are still remnants of the likeness of God within him, according to which he was originally created. Therefore, original righteousness could not have been an entirely separate gift imposed upon man from without, unconnected to human nature. Man did not first exist as a naked natural being, to

whom original righteousness was later added. Instead, man was conceived and created simultaneously with that original righteousness; it is inherent in the very idea of man. Without it, man is neither conceivable nor existent. The image of God in the narrower sense is closely related to the image of God in the broader sense; man does not merely bear the image of God; he is the image of God. The image of God is intrinsic to man himself; it extends as far as the essence of human being. Insofar as man has remained man even in the state of sin, he has also retained remnants of the image of God. To the extent that he has lost the image of God, he has also ceased to be fully and truly man.

The image of God in the narrow sense is nothing more than man's spiritual health. Even when a man becomes physically or mentally ill, he remains a man, though he has lost something essential to human harmony and has gained something contrary to that harmony. Similarly, when man lost his original righteousness through sin, he remained a man, but he lost something inseparable from the essence of humanity and received in its place something excluded by that essence. Man, having lost the image of God, did not become a mere stick or log but retained his rational and moral nature. However, he did not lose something that did not belong to his nature; rather, he gained something that affected and corrupted his entire nature. Just as original righteousness was man's spiritual health, sin is his spiritual infirmity—moral corruption, spiritual death, death in sins and transgressions, as Scripture describes it.

This understanding of the image of God does full justice to all the teachings of Scripture; it maintains both the connection and distinction between nature and grace, between creation and re-

creation. It gratefully and wholeheartedly acknowledges the grace of God, which enabled man to remain a man even after the fall and continues to regard and act upon him as a reasonable, moral, responsible being. It also maintains that this same man, deprived of the image of God, is totally corrupted and inclined to all evil. Life and history confirm this: in the deepest recesses, man's nature is preserved; yet, whatever summit of earthly greatness man may reach, he remains small and weak, guilty and impure. Only the image of God makes man a true and complete man.

If we now endeavor to give a brief overview of the contents of the image of God, we must first consider the spiritual nature of man. Man is a physical being, but he is also a spiritual being; he possesses a soul, whose core is spirit. This is clear from what Scripture teaches about the origin, nature, and immortality of the human soul. Regarding the origin, we read that, unlike the animals, Adam received the breath of life from above (Genesis 2:7), and this holds true for all human beings. For it is God who gives each man his spirit, Ecclesiastes 12:7, and forms the spirit of man within him, Zechariah 12:1. Therefore, in distinction from the fathers of the flesh, God can be called the Father of spirits, Hebrews 12:9. This special origin of the human soul also determines its being. Although Scripture occasionally attributes a soul to animals, Genesis 2:19, 9:4, etc., it uses the term in the broader sense of the life principle. Man, however, possesses a higher soul, whose core and essence is spirit. This is reflected in the fact that Scripture attributes a unique spirit to man, but never to animals. While animals share a spirit in the sense that they, along with all other creatures, are supported and sustained by the Spirit of God (Ps. 104:30), they have no independent spirit of their own. Human beings, on the other hand, each have their own

spirit, Deut. 2:30, Judges. 15:19, Ezek. 3:14, Luke 23:46, Acts 7:59, 1 Cor. 2:11, 5:3, 4. Because of this spiritual nature, the soul of man is also immortal; it does not die with the body as with animals but returns to God, who gave it spirit, Ecclesiastes 12:7, cannot be killed like the body by men, Matthew 10:28, and continues to exist as spirit, Hebrews 12:13, 1 Peter 3:19.

This spirituality of the soul elevates man above the beasts and makes him akin to the angels. Though he belongs to the sensuous world and is of the earth, he transcends the terrestrial through the immortal spirit implanted within him, thereby entering into the realm of the spirits with regal freedom. Through this spiritual nature, man is linked to God, who is Spirit, as it is written in John 4:24, and who inhabits eternity, Isaiah 57:15.

Secondly, the image of God is revealed in the faculties and powers bestowed upon man's spirit. While the higher animals can perceive and link images, they do not progress beyond this point. Man, however, ascends above mere perceptions into the realm of concepts and ideas. By thinking—a spiritual activity not to be confused with the physical movements or separations within the brain—he abstracts the general from the particular, ascends from the visible to the invisible, forms ideas of the true, the good, and the beautiful, and discerns God's eternal power and divinity from His creations. By his will, which is distinct from mere sensual desire, he detaches from the material world and reaches for unseen and transcendental goods. His affections are not solely stirred by useful and pleasant things within the material sphere but are also awakened by ideal, spiritual goods that defy numerical calculation. All these forces and activities originate and converge in self-awareness, through which man knows

himself and bears within an indelible consciousness of his own existence and the peculiarities of his rational and moral nature. These faculties manifest outwardly in language, religion, morality, law, art, and science—phenomena unique to the human world, absent in animals.

These faculties and activities are traits of the image of God. For according to the revelation in nature and Scripture, God is not an unconscious, blind force but a personal, self-conscious, knowing, and willing being. Even affections and passions such as wrath, jealousy, hatred, vengeance, mercy, and love are ascribed to God in Scripture —not as disturbances He endures, but as actions of His all-powerful, holy, and loving being. Scripture's human-like descriptions of God presuppose that man was created in His image, possessing all these faculties and activities.

Thirdly, this applies even to man's body, which is not excluded from the image of God. Scripture explicitly states that God is Spirit, John 4:24, and does not attribute a body to Him. Nevertheless, God is the Creator of the body and the entire visible world; all things, including material entities, originate and subsist in the Word, which was with God, John 1:3, Colossians 1:15, and thus rest in thought and spirit. Furthermore, while the body serves as an instrument, it is not the cause of man's actions; it is not the ear that hears, but the soul that hears through the ear.

The Scriptures speak of God's hands and feet, His eyes and ears, and so forth, to indicate that whatever man accomplishes through his body originally and perfectly belongs to God. Should He who plants the ear not hear? Should He who forms the eye not see? Psalm 94:9.

Therefore, insofar as the body serves as an instrument for the spirit's work, it bears a resemblance and provides a glimpse of how God works in the world.

All this pertains to the image of God in its broader sense. Yet the resemblance between God and man is even more profoundly marked in the original righteousness with which the first man was endowed, termed the image of God in its narrower sense. When Scripture accentuates this original righteousness, it underscores that the image of God concerns not merely the faculties of intellect and will, but their proper exercise. It is not the mere capacity to think and choose, to love and hate, but rather the content and orientation of these faculties in alignment with God's will and honor. The faculties of cognition and volition, of affection and aversion, were bestowed upon man precisely so that he might employ them rightly, according to God's precepts.

Even the devils have retained their faculties of knowledge and will, yet they employ them solely in their hatred and rebellion against God; even their belief in God, which in itself is good, only results in fear and trembling before His judgment (James 2:19). The Jews, despite their wisdom and zeal, showed their alignment with the devil through their deeds and desires, proving their likeness to him by their opposition to Jesus (John 8:39-44). Thus, the true likeness to God in man is not primarily manifested in his possession of intellect and will, but in pure knowledge, perfect righteousness, and holiness —constituting the image of God in its narrow sense, with which man was originally adorned.

The knowledge imparted to the first man did not imply omniscience or an inability to grow in understanding concerning God, himself, and the world. For even the knowledge of angels and the blessed continues to expand, and Christ Himself increased in wisdom during His earthly life. Rather, Adam's knowledge was adequate for his state and calling and was devoid of error. He loved the truth wholeheartedly; falsehood, with all its attendant error, doubt, unbelief, and uncertainty, had not yet tainted his heart. He stood in the truth, perceiving, knowing, and valuing everything as it truly was.

This knowledge of the truth encompassed righteousness and holiness. Holiness signified that the first man was free from sin's stain; his nature was untainted, no evil thought or desire emerged from his heart. He was not ignorant, for he knew God and His law, written in his heart, and loved it fully. Standing in truth, he also stood in love. Righteousness denoted that man, knowing the truth and being holy in will and affection, conformed wholly to God's law, meeting His righteous demands, and stood guiltless before Him. Truth and love brought peace—peace with God, with oneself, and with all creation. A mind and will entirely pure and free from sin are far beyond our current experience. Observing how sin permeates all our thoughts, words, and actions may even cause doubt whether such a state of truth, love, and peace is possible for humanity. Yet, Scripture dispels this doubt.

Firstly, in the very midst of history, it presents a man who could justly challenge His adversaries: "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46). Christ was a true and perfect man, sinless, with no deceit in His mouth (1 Peter 2:22). Secondly, Scripture teaches that the first human couple was created in the image of God, in

righteousness and holiness derived from the knowledge of truth. Furthermore, it maintains that sin is not inherent in human nature and can therefore be eradicated.

If sin has clung to man from his earliest origins, by virtue of his inherent nature, then, by its very essence, no deliverance from sin is possible; deliverance from sin would be tantamount to the destruction of human nature. Yet, not only is a man without sin conceivable in the abstract, but such a holy man has indeed existed. And when the first man fell and became guilty and unclean, another man, the second Adam, arose without sin, to free fallen humanity from all guilt and to cleanse it from all stain. The creation of man in God's image and the possibility of his fall inherently include the possibility of his redemption and re-creation; he who denies the former cannot maintain the latter. The denial of the fall inevitably leads to the bleak proclamation of man's irredeemability. To fall, however, man must first have stood; to lose the image of God, he must first have possessed it.

The creation of man in the image of God had, according to Genesis 1:26, 28, the immediate goal of fulfilling, subduing, and ruling the earth. This dominion is not a constituent part of the image of God and, much less, its entire content, but it is by no means an arbitrary or incidental addition. On the contrary, the emphasis placed on it and its close connection with the creation in God's image conclusively prove that the image of God is expressed in that reign and must unfold and expound its content more and more. Furthermore, the description of this dominion clearly indicates that it was given to the first couple immediately, but that it had to be acquired to a significant degree in the future. God not only declares

in general terms His intention to create humans in His image and likeness (Gen. 1:26), but when He created the first couple, He blessed them and commanded them: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). He specifically tasked Adam with cultivating the garden and keeping it in order (Gen. 2:15).

All this teaches us as clear as day that man was not created to be idle, but to work. He was not to rest on his laurels, but was to go out into the wide world and subject it to the power of his word and will. He was given a large, extensive, rich task to do on earth. He was entrusted with a work that would require centuries of effort. A path was pointed out to him, of immense length, which he had to follow and which he had to travel to the end. In a word, there is a great difference and a long distance between the situation in which the first man was created and the destination to which he was called. Although this destiny is closely connected with his being, just as this being is closely connected with his origin, it is nevertheless distinct from it. The essence of mankind, that is, the image of God, after which he was created, had to develop its content ever more richly and fully in the pursuit of his destiny; it had to be extended, so to speak, by mankind to the ends of the earth and pressed into all the works of his hands. The world had to be worked by man so that it became more and more a revelation of God's virtues.

Dominion over the earth was therefore the nearest, but not the ultimate goal to which man was called. The nature of the matter already indicates this. Work, which is true work, cannot rest and does not have a final goal in itself, but always aims to accomplish something and stops when this goal is reached. Work, merely for the sake of work, without consultation, without a plan, without a

purpose, is without hope and unworthy of a reasonable man. Development that always continues is not development; to say development is to say progress, course, order, final goal, and destination. If man was called to work when he was created, this implies that after completing his work, he should enter into rest for himself and for the human race that is to come from him.

The institution of the seven-day week confirms and strengthens this consideration, which arises from the very nature of the matter. God labored six days in His creation and rested on the seventh day from all His works. Man, having been created in God's image, receives the right and privilege to follow God's example from the moment of his creation. The work entrusted to him—namely, the fulfillment and subjugation of the earth—is a faint reflection of God's creative activity; his labor, too, is undertaken with deliberation, proceeds in regular order, and has a definite purpose. Man is not a mere machine that moves forward unconsciously; he does not turn with unchanging uniformity on a treadmill. Rather, he remains, even in his work, a man—the image of God—a thinking, willing, acting being who seeks to create something with his labor and who, at the end, looks down with satisfaction upon the work of his hands. His work culminates, as with God Himself, in rest, enjoyment, and pleasure. The six-day week, with the Sabbath at its conclusion, ennobles human labor, elevates it above the monotonous toil of inanimate nature, and bestows upon it the dignity of a divine vocation. Therefore, whoever enters God's rest on the Sabbath day, in accordance with His purpose, rests in the same joyful manner upon his works, as God rests upon His own, Heb. 4:10. This applies to the individual human being, but also to the church and to mankind. The world, too, has its labor, which is followed and concluded by the eternal Sabbath. There

remains a rest for the people of God, of which every Sabbath day is merely an example and foretaste, but also a prophecy and a guarantee (Heb. 4:9).

This is why the Heidelberg Catechism rightly states that God created man good and in His image, so that he might know God his Creator, love Him with all his heart, and live with Him in eternal bliss, to praise and glorify Him. Man's final destination lay in eternal bliss, in the glorification of God, in heaven and not on earth. But in order to reach this final destination, he must first fulfill his calling on earth. To enter God's rest, he must first complete God's work. The path to heaven lay through and over the earth; the entrance to the Sabbath is opened up by six days of labor; eternal life is attained in the way of works.

This teaching on man's destiny rests entirely on thoughts expressed in Genesis 1:26-2:3. But the remainder of the second chapter adds another important aspect. When God places man in paradise, He grants him the right to eat freely from all the trees in the garden; but He excludes one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, from which man may not eat, for if he eats of it, he will surely die, Gen 2:16, 17. To all the commandments, a single prohibition is added. The commandments were known to Adam partly from his own heart, partly from the spoken word of God. They were not devised by him but were instilled and communicated to him by God. Man is not religiously and morally autonomous; he is not his own lawgiver and cannot do as he pleases. Rather, God is his only Lawgiver and Judge, Isa 33:22, James 4:12. All those commandments which Adam received ultimately boiled down to this: that he, who was created in the image of God, should remain

God's image in all his thinking and doing, in all his life and work. He had to remain so personally for himself, but also in his married life, in his family, in his six days of labor, in his rest on the seventh day, in his expansion and multiplication, in his subjugation and control of the earth, in his cultivation and guarding of the garden. Adam was not to go his own way but was to walk in the path that God showed him.

But all these commandments, which left Adam ample scope for movement and indicated the whole earth as his field of activity, were augmented by one prohibition, a singular limitation. For the prohibition against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil does not belong to the image of God, nor is it a constituent part of it; on the contrary, it is the limitation of it. Should Adam violate this prohibition, he would forfeit the image of God, place himself outside the communion with God, and die. Thus, man's obedience was tested by this prohibition. It would become evident through this prohibition whether man would follow God's way or his own; whether he would adhere to the straight path or go astray; whether he would remain a son of God in the Father's house or journey to a distant country with the share of goods given him. Hence, this prohibition is typically referred to as the trial commandment. Adam and Eve could find no reason why the eating of this particular tree was forbidden; they had to obey the prohibition, not because they saw and understood its rational content, but simply because God had decreed it, based on His authority, requiring pure obedience, out of a sheer sense of duty. This is why the tree whose fruit was forbidden was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That tree would reveal whether mankind would arbitrarily decide for itself what was good and evil or

whether he would be entirely led by and adhere to the commandment given by God.

So the first man was given much to do, but also something to abstain from—little, but still something. The latter is often much more challenging than the former. Many people, for instance, are willing to do a great deal for their health, but they are not willing to sacrifice much or anything for it; they find it hard to bring themselves to do anything and regard the smallest act of self-denial as an unbearable burden. The forbidden exerts a mysterious attraction; it raises questions about the why, the what, and the how; it awakens doubt and stimulates the imagination. The first man had to resist this temptation emanating from the prohibition; this was the battle of faith he had to fight; but in the image of God, in which he was created, he also received the strength with which he could stand and overcome.

Yet this trial commandment shows even more clearly than the institution of the seven-day week that man's destiny differs from his creation. Adam was not yet, in the beginning, what he could and should become at the end. He lived in paradise, but not yet in heaven. He had a long journey before reaching his final goal. He had to acquire eternal life by doing and abstaining. In a word, there is a great difference between the state of innocence in which the first man was created and the state of glory for which he was destined. What this difference consisted of is further elucidated in the remainder of Revelation.

While Adam was subject to the alternation of day and night, of waking and sleeping, we are told of the heavenly Jerusalem that

there will be no night there, Rev. 21:25, 22:5, and that the redeemed will stand before the throne of God through the blood of the Lamb and serve Him day and night in His temple, Rev. 7:15. The first man was bound by the division of the week into six working days and one day of rest, but for the people of God, there remains an eternal, undisturbed rest, Heb. 4:9, Rev. 14:13. In the state of innocence, man had a daily need for food and drink, but in the future, God will destroy both food and drink, 1 Cor. 6:13. The first man and woman were male and female and were blessed to be fruitful and multiply; but in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like angels of God in heaven, Matt. 22:30. The first man, Adam, was earthly, had a natural body, and became a living soul, but believers receive a spiritual body in the resurrection and will then bear the image of the heavenly man, of Christ, the Lord from heaven, 1 Cor. 15:45-49. Adam was created in such a way that he could still err, sin, fall, and die; but believers are already here on earth, in principle, above all of that: they can no longer sin, because everyone who is born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God (1 John 3:9). They cannot fall away to the end, for they are preserved by faith in the power of God unto salvation, which is ready to be revealed at the last time, 1 Pet. 1:5; nor can they die, for those who believe in Christ already have eternal, undefiled life here on earth; they do not die in eternity, and even live though they die, John 11:25, 26.

In contemplating the creation of the first man, we must avoid two extremes. On the one hand, we must assert, based on Holy Scripture, that he was created at once in God's image and likeness, endowed with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. He was not initially a small, insignificant child who needed to develop

independently; nor was he a mature human being who was spiritually empty and neutral between truth and falsehood, between good and evil. Far less was he an animal being who had gradually evolved and now needed to become human through struggle and effort. Such ideas are utterly at odds with Scripture and common sense.

On the other hand, we must not exaggerate the state of the first man, as is often done in Christian teaching and preaching. However exalted Adam's position by God, he did not yet possess the highest; he had the capacity not to sin but was not yet endowed with the inability to sin. He did not yet possess eternal life, which is imperishable, but received a provisional immortality, contingent upon fulfilling a condition. He was created in God's image but could still forfeit this image with all its glory. He dwelled in paradise, but this paradise was not heaven and could be lost with all its beauty. All the spiritual and physical riches Adam possessed lacked one essential thing: absolute security. Without this, peace and enjoyment remain incomplete. The present era, with its numerous attempts to insure all human possessions through societies or the state, sufficiently proves this point. Believers are insured for this life and the life to come, for Christ is their surety and will not permit any of them to be torn from His hand and perish (John 10:28). Perfect love, therefore, casts out fear in them (1 John 4:18) and assures them that nothing will separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus their Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). But this absolute certainty was lacking for man in paradise. Though he was created in God's image, he was not immutably secured in goodness. Despite all he possessed, he could still lose everything for himself and his descendants. His origin was divine, his nature akin to God, and his destination was eternal bliss

in the immediate presence of God. Yet, whether he would reach that destination was left to his own choice and depended on his own will.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the special attention given to the creation of mankind in Genesis 1 and 2 underscore the significance of humans in God's creation?

- Reflect on why Scripture focuses so much on the creation of man compared to other creatures and what this reveals about humanity's role and value in God's plan.

2. What is the importance of God consulting within Himself before creating man, and how does this act reflect His wisdom, goodness, and omnipotence?

- Consider the implications of this divine deliberation and how it emphasizes the uniqueness of humanity's creation.

3. In what ways does being created in God's image and likeness establish a unique relationship between humans and God compared to other creatures?

- Reflect on the meaning and significance of bearing God's image and how it sets humans apart from all other forms of life.

4. How does the creation of humans as male and female, both bearing God's image, highlight the importance of relationship and covenant in reflecting God's nature?

- Discuss the theological and relational significance of male and female being created together in the image of God.

5. What does the command to have dominion over all living beings and the earth reveal about humanity's role and responsibility in creation?

- Reflect on the implications of this command for how humans should interact with and care for the rest of creation.

6. How does the detailed account of man's initial dwelling place in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2 enrich our understanding of God's provision and care for humanity?

- Consider the significance of the garden's preparation, its trees, and rivers, and what this tells us about God's intentions for human life and flourishing.

7. Why is the command given to Adam to cultivate and guard the Garden of Eden, along with the prohibition regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, foundational for understanding human vocation and obedience?

- Discuss the relationship between work, stewardship, and obedience in the context of God's original plan for humanity.

8. What does the creation of woman from man's side and the institution of marriage teach about the nature of human companionship and the fulfillment of God's design for relationships?

- Reflect on the theological significance of Eve's creation and how marriage reflects God's purpose for human companionship.

9. How does the theory of evolution challenge the biblical account of creation, and what are the theological implications of accepting evolution over creation?

- Consider the contrasting views of human origin presented by Scripture and evolution, and the impact of these views on understanding human nature and destiny.

10. How does the belief in humans being created in the image of God influence our understanding of human dignity, value, and purpose?

- Reflect on the practical and ethical implications of this belief for how we view ourselves and others, and how it should shape our actions and attitudes.

13. Sin and Death

The third chapter of Genesis immediately recounts the fall and disobedience of man. It was likely not long after his creation that he became guilty of transgressing the divine commandment. Creation and fall are distinct in nature and essence, yet in terms of time, they are not far apart.

This was true for mankind, and it likely holds for the world of angels as well. The Scriptures do not provide a detailed account of the creation and fall of the angels; they only disclose what is necessary for us to comprehend mankind and his fall, refraining from further

elaboration and avoiding satisfying our curiosity. Yet we know that angels exist, that many have fallen, and that this fall also occurred at the dawn of the world. Some have proposed that the creation and fall of the angels occurred much earlier, even before Genesis 1:1, but Scripture offers no basis for this.

Genesis 1:1 marks the beginning of the entire work of creation, and Genesis 1:31 likely refers to the whole creation, not just the earth, stating that God saw all His works and declared them very good. Thus, the rebellion and disobedience of the angels must have occurred after the sixth day of creation.

Moreover, it is certain that the fall of the angels preceded that of man. Sin did not first erupt on earth but in heaven, in the immediate presence of God, at the foot of His throne. The thought, desire, and will to resist God first arose in the hearts of the angels; pride may have been the initial sin, marking the beginning and principle of their fall. In 1 Timothy 3:6, Paul advises against immediately electing a new convert as a church leader, lest he become conceited and fall into the same condemnation as the devil. If, as some interpret, this refers to the devil's judgment—his fall due to self-exaltation and pride—then we have an indication that the devil's sin began with self-exaltation and pride.

However, the fall of the angels indeed preceded that of man. For man did not transgress God’s commandment in isolation, without any external inducement; rather, the woman, being deceived and seduced by the serpent, transgressed, as noted in 2 Corinthians 11:3 and 1 Timothy 2:14. It is certain that the serpent was not merely a symbolic embellishment but a real creature, for it is expressly stated

to be more cunning than any other beast of the field, as seen in Genesis 3:1 and Matthew 10:16. Nonetheless, it is equally certain that a demonic power employed the serpent to deceive and mislead mankind.

Already in the Old Testament, Satan is mentioned several times as the accuser and seducer of mankind, as in Job 1, 1 Chronicles 21:1, and Zechariah 3. However, the full horror of this power of darkness is only revealed when the divine and heavenly light shines upon the world in Christ. Then it becomes clear that there exists another sinful realm beyond this earthly one. There is a spiritual domain of evil, populated by countless demons and impure spirits, each more wicked than the last (Matthew 12:45), with Satan as their leader. Satan is known by various names: Satan (adversary), the devil (slanderer, Matthew 13:39), the enemy (Matthew 13:39, Luke 10:19), the wicked one (Matthew 6:13, 13:19), the accuser (Revelation 12:10), the tempter (Matthew 4:3), Belial (wickedness, nothingness, 2 Corinthians 6:15), Beelzebul or Beelzebub (the god of flies, worshipped in Ekron, 2 Kings 1:2, Matthew 10:25), the ruler of the devils (Matthew 9:34), the prince of the power of the air (Ephesians 2:2), the ruler of this world (John 12:31), the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4), the great dragon, and the old serpent (Revelation 12:9).

This kingdom of darkness did not exist from the dawn of creation but came into being through the apostasy of Satan and his angels. Peter broadly states that the angels sinned and are therefore punished by God (2 Peter 2:4), while Jude specifies in his epistle (verse 6) the nature of their sin, saying they did not keep their proper domain but left their own habitation in heaven. Dissatisfied with their God-given

state, they aspired for something else. This rebellion occurred at the very beginning, for the devil has sinned from the beginning (1 John 3:8) and has sought to destroy mankind from the beginning. Jesus explicitly states that he was a murderer from the beginning and did not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him; he is filled with lies (John 8:44).

From him emanated the temptation of man, and he cleverly tied it to the commandment that God had given—namely, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The apostle James testifies that God is above all temptation and never tempts anyone (James 1:13). This does not imply that God never tests anyone, for Scripture recounts many instances of such trials with Abraham, Moses, Job, Christ Himself, and even the very first man. However, when someone fails the test, there is a tendency to blame God for their fall, suggesting that God tempted them, meaning He tested them with the intent for them to fail.

We observe that Adam, immediately after the fall, sought to shift the blame; this inclination persists in humanity. It is against this tendency that James contends, emphatically asserting that God Himself is above all temptation and never tempts anyone. God never tests with the intent of causing one to fall and never tests beyond one's capacity, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 10:13. The trial set before Adam was meant to manifest his obedience and was not beyond his ability; it was a light prohibition, especially compared to all that was permitted to him.

Yet, what God intends for good, Satan perverts for evil. Satan misuses the trial commandment as a temptation, a covert assault on

the obedience of the first man, aiming to bring about his downfall. The divine prohibition is first portrayed as an arbitrary burden, an unfounded restriction on human freedom, sowing the seed of doubt in Eve's soul regarding the divine origin and legitimacy of the command. This doubt then transforms into disbelief, leading Eve to think that God issued the prohibition out of fear that humans would become like Him, knowing good and evil. This unbelief stirs the imagination, making the violation of the prohibition seem a path not to death but to true life, to equality with God. The imagination influences the heart's inclination and striving, making the forbidden tree appear pleasing to the eyes and desirable to the heart. Thus, desire drives the will, culminating in the sinful act; Eve took the fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate (Genesis 3:1-6).

In this straightforward yet profoundly philosophical manner, Scripture recounts the history of the fall and the origin of sin. This is how sin continues to arise: it begins with the darkening of the mind, progresses through the excitement of the imagination, arouses desire in the heart, and culminates in the act of the will. There is a significant difference between the origin of the first sin and all subsequent sins. While all later sins presuppose a sinful nature in humanity and find a point of attachment therein, this was not the case with Adam and Eve, who were created in God's image. Nevertheless, despite their perfection, they were created with the capacity to fall. Sin, by its nature, always bears the mark of unreason and arbitrariness. When one sins, they invariably attempt to excuse or justify themselves, yet they never succeed; there is no rational basis for sin. Its existence is inherently unlawful. Similarly, contemporary arguments that criminals are compelled to sin by

circumstances or inclinations face strong opposition from the conscience. Sin cannot be reasonably or emotionally reduced to a disposition and action with a rightful existence.

This principle applies most strongly to the first sin, committed in Eden. While present-day sins often have mitigating circumstances that do not justify the sin but limit the degree of guilt, the sin of the first pair of humans had no such extenuating factors. On the contrary, everything— the special revelation that made the trial commandment known to them, the command's light demand for renunciation, the severity of the threat attached to transgression, the awfulness of the consequences, the holiness of their nature—served only to magnify their guilt.

The possibility of the fall can be underscored, yet the passage to actuality remains veiled in obscurity. Scripture does not endeavor to render this transition comprehensible to us. By doing so, it allows sin to remain in its sinful essence; sin exists, but it was and is not permitted to be: it was, it is, and it will forever stand in opposition to God's law and the witness of our conscience.

In intertwining these two elements—granting, on the one hand, an understanding of the origin of sin, the truth of which resonates in our daily lives, and on the other hand, allowing sin to stand in its irrational and inscrutable nature—the narrative of the fall in Genesis 3 ascends to a pinnacle above all the human wisdom conceived over centuries regarding the origin of evil. That there is sin and misery, we know not only from Scripture but is proclaimed to us daily by the suffering of creation; the entire world bears the mark of the fall. Even if the world around us remained silent, the voice of conscience,

which incessantly accuses us, and the poverty of the heart, which testifies to boundless woe, would remind us hourly.

Thus, everywhere and always, humanity is confronted with the question: whence comes this evil, the evil of sin and the evil of suffering? This is the mystery that, more than the mystery of the origin of being, has occupied human thought and filled minds and hearts incessantly. Now compare the solutions that human wisdom has proposed with the straightforward answer given by Scripture!

These human solutions are varied, yet they exhibit a certain affinity and can be classified accordingly. A prevalent opinion is that sin does not reside within man nor originate from him, but rather clings to him externally; man is inherently good, his heart pure; evil resides solely in circumstances, in the environment, in the society into which he is born and raised. Eliminate these wrongs, reform society, introduce equitable distribution of goods, and man will naturally become good; all motives for doing evil will vanish!

This notion of the origin and nature of sin has always found many adherents, as humans are naturally inclined to blame circumstances for their sins; but it gained particular favor in the eighteenth century when political and social decay was recognized and radical transformation of state and society was promoted as the remedy for all ills. However, the nineteenth century brought disillusionment concerning mankind's natural goodness; and many now deem mankind as fundamentally evil and despair of his redemption.

Thus, another explanation, which has traditionally sought the origin of sin in man's sensual nature, gained prominence. Man possesses a soul, but he also has a body; he is spirit, but also flesh. This flesh

inherently harbors sensual inclinations, impure desires, and base passions, naturally opposing the spirit with its ideas, thoughts, and ideals. Since man initially lives merely a vegetative and animal life upon birth, and for many years remains a child engrossed in sensual contemplation, it follows that for many years, man's flesh dominates and imprisons the spirit. Only very slowly does the spirit wrest itself from the power of the flesh, yet humanity and the individual steadily progress.

Thinkers and philosophers have long debated the "origin" of sin, and in recent times, they have found significant support in the doctrine that humanity is descended from animals and, in essence, remains an animal at its core.

Some conclude from this premise that man will perpetually remain an animal, while others nurture the hope that, having already progressed so far, mankind will continue to advance and may one day even transcend to an angelic state. Regardless of the outcome, man's animal descent seemed to offer a promising solution to the problem of sin. If humanity has its origins in animals, it is perfectly natural, and not at all surprising, that animalistic tendencies persist within him and frequently overpower the restraints of decency.

Thus, many assert that sin is merely a residual effect of our primordial animal state; desires, fornication, theft, robbery, murder, and the like are behaviors that were as common among the earliest humans as they are among animals, and they now resurface in those individuals deemed criminals. These people, who revert to primal habits, are not truly criminals but rather regressive, weak, sick, or mentally unstable beings who should not be punished in prisons but

cared for in hospitals. Just as a wound is to the body, so is the criminal to society. Sin is viewed as a disease inherited from our animal ancestry, one that humanity only gradually overcomes.

If one extends this line of thought, tracing sin's origin to sensuality, flesh, and animal nature, one inevitably arrives at the ancient doctrine that sin originates in matter, or more broadly, in the finite existence of all creatures. This notion was widespread in antiquity. Spirit and matter, like light and darkness, are eternally opposed and can never achieve true and complete communion. Matter was not created by the God of light but existed eternally alongside God, formless, dark, and devoid of light and life. Even if it was later shaped by God and used to construct this world, it remains incapable of absorbing and expressing the fullness of the spiritual idea; dark within itself, it does not permit the light of the idea to shine through.

Sometimes, this dark matter is further traced to a divine origin; two gods are then posited to coexist from eternity, a God of light and a God of darkness, a good and an evil God. Alternatively, attempts are made to merge these eternal principles of good and evil into one Godhead, resulting in a dualistic deity; within Him lies an unconscious, dark, hidden ground from which a conscious, luminous nature emerges. This is considered the deepest origin of darkness and evil in the world and the source of all life and light.

If one proceeds further, one encounters the doctrine, revived by some modern philosophers, that God Himself is nothing but a dark nature, a blind urge, an eternal hunger, an irrational will that only comes to consciousness and becomes light within humanity. This stands in stark contrast to the revelation of Scripture. Scripture

declares that God is pure light without any darkness, and that all things were made by the Word in the beginning. However, the philosophy of the new age asserts that God is intrinsically darkness, nature, an abyss, and that light first emerges for Him in the world and within humanity. Man, therefore, is not blameworthy and does not need redemption from God; rather, God is the one who is blameless and awaits His redemption from mankind.

This extreme conclusion is not stated so bluntly and directly by many, yet it remains the inevitable terminus of the path upon which all these aforementioned theories regarding the origin of sin tread. Diverse as they may be, they share a common thread: they do not seek the origin and source of sin in the will of the creature, but rather in the existence and nature of things, and thus in the Creator, who is the cause of that existence and nature. If sin resides in circumstances, in society, in the senses, in the flesh, in matter, then it implicates Him, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, and man is exonerated. Sin then did not commence with the fall, but traces back to the moment of creation; creation and fall are thus conflated; being, existence itself, is deemed sin; moral imperfection is intertwined with finitude. Consequently, salvation is either rendered utterly impossible or culminates in the annihilation of existence, in nirvana.

High above such human conjectures soars the wisdom of God. The former denounces God and absolves man; the latter justifies God and indicts man. Scripture is the tome that, from its beginning to its end, vindicates God and holds man accountable; it is a grand and potent theodicy, a defense of God, of all His attributes and deeds, bearing within it the testimony of every man's conscience. The fall did not

occur outside His foreknowledge, His counsel, and His will, and the entire course and history of sin is under His sovereign direction, constrained by His governance until the end. Sin does not catch God off guard or render Him powerless; even in the face of sin, He remains God, unsullied in wisdom, goodness, and omnipotence.

Indeed, He is so wise, good, and powerful that He can bring forth good from evil and compel sin, contrary to its nature, to contribute to the glorification of His name and the establishment of His kingdom. Nevertheless, sin retains its sinful character. If, in a certain sense, it can be said that God willed sin, because nothing can come into being or exist without His will, it must never be forgotten that He always willed it as sin, as something that ought not to be, and therefore, it always exists unlawfully, in defiance of His command.

Thus, while justifying God, Scripture simultaneously preserves the nature of sin. If sin's origin lies not in the creature's will but in a being preceding the will, it immediately loses its ethical and moral character, becoming a physical or natural evil, inseparable from the existence and nature of things. Sin then becomes an independent entity, an original principle, a sort of malevolent substance, akin to how disease was once perceived. But Scripture teaches us that sin is not and cannot be such. For God is the Creator of all things, even matter; and when the work of creation was finished, He beheld all that He had made, and it was very good.

Therefore, sin does not belong to the nature of things; it is not part of being but is a moral phenomenon, belonging to the domain of morality, existing as a deviation from the moral law which God gave to the rational creature and established for his will. The first sin was

the violation of the precept and, thereby, of the entire moral law, which rests upon the same divine authority as the precept. The numerous terms by which Holy Scripture describes sin—transgression, disobedience, iniquity, wickedness, enmity against God, and others—point in this same direction. Paul explicitly states that through the law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), and John declares that all sin, whether small or great, is iniquity, lawlessness, unlawfulness (1 John 3:4).

Now, if transgression is the essence of sin, it cannot lie in the very being or essence of things, whether material or spiritual, for their essence and being are derived from God alone, who is the fountain of all goodness. Consequently, evil can only come after good, can only exist through and upon the good, and can reside solely in the corruption of good. Even the fallen angels, though sin has marred their entire nature, remain fundamentally good creatures. The good inherent in the nature and being of things is not obliterated by sin, but rather diverted and employed for purposes contrary to its intended design. Man has not forfeited his essence, his human nature, through sin; he still possesses a soul and a body, a mind and a will, and all his affections.

However, all these gifts, inherently good and bestowed by the Father of lights, are now wielded by man as weapons against God and in the service of iniquity. Sin, therefore, is not merely a deprivation nor simply the loss of what man originally possessed, akin to a wealthy man who becomes impoverished and must forego many former pleasures. Rather, sin is a deprivation of that which man must possess to be truly human; it simultaneously introduces a defect that man was never intended to bear.

Modern science posits that disease is not a distinct substance but life under altered circumstances, wherein the laws of life remain consistent with those in a healthy body, yet the organs and functions of life are disrupted in their normal operations. Even in death, the body's processes do not cease but instead engage in destructive, dissolving activities. Similarly, sin is not a substance but a disruption of all the gifts and powers granted to man, redirecting them away from God. Reason, will, affections, desires, passions, soul faculties, and bodily forces, originally instruments of righteousness, have been mysteriously transformed by sin into instruments of iniquity. The image of God bestowed upon man at creation was not a substance but was so intrinsic to his nature that its loss resulted in total deformation and disfigurement.

Anyone who could truly see man, both internally and externally, would perceive traits that make him resemble Satan more than God (John 8:44). Spiritual health was supplanted by spiritual sickness and death. Yet, despite this, sin is not an inherent part of man's being. By upholding the moral nature of sin, Scripture also upholds man's capacity for salvation.

Sin is not part of the world's nature but was introduced into it by man; thus, it can be removed by the power of divine grace, which surpasses all creation.

The first sin committed by man did not remain an isolated act; it was not an event that man could simply move past as if nothing had happened. The moment man allowed sin into his thoughts, imagination, desires, and will, a profound transformation occurred within him. This is evidenced by Adam and Eve's immediate attempt

to hide from God and each other after the fall. Their eyes were opened, and they realized their nakedness, seeing each other as they never had before. They no longer dared to look at each other without fear and guilt, feeling unclean and ashamed, and thus they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. Despite their attempts at concealment, they were still together, sharing a mutual fear and hiding from the face of God amidst the trees of the garden.

With the leaves of a fig tree, Adam and Eve could partly veil their shame and embarrassment from one another, but these could not hide them from God. Thus, they fled deep into the midst of the trees of the garden, driven by shame and fear. These emotions had seized them because they had lost the image of God and now stood guilty and unclean before Him.

Such is always the consequence of sin: we lose that inner, spiritual confidence before God, ourselves, and our fellowmen, which only the consciousness of innocence can foster within our hearts. The gravity of the first sin becomes even more apparent as it spreads from the first pair of human beings to the entirety of mankind. The initial step in the wrong direction was taken, and all the descendants of Adam and Eve followed in their footsteps. The universality of sin is a fact that impresses itself upon everyone's consciousness, indisputably established both by the testimony of experience and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

It would require little effort to gather testimonies from all parts and eras of the world that attest to this universality of sin. The simplest and the most learned people agree. It is said that no one is born without sin; everyone has weaknesses and failings. Among the ills of

mankind are the darkness of reason, the necessity to err, and even the love of error. No one is free in conscience; conscience makes cowards of us all. The heaviest burden humanity bears is guilt. From all sides of history, we hear this echoed in various tones. Even those who begin with the premise of man's natural goodness are compelled, by the end of their inquiries, to acknowledge that the seeds of all sin and crime lie hidden in every human heart. Philosophers have lamented that all men are, by nature, radically evil.

Scripture affirms this judgment which mankind pronounces upon itself. After recounting the fall in the third chapter of Genesis, it continues in the subsequent chapters to trace how sin spread and increased within the human race, reaching such a height that the judgment of the flood became necessary. It is testified of the generation before the flood that man's wickedness was great upon the earth and that all the thoughts of his heart were continually evil. The earth was filled with violence because of man and was corrupt before God. Yet, the flood brought no change to the heart of man. Even afterward, God declared of the new mankind arising from Noah's family that the pattern of man's heart is evil from his youth (Genesis 8:21).

All the pious men of the Old Covenant echo this divine testimony. Job laments that no one can bring a clean man out of an unclean one (Job 14:4). Solomon confesses in his prayer at the dedication of the temple, "There is no man who does not sin." The Lord, as recorded in Psalms 14 and 53, looks down from heaven upon the children of men to see if any are wise, seeking God, but sees only waste and iniquity; they have all gone astray, together becoming corrupt; there is no one

who does good, not even one. No one can stand before the Lord, for no one living is righteous before Him (Psalms 103:3, 143:2). "Who can say, 'I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?'" (Proverbs 20:9). In short, there is no righteous man on earth who does good and does not sin (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

All these declarations are so universal that they permit no exception. They do not emerge from the mouths of the ungodly, who often exhibit indifference to their own sins and those of others, but they emanate from the hearts of the devout, who have come to recognize themselves as sinners before the face of God. These judgments are not directed solely or primarily at others—those living in blatant sin or, like the pagans, bereft of the knowledge of God—but they begin with themselves and their own people.

Scripture does not depict the godly as individuals who have lived in perfect holiness on earth. Rather, it portrays them as sinners, often guilty of grievous offenses. It is precisely the godly who, despite being aware of the righteousness of their cause, feel their guilt most acutely and present themselves before the Lord with humble confession (Ps. 6, 25, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143). Even when they admonish the people and bring their apostasy and unfaithfulness to light, they ultimately join with them in collective confession: "We lie in our shame, and our disgrace covers us, for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth to this day" (Jer. 3:25; Isa. 6:5, 53:4-6, 64:6; Dan. 9:5ff; Ps. 106:6).

The New Testament also leaves no room for doubt regarding the sinful state of the entire human race; the entire proclamation of the Gospel rests on this premise. When John announces the approach of

the kingdom of heaven, he calls for repentance and baptism, for circumcision, sacrifices, and adherence to the law had not provided the people of Israel with the righteousness required to enter the kingdom of God. Hence, Jerusalem and all Judea came to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. Christ appeared with the same message of the kingdom of God, asserting that only regeneration, faith, and conversion grant access to that kingdom (Mark 1:15, 6:12; John 3:3).

It is true that Jesus says in Matt. 9:12-13 that those who are healthy do not need a physician, and that He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. However, the context shows that Jesus, by referring to the "healthy" and the "righteous," was thinking of the Pharisees, who criticized Him for dining with tax collectors and sinners, exalting themselves above them, and in their self-righteousness feeling no need for His searching love.

Moreover, in verse 13, Jesus explicitly states that if the Pharisees understood that God, in His law, desires mercy rather than sacrifice, they would realize that they, too, like the tax collectors and sinners, were guilty and unclean and in need of conversion in His name. Christ initially confines His mission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15:24), but after His resurrection, He commissions His disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, because salvation for all mankind is tied to faith in His name (Mark 16:15-16).

In line with this teaching, the apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, embarks on an elaborate discourse to establish that the entire world stands condemned before God, affirming that by the

works of the law no flesh shall be justified, as stated in Romans 3:19-20. He begins by condemning the Gentiles for their transgressions, Romans 1:18-32, and proceeds to include the Jews, who despite their privileges, are fundamentally guilty of the same offenses, Romans 2:1 - 3:20. All are under the bondage of sin, Romans 3:9, 11:32, Galatians 3:22, so that every mouth may be silenced, and in their salvation, only the mercy of God is exalted.

Indeed, the pervasive sinfulness of humanity is so foundational to the New Testament's proclamation of the Gospel that the term "world" often acquires a pejorative sense. While in itself the world and all it encompasses were created by God, John 1:3, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:2, through sin it has been so thoroughly corrupted that it now stands as a power antagonistic to God.

This grim condition of humanity and the world raises profound questions about its origin and cause. What is the source not only of the initial transgression but of the pervasive sinfulness, the guilt and corruption that afflict the entire human race from birth, with Christ alone excepted? Is there a link between the first sin committed in Paradise and the torrent of iniquity that has since deluged the earth? And if such a link exists, what is its nature?

There are those, following Pelagius, who adamantly deny any such connection. They argue that every sinful act is entirely self-contained, effecting no change in human nature and therefore can be immediately succeeded by a virtuous act. After Adam transgressed God's command, his inner nature, disposition, and will remained completely unchanged; consequently, all his descendants are born

with the same innocent and neutral nature that Adam possessed at his creation.

According to this view, there is no inherent sinful nature, no intrinsic disposition towards sin, for all nature, being created by God, remains inherently good. Sinful deeds do not form a continuous, coherent series but are isolated actions that can be interspersed with good deeds, bound to the person solely by a completely free choice of will. The only influence these sinful acts have on the individual or on others is that of setting a bad example. Once a sinful act is committed, it becomes easier to repeat, and others may follow suit. Hence, the widespread sinfulness of humanity is attributed to imitation. There is no concept of original sin; every human being is born innocent, but the pervasive influence of bad examples typically leads subsequent generations astray.

In this framework, sinful actions are habitual, and through routine, all follow the same path of sin, although it remains possible, and perhaps not improbable, that a few have resisted this power of habit, charted their own course, and lived perfectly holy lives on earth.

This attempt, however, to explain general sinfulness is not only contrary to the Scriptures on every point, but it is also so superficial and inadequate that, at least in theory, it is seldom fully and completely upheld. It is refuted by facts from our own experience and life. We all know from experience that an act of sin is not external to us and cannot, like an unclean garment, be simply removed; rather, it is closely connected with our inner nature and leaves an indelible mark. We are not the same after each act of sin as we were before; it deprives us of peace of mind, is followed by

remorse and repentance, strengthens our inclination to evil, and eventually renders us incapable of resisting the power of sin or even the slightest temptation.

It is also contrary to all experience that sin should only take hold of man from without. Certainly, evil examples can have a powerful influence; we see this in children born of wicked parents and raised in an environment devoid of godliness, and conversely, the birth from pious parents and upbringing in a religious-moral environment is a blessing beyond measure. But that is only one side of the matter. A bad environment would not exert such an evil influence on the child if there were not already a tendency to evil in his heart; and a good environment would not often be completely powerless against a child if he had received a pure heart at birth, receptive to all that is good.

But we all know better; the environment merely triggers the sin that develops in us; the root of sin lies deeper, lurking in our hearts. From within a man's heart, as Jesus said, come evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, and all manner of iniquities (Mark 7:21). This word is confirmed by everyone's experience; almost without our knowing it or willing it, impure thoughts and images rise in our consciousness. On certain occasions, when we encounter adversity or opposition, the evil that is deeply hidden in our hearts emerges; it sometimes frightens us and makes us wish to flee from ourselves. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

Finally, if following the example of evil were the only cause of sin in mankind, its complete universality would be inexplicable. Pelagius,

therefore, asserted that here and there sinless men had certainly lived. But this only exposed the untenability of his explanation all the more clearly. For, with the exception of Christ, there has not been a single human being on earth who has been free from all sin.

We need not know all men individually to pronounce this judgment. For the Scriptures speak unambiguously in this regard; the whole history of mankind is proof of this; and our own hearts are the key to understanding the hearts of other men. For we are all of one mind and form not only a natural but also a moral unity. There is a human nature common to all human beings; and this nature is guilty and impure. The evil tree does not arise from the evil fruits, but the evil fruits arise from the evil tree.

Others, recognizing the validity of these objections, have modified Pelagius' teaching accordingly. They admit that the absolute universality of sin cannot be inferred merely from following the evil example, and that moral decay does not enter man solely from without. They are forced to confess that sin inhabits man from his conception and birth; he himself brings his corrupt nature from his parents. Yet they maintain that this moral depravity, inherent in man by nature, is not yet real sin bearing the character of guilt, and therefore does not yet deserve punishment. This moral depravity becomes sinful, guilty, and deserving of punishment only when man freely accepts it as he matures, appropriates it, and converts it into sinful acts through his own free will.

This semi-Pelagian conception may make an important concession, but on reflection, it proves to be very inadequate. For sin always consists in unlawfulness, in transgression, and in deviation from the

law which God has laid down for the reasonable and moral creature. This deviation from the law may occur in man's actions, but also in his dispositions and affections, in the nature which he brings with him at his conception and birth. Semi-Pelagianism recognizes this and speaks of a moral depravity which precedes man's acts of will. But if one takes this seriously, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the moral corruption which is now characteristic of human nature is also really sin and guilt, and therefore worthy of punishment. One of the two possibilities: either man's nature conforms to God's law and is as it should be, in which case it is not morally defective; or it is morally defective, in which case it does not conform to God's law either, is unlawful and unjust, and consequently makes man guilty and punishable.

Certainly, there is little to be said against this rigorous reasoning; but many nevertheless try to free themselves from its constraint by using the ambiguous term 'desire' to describe the moral corruption which man brings with him at birth. Of course, the use of this word is not in itself wrong; the Scriptures also make frequent use of it, Romans 1:24, 2:7, 13:14, Galatians 5:16, James 1:14, 1 Peter 1:14, 1 John 2:16, etc., but under the influence of the ascetic tendency which gradually developed in the Christian Church, theology often interpreted this word in a very limited sense; it thought almost exclusively of man's procreative urge, and thus arrived at the idea that, since this was given to man in creation, it was not in itself sinful, but nevertheless gave him a very easy reason for sinning.

It was Calvin who opposed this idea. He did not object to calling the moral depravity into which man is born "lust." But then this word had to be understood in a good sense. For this purpose, it was

necessary, in the first place, to make a distinction between desire and lust. Desires in themselves are not sinful, and were instilled by God Himself at creation; because man is a limited, finite, dependent creature, he has countless needs and therefore also countless desires. When he is hungry, he longs for food; when he is thirsty, he longs for water; when he is tired, he longs for rest. And so also in the spiritual: man's mind is created in such a way that it craves the truth, and man's will by virtue of his God-created nature has a desire for good. When Solomon did not desire wealth, but wisdom, this was good in the eyes of the Lord, 1 Kings 3:5-14; and when the poet of Ps. 42 thirsted after God like a deer after the streams of water, this was a very good and precious desire.

Desires in themselves, therefore, are not sinful, but they, as well as the imagination and the will, have been corrupted by sin and therefore come into conflict with the Lord's law. Not the strictly natural desires, but the desires corrupted by sin, uncontrolled, exaggerated, and overstrained, are sinful.

And here, in the second place, it should also be noted that desires are by no means only inherent in the sensual, physical, but also in the spiritual nature of mankind. The urge to procreate is not the only natural desire, but it is one among many; nor is it in itself sinful, for it was implanted in man at creation, nor is it the only one which has been corrupted by sin, but all natural, physical, and spiritual desires have become unruly and unprincipled because of it. Man's good desires have been transformed into evil desires.

If man's moral corruption is called desire in this sense, then its sinful and guilty nature is beyond all doubt. This desire is expressly

condemned in the Law of the Lord, as stated in the special commandment, "You shall not covet," Ex. 20:17. Paul explicitly acknowledges this when he declares that he would not have recognized lust as sin if the law had not said, "You shall not covet," Rom. 7:7. When Paul came to a true understanding of himself, and began to test not only his actions but also his inclinations and desires against God's law, it became evident to him that these too were corrupt and impure, stretching towards what was forbidden. For Paul, the Law of God is the sole source and measure of sin, and it must be the same for us. No human desires or imaginations can determine what sin is, but only the law of God, which dictates how mankind should stand before God, externally and internally, physically and spiritually, in word and deed, in thought and inclination. Judged by that law, it is indisputable that man's nature is corrupt and his desires sinful. Man not only thinks and acts wrongly, but he is wrong from the moment he was conceived.

Besides, from the point of view of philosophy, it is impossible to imagine that lust in itself is not sin, but that it only becomes sin through the will. This notion rests on the absurd idea that the will of man stands neutral, outside of and in opposition to that desire, unaffected by sin, and can now freely decide whether or not to grant the desire of its nature. Experience shows that in many cases it is possible for man, on the basis of various considerations of health, decency, civil honor, etc., to use his reason and will to resist the sinful desires which well up in his heart and to prevent them from being converted into sinful deeds. There is indeed a struggle in a natural man between his desire and his duty, between his inclination and his conscience, between his desire and his reason.

But this struggle is fundamentally different from that which is waged between flesh and spirit, between the old and new man, in the regenerate; it is only a struggle waged externally, against the outburst of desire, but it does not penetrate into the heart of the fortress and does not attack the root of the evil. Therefore, this battle can bind and restrain the sinful desire, but cannot cleanse and renew it internally; the sinful character of the desire remains unchanged. Furthermore, even though reason and will can sometimes restrain desire, they are often controlled and employed by that desire. They do not oppose it in principle, but naturally take pleasure in it; they feed, nurture, excuse, and justify it. Often they allow themselves to be so carried away by lust that they rob man of all independence and make him a slave to his passions. Evil thoughts and evil desires arise from the heart, obscuring reason and corrupting the will. The heart is so deceitful that it misleads even the wisest head.

Both attempts to explain the general sinfulness of human beings come to the conclusion that they seek the cause in the fall of each individual human being. According to Pelagianism, every man falls for himself by voluntarily following the evil example of others; according to Semi-Pelagianism, every man falls for himself by voluntarily adopting an innate but not sinful lust and converting it into a sinful act. Both, however, fail to recognize the moral facts which are certain for each person's conscience, and both fail to explain how the absolutely universal sinfulness of the human race can arise from millions upon millions of accidental decisions of the will.

Nevertheless, in recent times, these attempts have once again found acceptance among many, albeit in a different, unfamiliar form. In the

past, there were some who believed in the pre-existence of man; but Buddhist influences have greatly expanded this belief in recent years. It is now held that all human beings have existed eternally, or at least centuries before their appearance on earth, or that, in a more philosophical form, the sensible-perceivable life of man on earth must be distinguished from his inconceivable, yet conceivable existence.

And one further connects this idea with the belief that in this real or imaginary pre-existence, individuals have all fallen individually and, as a consequence, must live here on earth in gross, material bodies, to prepare for another life hereafter, where they will receive a reward for their efforts. Thus, there is only one law that governs all human life before, on, and after this earth, which is the law of retribution; everyone reaps what he has sown and receives what he has earned by his deeds.

This Indian conception is remarkable because it tacitly acknowledges that there is no place in this earthly life for the fall of an individual human being. However, it offers no explanation of general sinfulness, similar to the Pelagian theory. It merely shifts the difficulty from life here on earth to a pre-existence of which no one has any recollection, for which there is no evidence, and which remains a mere dream. Furthermore, the doctrine that only the law of retribution governs everything, including the lives of the poor, the sick, the wretched, and the needy, is a ruthless and harsh doctrine. It starkly contrasts with the splendor of divine grace revealed in Scripture.

But - and this is the point of utmost importance - this Indian wisdom fully aligns with Pelagian doctrine in seeking the cause of general sinfulness in the fall of each individual human being. Both ideas are grounded in the notion that humanity consists of an arbitrary collection of souls who have existed side by side for centuries, having no intrinsic connection in origin or essence, each responsible for his own fate. Each fell for himself, each receives his own deserved fate, and each strives individually to improve his lot. What unites people is merely the shared misery they all endure, making compassion the most crucial virtue. On closer examination, it becomes evident that those leading happy lives on earth "reward" themselves for their virtues according to the law of retribution and look down upon the wretched, who, after all, received what they deserved according to that same law.

To truly appreciate the Scriptures, one must clearly understand this context when they shed light on the general sinfulness of the human race. The Scriptures do not engage in idle speculation but recognize and respect the facts evident to all our consciousness and conscience. They do not fantasize about a pre-existence of souls before they enter earthly bodies, nor do they acknowledge a fall occurring in each individual's life, either before or during earthly existence. Instead of the individualistic and atomistic view, the Scriptures present an organic view of the human race.

Humanity does not consist of a random collection of souls who have come together by chance and now must find common ground through various contracts. Instead, it is a unity, a body with many members, a tree with many branches, a kingdom with many citizens. This unity is not something that will come to be in the future through

external aggregation; it has always been and remains, despite all divisions and schisms, because it has one origin and one nature. Physically, humanity is one, springing from one blood; and judicially and ethically, it is one, because, on the basis of natural unity, it is subject to the same divine law, the law of the covenant of works.

From this, the Scriptures now deduce that mankind also remains one in her fall. In this manner, they regard the human race, always, from its first to its last page. If there are distinctions among men in rank, position, office, honor, gifts, and if Israel was elected to the Lord's inheritance above other nations, it is due to God's grace; He alone makes distinctions (1 Cor. 4:17). In themselves, all men are alike before God, for they are all sinners, sharing in the same guilt, contaminated by the same impurity, subject to the same death, and in need of the same redemption. God has bound them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on them all (Rom. 11:32). There is no reason for anyone to be proud; there is no reason for anyone to give in to despair.

That this is the continuous consideration of the Scriptures concerning the human race needs no further demonstration; it appears sufficiently from what has been said above about general sinfulness. But this organic unity of the human race in a legal and moral sense finds in the Apostle Paul a deliberate and profound treatment.

When in his letter to the Romans he has first exposed the damnability of the entire world before God (1:18-3:20), and then explained how all righteousness and the forgiveness of sins, all reconciliation and life, are acquired by Christ and are present in Him

for the believer (3:21-5:11), he summarizes at the end in chapter 5: 12-21 (before describing the moral fruits of the righteousness of faith in the sixth chapter). He again briefly summarizes the entire salvation, which we owe to Christ, and thus places it, in a world-historical context, opposite all the guilt and misery which came to us from Adam.

Sin entered the world through one man and continued with death to all men. For the sin of which the first man was guilty was of a very special character; it is called an offense, different in character from the sins of men from Adam to Moses (5:12), a crime or misdemeanor (5:15 ff), a disobedience (5:19), and as such forms the sharpest contrast with the absolute and lifelong obedience of Christ (5:19).

That is why the sin, of which Adam was guilty, did not remain confined to his person; it worked its way through the whole human race. It was not only in his person that sin entered the world, but also in the world through one man (5:12), and as a consequence of that, death passed upon all men and could justly continue, since all men sinned in that one man.

That this is Paul's thought is proved by the fact that he derives the death of those men who lived from Adam to Moses, and who could not sin with an offense like Adam's (because in those days there was no positive law, that is no law of covenant, to which a certain condition and threat was attached), precisely from Adam's offense. But if Romans 5:12 f. still leaves any uncertainty in this respect, it is completely removed by what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:22.

Here we read that all men die, not in themselves, nor in their parents or ancestors, but in Adam. That is to say, men are not subject to

death primarily because of their own guilt or that of their parents, but they all died in Adam. It was already decided in Adam that they would all die; the cause and the principle of their death are found in Adam. In him, they did not merely become mortal, but in fact, all died in an objective sense; the sentence of death was already pronounced then, although its execution followed later. Now Paul knows of no other death in mankind than that which results from sin (Romans 6:23). If all men have died in Adam, then all have sinned in him. Sin and death could enter the world through Adam's transgression and pass into all mankind because that transgression had a special character. It was the transgression of a special law and was not committed by Adam exclusively as a person but as the head of the human race.

Only when the Apostle's thought in Romans 5:12-14 is understood in this way does everything come into focus that is said in the following verses about the consequences of Adam's transgression; it is all the result of the same basic idea. The guilt (the judgment pronounced by God as judge) of one who sinned became a condemning sentence, which extended to the entire human race (vs. 16); through the crime or misdemeanor of one man, death prevailed in the world over all men (vs. 17); through one crime, death came to all men (vs. 16); and through one man's transgression, death came to all men (vs. 17). Through one crime it came to a condemning judgment for all people (vs. 18); and then finally everything is summed up in this sentence: through the disobedience of one man the many (that is, all the descendants of Adam) were made sinners, they all came to stand before God as sinners (vs. 19).

The seal on this interpretation of Paul's train of thought is set by the comparison he draws between Adam and Christ. In the context of Romans 5, the Apostle is not talking about the origin of sin in Adam, but about the fullness of salvation acquired through Christ. In order to show this salvation in all its glory, he compares it with sin and death, which have spread from Adam through the human race. Adam serves here as an example, as a type, of the one who is to come (vs. 14).

In the one Adam and by his one transgression, the human race was condemned; in the one man Jesus Christ, it is acquitted and justified by God's one judicial sentence. Through one man, sin entered the world as a power and ruled over all men, and likewise one man has given divine grace dominion over mankind. Through one man, death came into the world as proof of the reign of sin; through one man, Christ Jesus our Lord, grace also began to reign in the way of righteousness that leads to eternal life. The comparison between Adam and Christ is valid in all respects; there is only this difference: sin is powerful and strong, but grace far surpasses it in wealth and abundance.

In the doctrine of original sin, Christian theology has summarized these thoughts of Scripture. It is possible to oppose and deny this doctrine, or even to mock it. But this does not silence the testimony of Scripture, nor does it destroy the facts on which this doctrine is based. For the whole history of the world is proof that mankind, in its entirety and therefore in all its members, stands guilty before God, is partaker of a morally corrupt nature, and is at all times subject to destruction and death. Original sin therefore includes original guilt: in the first man, because of and for the sake of his

disobedience, the many that came from him were made sinners by the just judgment of God (Romans 5:19).

Original sin, secondly, is original pollution: all men are conceived in sin and born in iniquity, as the Psalmist declares, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). From their youth, their thoughts are only evil continually (Gen. 6:5, 8:21), and this corruption taints every part of their being. "Can a clean thing come out of an unclean? Not one" (Job 14:4). This impurity extends to the entire human race and pervades the whole being of every individual. The heart, which is more deceitful than anything else and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9), as the wellspring of life (Prov. 4:23), is also the fountain of all iniquity (Mark 7:21-22). From this central point, sin darkens the mind (Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:18), inclines the will toward evil, and renders it powerless to do true good (John 8:34; Rom. 8:7). It defiles the conscience (Titus 1:15) and makes the body, with all its members—eyes and ears, hands and feet, mouth and tongue—servants of unrighteousness (Rom. 6:13). This inherent sin renders every human being subject to perdition and death, not first through his own deliberate sins, but from the moment of his conception (Rom. 5:14); all men have already died in Adam (1 Cor. 15:22).

Though this doctrine of original sin may seem harsh, it rests upon a law that governs all human life, a law whose existence is undeniable and unchallenged as long as it works to one’s benefit.

When parents amass treasures for their children, those children never object to inheriting these treasures at their parents’ death, even though they have not earned them at all, and may even be

unworthy of them due to disgraceful behavior, squandering them in unrighteous living. And if there are no children, distant relatives, second cousins and third cousins, appear to share in the inheritance that unknown and neglected kin have unexpectedly left them, without any pangs of conscience. This applies to material goods, but there are also spiritual goods, such as rank and position, honor and reputation, science and art, which children inherit from their parents. Though they have not earned these in any way, they accept them without protest and even gratefully.

This law of heredity prevails everywhere: in families, in lineages, among peoples, in the state and society, in science and art, and throughout mankind. The next generation benefits from the goods accumulated by previous generations; offspring enter into the labors of their fathers in every field of life. There is no one who, as long as he benefits, will oppose this gracious act of God.

However, everything changes when this same law of inheritance works to one's disadvantage. When children are called upon to support their impoverished parents, they may suddenly disown all familial ties and refer them to charity. When relatives feel insulted because one of their own marries beneath their status or commits an indecent act, they swiftly distance themselves and share in their disapproval. People have a strong tendency to enjoy the benefits of society while shirking its burdens. This inclination itself is a powerful proof that a community of joys and burdens indeed exists among people. There is a unity, a community, a solidarity whose existence and functioning no one can deny.

We do not fully comprehend the mechanisms by which influence and characteristics are transmitted across generations and communities. The laws of heredity, which govern the transmission of physical and mental traits from parents to offspring, remain shrouded in mystery. Likewise, we cannot unravel the enigma of how an individual, born into and nurtured by a community, eventually grows to independence and assumes a significant role within that same community. The boundary where communal influence ends and personal autonomy begins is elusive. Yet, this does not negate the existence of a profound solidarity among people, binding them together in various social fabrics. Individuals exist, but so do family ties, kinship bonds, national identities, and cultural affinities that weave individuals into powerful collectives. There are personal attributes and social characteristics, individual sins and collective transgressions, personal debts and communal responsibilities.

This pervasive solidarity naturally entails the representation of the many by the few. Not everyone can be present everywhere or engage in every task. Humanity is dispersed across the globe, living in different times and places, with varying degrees of wisdom and capability. Consequently, it is inevitable that a select few are called to think, speak, decide, and act on behalf of the many. True community is impossible without diversity in gifts and roles, without representation and substitution. Just as a body cannot function without distinct members governed by a head, so too does society rely on leaders and representatives: a father for his family, a director for his company, a board for its association, a general for his army, a parliament for its constituents, and a king for his realm. Subordinates share in the outcomes of their leaders' decisions.

This principle applies within limited circles of humanity, where individuals can greatly affect their immediate surroundings. Even a figure as influential as Napoleon occupies a finite and fleeting place in the annals of history. However, Scripture reveals the existence of two individuals whose impact transcends all others, whose authority and influence extend beyond any single nation, continent, or era, reaching into eternity. These two individuals are Adam and Christ. Adam stands at the dawn of history as the head of the old humanity, the progenitor of sin and death. Christ, positioned in the fulness of time, heads the new humanity, the source of righteousness and life.

Their unique positions at the helm of humanity set them apart. The influence of Adam and Christ can be understood through analogies drawn from various forms of human solidarity found in families, communities, and nations. These analogies can help us grasp the profound impact Adam and Christ have on the human race. The law of heredity, which operates in every sphere of life, applies supremely in the spiritual and moral realms as well. Nonetheless, Adam and Christ hold unparalleled significance. Their roles are not mere analogies but realities that shape the destiny of all mankind. Through Christ, we find reconciliation and redemption from the fate inherited from Adam's transgression.

For it is the same law that condemns us in the first man and acquits us in the second. If we could not partake of the damnation in Adam without knowing it, it would not be possible for us to be accepted into grace again in Christ in the same way. If we do not object to receiving the good that is given to us through gift and inheritance without any merit on our part, we have lost the right to oppose this same law when it brings evil upon us. We accept good from God,

should we not accept evil? Job 2:10. Therefore, let us not accuse Adam, but give thanks to Christ, who loved us so wonderfully. Let us not look back to paradise, but let us look forward to the Cross; behind that Cross hangs the unforgiving crown.

Original sin, into which mankind is received and born, is not a dormant, inoperative quality, but a root from which all kinds of sins spring, an unholy fountain from which sin continually gushes like surging water, a force that always drives man in the wrong direction of his heart, away from God and his community, towards his own destruction and ruin. From original sin, therefore, we distinguish those sins which were formerly known as intractable sins and which comprise all those violations of the divine law which are committed by man himself personally, with less or more consciousness, with weaker or stronger will and intention. All these personal sins have a communal origin; they come from the heart of man (Mark 7:22). And that heart is the same for all people in all places and in all times, as long as it has not been changed and renewed through rebirth. There is one human nature common to all of Adam's descendants, and that nature is guilty and impure in all of them. Therefore, there is no reason for any human being to separate himself from all others and say: "Go away from me, I am holier than you." The pride of the self-righteous, the pride of the noble, the self-exaltation of the wise is, in view of the human nature that is inherent in all people, without foundation. Among the thousands of sins, there is not one of which any man could say that he is foreign to it and has nothing to do with it. The seeds of all iniquity, even the most evil, lie in the heart that each one carries in his bosom. The criminals are not a special breed but come from the society of which we are all members; they only

reveal what is going on, stirring and brewing in the hidden nature of every human being.

Because they arise from a common root, all the sins in the life of each individual human being and also in the life of a family, a tribe, a nation, a society, and in the whole of humanity are organically connected with each other. The number of sins is immeasurably large, so that efforts have been made to classify and group them. They are referred to as the seven deadly sins (pride, avarice, intemperance, impudence, sloth, envy, wrath); or according to the instrument by which they are committed, as sins of the mind, words, and works, as sins of the flesh and of the spirit; or according to the commandments against which they are resisted, sins against the first and second tables, against God, neighbor, and ourselves; or according to the form in which they occur, sins of omission or commission; or according to the degree in which they are distinguished, hidden and public, silent and calling, human and devilish sins, etc.

But however different they may be, they never stand alone as mere random acts; they always hang together at the root and have a constant effect on each other. Just as in insanity the law of healthy life is preserved but is now at work to disrupt it, so the organic life of mankind and humanity also comes out in sin, but in such a way that through that sin it now develops in a direction which is diametrically opposed to its original purpose.

We all recognize the truth of the proverb: sin is a slippery slope; one cannot tread its path for long and then halt or reverse course at will. A poet once profoundly observed the curse of the evil deed, which

continually begets further evil. Yet, it is Scripture that provides the clearest light on this matter. James 1:14-15 illustrates how man's sinful acts arise organically; temptation does not stem from God but from one's own lust. This desire, however, does not immediately produce sin; it first must be conceived and nurtured by the mind and will. Once desire has been impregnated by the will, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is fully grown, it results in death.

Thus, every particular sin follows this pattern, but various sins are also interconnected. James emphasizes this in 2:10, stating that whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one commandment is guilty of all. The same Lawgiver who decreed one commandment has given them all; transgressing one commandment challenges the authority of the entire law. The law is an organic whole, so that violating one part disfigures the entirety. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link; when one link is broken, the whole chain falls apart. Thus, one who transgresses a single commandment, in essence, violates them all, leading to a downward spiral of sin. As Jesus said, such a person becomes a slave to sin (John 8:34), or as Paul expresses it, sold under sin's dominion, as dependent on sin as a slave is to his master (Romans 7:14).

This organic view also applies to sins manifested in various spheres of human life. There are personal sins, but also communal and societal sins, sins specific to families, nations, and different social classes. Each profession, each role, each class in society faces unique moral hazards and sins. City dwellers' sins differ from those of villagers; farmers' sins from merchants'; the educated from the uneducated; the rich from the poor; children from adults. This diversity in sins demonstrates their interconnectedness. Statistics

confirm this by showing that certain crimes recur with rhythmic regularity across different demographics and circumstances. Though we only glimpse this interconnectedness superficially, delving deeper would reveal a unity and system even in sin.

Scripture unveils a portion of this mystery by linking mankind's sin, from its origin to its culmination, with the kingdom of Satan. Since Satan's seduction of humanity (John 8:44), he has become, in a moral sense, the ruler of this world and the god of this age (John 16:11, 2 Cor. 4:4). Though condemned by Christ and cast out (John 12:31, 16:11), and primarily active in the Hebrew world (Acts 26:18, Eph. 2:2), he constantly assaults the church, which must battle him with its full armor (Eph. 6:12). Towards the end of days, Satan will marshal his forces for a final, decisive assault on Christ's kingdom (Rev. 12ff). Viewing the entirety of sin's realm in mankind through the lens of Scripture reveals its true nature and purpose: enmity against God and a quest for dominion over the world. Every sin, no matter how small, contributes to this goal as a transgression against divine law. The history of the world is not a blind process but a grand drama, a spiritual warfare spanning centuries between the Spirit from above and the spirit from below, between Christ and the Antichrist, between God and Satan.

Although this fundamental consideration of sin must take precedence, we must not succumb to the error of losing sight of the distinctions that exist between different sins. While it is true that sins, like virtues, are one and indivisible—so that he who has one, in principle, has them all, as James 2:10 suggests—this does not mean that all sins are equal in measure and degree. There is a clear difference between sins committed by error and those committed

with a high hand (Numbers 15:27, 30), between sins of ignorance and those committed with full knowledge and intention (Matthew 11:21; Luke 12:47; 23:34; Acts 3:17; 17:30), and between sins against the first and second tables of the law (Matthew 22:37, 38). Additionally, there are sensual and spiritual sins, human and devilish sins, and so forth. Since the commandments of the one law are different, and since their transgressions may occur under varying circumstances and with varying degrees of consent from the conscience and will, not all sins are equally grievous or worthy of the same punishment. The moral law's transgressions are more serious than those against ceremonial commandments, for obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22). He who steals out of poverty is far less guilty than one who steals out of greed (Proverbs 6:30). There are degrees of wrath (Matthew 5:22), and though desiring a married woman is already adultery in the heart, he who does not fight this desire but follows it commits adultery in deed (Matthew 5:28).

Failing to understand this distinction between sins would lead us into serious conflict with Scripture and reality. In a moral sense, men are born equal; they bear the same guilt and are polluted by the same stain. However, as they grow, they diverge greatly. The faithful sometimes fall into serious sin, constantly struggling against the old man and attaining only a small principle of perfect obedience here on earth. Among those who have not known Christ or believed in Him, many give themselves over to every indulgence of wickedness and drink sin like water. Yet, many others lead lives of civil honor and high morality, setting examples of virtue even for Christians. The seeds of all wickedness lie in every human heart. The more we grow in self-knowledge, the more we recognize the truth of the confession

that by nature we are inclined to hate God and our neighbor, incapable of any good and inclined to all evil. Yet, this evil inclination does not lead to evil deeds in everyone to the same extent; not all who walk the broad road do so at the same pace or make the same progress.

The cause of this difference does not lie within man, but in the restraining grace of God. The heart is the same in all men; always, everywhere, and in all, the same evil thoughts and desires arise. The heart is always evil from childhood. If God were to let men loose and give them over to the desires of their hearts, it would result in hell on earth, making human society and history impossible. Just as the fire within the earth is kept in check by the hard crust and only erupts through volcanoes from time to time, so the evil thoughts and desires of the human heart are suppressed and restrained by society. God has not let man go but restrains the wild beast within him, thus carrying out His counsel for the human race. He still maintains natural love, the craving for companionship, the consciousness of religion and morality, the conscience and the sense of justice, reason and the will within mankind. He places man in the midst of family, society, and state, which with their public opinion, notions of decency, labor coercion, discipline, punishment, and more, restrain him, force him into a civil and honorable life, and educate him.

Through all these manifold and powerful influences, sinful man is enabled to accomplish much good. When the Heidelberg Catechism asserts that man is completely incapable of any good and inclined to all evil, it speaks, as the Articles against the Remonstrants clearly state, of sanctifying good.

By nature, man is utterly incapable of this beatific good; he cannot perform any deed that is internally and spiritually pure in the eyes of God, who searches the heart, and that fully accords with both the spiritual and literal sense of the law, thus meriting eternal life and heavenly salvation. However, this does not imply that man is incapable, through the general grace of God, of accomplishing many commendable acts. In his personal life, he can, by reason and will, subdue his evil thoughts and desires and conform to virtue; in his domestic life, he can love his wife, children, parents, and siblings, and seek their good. In society, he can honestly and faithfully fulfill his vocation and contribute to the increase of prosperity, civilization, science, and art. In a word, through all the powers with which God surrounds natural, sinful man, He still enables him to lead a human life here on earth.

Yet, all these powers are insufficient to renew man's inner life, and often prove inadequate even to subdue iniquity. Here, we need not even think of the criminal world, which exists in every society and leads its own life. During conquests, colonizations, religious and race wars, popular uprisings, state revolutions, scandal trials, and the like, it is sometimes revealed what terrible injustice dwells in the hearts of men. The refinement of culture does not eradicate it, but encourages the shamelessness with which it is treated. Upon deeper examination, the seemingly noblest deeds often turn out to be inspired by all sorts of sinful considerations of selfishness and ambition. He who understands something of the malice and deceitfulness of the human heart is not surprised that there is so much evil in the world, but rather that there is still so much good; and he prays to the wisdom of God, who still manages to accomplish so much with such a human race. It is the goodness of the Lord that

we are not consumed, that His mercies never end (Lamentations 3:22). There is a constant struggle between man's sin, which seeks to break out, and the grace of God, which restrains it and makes human thought and action subservient to the execution of His counsel.

This grace of God can lead mankind to humility, even if it is only in the manner of Ahab (1 Kings 21:29) or the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jonah 3:5ff.), but man can also resist this grace permanently; and then that dreadful phenomenon sets in, which Scripture calls hardening or forbearance, of which Pharaoh is the typical example. True, it occurs with others in Scripture as well, but the nature and progress of hardening are most clearly revealed with Pharaoh. He was a powerful ruler, standing at the head of a great empire, proud of heart and unwilling to bow down to the signs of God's power. These signs succeeded one another in a regular order, increasing in miraculous power and destructive effect; but to the same degree, Pharaoh became angrier with them; his urges to give in and bow down lost more and more of their sincerity; finally, he walked toward his own destruction with his eyes wide open.

It is a tremendous drama of the soul that unfolds before our eyes in Pharaoh's person, seen both from God's and man's perspectives. Sometimes it is stated that the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:20, 27), and at other times, it is said that Pharaoh hardens his own heart (Ex. 7:13, 22, 8:15, 19, 32, 9:34), or that his heart is hardened (Ex. 7:14, 9:7, 9:35). In this hardening, there is a divine and a human effect—a result of divine grace, which increasingly becomes a judgment, and an effect of human resistance, which increasingly assumes the character of a conscious and determined enmity against God. Scripture describes this hardening

in various places: the Lord hardens (Deut. 2:30, Josh. 11:20, Isa. 63:17), and man hardens himself (1 Sam. 6:6, 2 Chron. 36:13, Ps. 95:8, Matt. 13:15, Acts 19:9, Rom. 11:7, 25). There is an interaction, a dispute, a struggle between the two, inseparable from the revelation of divine grace. This effect is attached to general grace, but special grace, in particular, has this characteristic: it brings about judgment, division, and separation among men (John 1:5, 3:19, 9:39). Christ is a fall and a resurrection (Luke 2:34); He is a rock of salvation or a stumbling block and a reproach (Matt. 21:44, Rom. 9:32); the Gospel is either death or life (2 Cor. 2:16); it hides itself from the wise and prudent and reveals itself to the children (Matt. 11:25). In all this, the good pleasure of God is revealed, as well as the law of the religious-moral life.

The sin of hardening culminates in its ultimate consequence: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Jesus speaks of this in connection with a serious quarrel with the Pharisees. When He healed a man who was blind and dumb and possessed by the devil, the crowds were so amazed that they exclaimed, "Is this not the Son of David, the Messiah whom God promised to the fathers?" But this homage to Christ aroused nothing but hatred and enmity among the Pharisees, who declared that Jesus cast out the devil through Beelzebul, the chief of the devils. They stand in opposition; instead of recognizing Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah who, by the Spirit of God, cast out the devils and established God's kingdom on earth, they claim that Jesus is an accomplice of Satan, performing devilish works. Jesus maintains His full dignity in the face of this terrible calumny; He refutes it and demonstrates its incongruity, but ultimately, He adds this serious warning: all sin and calumny will be forgiven to

mankind, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age nor in the age to come (Matt. 12:31-32).

The words themselves and their context clearly show that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not committed at the beginning or in the middle, but at the end of the way of sin. It does not consist in doubting or disbelieving the truth that God has revealed, nor in resisting and distrusting the Holy Spirit, for these sins can be committed even by the faithful and are often committed by them. But blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can only occur when there has been such a rich revelation of God and such a powerful enlightenment of the Holy Spirit in the consciousness that man's heart and conscience are fully convinced of the truth of divine revelation (Heb. 6:4-8, 10:25-29, 12:15-17).

And it consists in this: such a person, despite all personal revelation and subjective enlightenment, despite recognizing and experiencing the truth as truth, nevertheless, with full awareness and deliberate will, declares it to be a lie with heart and mouth and condemns Christ as an instrument of Satan. In this, human sin reaches the level of demonic sin; it does not exist in doubt and unbelief but excludes these, as well as all repentance and prayer altogether (1 John 5:16). It is far beyond all doubt and unbelief, beyond all repentance and prayer. Even though the Holy Spirit is believed and recognized as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, He is blasphemed in devilish malice. Sin becomes so ungodly insolent in its completion that it casts off all shame, despises all pretence, and out of sheer lust for evil sets itself against God's truth and grace. Thus, it is a very serious warning which Jesus gives in this teaching about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; but one should not forget the consolation it contains. For if

this is the one unforgivable sin, then all other sins, even the greatest and most grievous, are forgivable; forgivable not by human penance, but by the riches of divine grace.

If sin can only be forgiven and erased by grace, it follows that it deserves punishment in itself. Scripture proceeds from this, when, before sin entered the world, it already threatens it with the punishment of death (Genesis 2:17), and repeatedly announces the judgment of God on sin, whether in this life (Exodus 20:5) or in the great day of judgment (Romans 2:5-10). For God is the Just and the Holy One, who hates all ungodliness (Job 34:10, Ps. 5:5, 45:8), does not hold the guilty guiltless (Ex. 34:7, Num. 14:18), but seeks all iniquity with His wrath (Rom. 1:18), curse (Deut. 27:26, Gal. 3:10), and vengeance (Nah. 1:2, 1 Thess. 4:6), and shall repay each one according to his works (Ps. 62:13, Job 34:11, Prov. 24:12, Jer. 32:19, Ezek. 33:20, Matt. 16:27, Rom. 2:6, 2 Cor. 5:10, 1 Pet. 1:17, Rev. 22:12). The conscience bears witness to this in every man when it condemns him for his evil thoughts, words, and deeds, and often pursues him with consciousness of guilt, remorse, and fear of judgment. And the justice of all peoples is built on this premise of the punishability of sin.

But the human heart always resists this strict judgment because it feels condemned by it. Science and philosophy have often aligned with this heart, attempting, through elaborate reasoning, to sever good from reward and evil from punishment. Just as art must be practiced for its own sake, so, in this view, good must be practiced for its own sake and not out of hope for reward, and evil must be forsaken for its own sake and not out of fear of punishment. There is neither reward for virtue nor punishment for sin; the only

punishment for sin is the consequence it brings about by its nature, with the necessity of a natural law. Just as the virtuous person has peace of mind, the sinner is tormented by consciousness of guilt, fear, and anxiety, and is also afflicted by those bodily ailments which result from many sins, such as drunkenness and lust.

In recent times, this philosophy of the sinful and erring heart has sought support in the theory of evolution, which posits that man descends from animals, remains an animal at his core, and is necessarily all that he is and does. Just as there are flowers which emit pleasant and unpleasant scents, just as there are gentle and ferocious animals, so there are people who are useful and those who are harmful to society. Society does have the right, out of self-preservation, to remove and imprison these harmful individuals, but this is not punishment. One person has no right to hold court over another and condemn him. Criminals are not evil-doers but rather madmen who suffer from hereditary defects or who have been shaped and raised by society itself. Therefore, they do not belong in prison but in hospitals or reformatories and are entitled to humane, professional, or educational treatment.

In the interest of fairness, it must be acknowledged that this contemporary theory of criminal law arises, in part, as a reaction against a previous extreme. Where criminals are now often viewed as madmen, in past ages, the mentally ill and various other unfortunates were frequently treated as criminals, and subjected to the most horrific tortures under the guise of justice. Yet, while this historical context may offer some explanation, it does not justify the new theory. This modern approach is just as one-sided, for it diminishes the gravity of sin, strips man of his moral agency, reduces

him to a mere automaton, attributes his moral nature to external factors, and fundamentally erodes the foundation of authority, governance, and justice.

Despite the attempts of science to establish the natural necessity of sin, every person whose conscience remains unscathed feels a compelling obligation to pursue good and bears responsibility for his misdeeds. Certainly, the anticipation of reward is neither the sole nor the paramount incentive for virtuous behavior, just as the dread of punishment is not the exclusive deterrent from wrongdoing. However, one who acts righteously and refrains from evil, even if motivated by these lesser incentives, is in a better moral state than one who, disregarding such motives, lives in accordance with the sinful desires of his heart. From the very outset, virtue and happiness, sin and punishment, are intrinsically linked in the moral consciousness. True love of the good, which means full communion with God, entails that man is wholly integrated into this communion, both inwardly and outwardly; conversely, sin in its fullness results in the complete destruction of man, both body and soul.

The punishment ordained by God for sin is death (Gen 2:17), but this temporal, physical death is not an isolated incident; it is both preceded and followed by numerous other punishments.

Upon sinning, man's eyes were opened; he felt shame in his nakedness and hid himself from God in fear (Gen 3:7-8). Shame and fear are inseparable from sin, for through sin, man immediately perceives his guilt and impurity.

Guilt, which is the obligation to punishment, and impurity, which is moral corruption, are the immediate consequences of the fall.

However, to these natural punishments, God adds a variety of severe judgments. The woman is punished both in her role as a wife and as a mother; she will bear children in pain, and yet her desire will always be for her husband (Gen 3:16). The man is punished in his vocation, in the toil of cultivating the earth, in the labor of his hands (Gen 3:17-19). Although death does not come immediately after the transgression—it is postponed for many years—life now becomes a continual struggle, filled with suffering and sorrow, a constant preparation for death, a protracted dying. Through sin, man has become not just mortal, but constantly dying, from the cradle to the grave. His existence is a brief and futile battle against death.

This is poignantly captured in the numerous laments in Scripture about the frailty, transience, and vanity of human life. Man was made from dust, even before the fall; his body formed from the earth, and thus earthly, a living soul (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). However, the life of the first man was intended to be governed, spiritualized, and glorified by the spirit through adherence to divine law. But now, as a consequence of his transgression, the law is fulfilled: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).

Instead of living by the spirit, through sin, man has become flesh. Now his life is but a shadow, a fleeting dream, a night-watch, a handbreadth, a footstep, a wave that rises and breaks in the ocean, a ray of light that shines and vanishes, a flower that blooms and withers. It hardly merits the full, glorious name of life; it is a continual death in sin (John 8:21, 24), a death in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1).

This is life viewed from within, as it is corrupted, ruined, dissolved by sin. From without, it is perpetually threatened on all sides. After his transgression, man was driven out of paradise; he may not return of his own accord, for he has forfeited the right to life, and such a place of peace is no longer fitting for fallen man. He must venture into the world to earn his living and fulfill his vocation. The innocent belong in paradise, the blessed dwell in heaven, but sinful man, still open to salvation, is given a dwelling on earth that shares in his fall, is cursed for his sake, and is subject to vanity along with him (Romans 8:20).

The earth on which we dwell is neither heaven nor hell; it stands between the two and partakes of both. We cannot detail the exact connection between the sins of men and the calamities of life. Jesus even cautions against such direct correlations, saying that the Galileans, whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices, were not greater sinners than others (Luke 13:1-3), and that the man born blind was not suffering for his own sins or those of his parents, but was afflicted that the works of God might be manifest in him (John 9:3). Thus, from the calamities befalling someone, we may not conclude, like Job's friends, that there is specific, personal guilt.

However, undoubtedly, according to the entirety of Scripture's teaching, there is a profound connection between fallen humanity and the fallen earth. They were created in harmony, both cast down to vanity together, both redeemed in principle by Christ, and will one day be raised and glorified together. The present world is neither the best nor the worst possible, but it is a suitable world for fallen man; because it produces only thorns and thistles on its own, it compels man to labor, preserves him from utter destruction, and sustains in

his heart the indomitable hope of lasting good and eternal happiness. This hope sustains him, even if it is but a short, restless life.

All life, which is still part of man's nature, perishes in death. If strong, it may last seventy or eighty years, but often it is cut short much earlier, in the prime of youth, or even shortly after or before birth. The Scriptures declare that death is God's judgment, a reward and punishment for sin (Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12, 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:21, James 1:15), and this resounds in the minds of humanity as a whole and of each individual. Even the so-called natural nations hold that man is naturally immortal, and that not immortality but death requires explanation. Nevertheless, many throughout history have believed that death, not caused by external force but as an internal process of life's decay, is entirely natural and necessary; death in itself is not terrifying, but appears so because man's instinct for life opposes it. As science advances, limiting premature death and making natural death by decay the norm, humanity will die as calmly and peacefully as the withering plant and the animal that lives out its days.

But though there are some who speak in this manner, there are others who sound a very different note. Men of science are in complete disagreement about the causes and nature of death. In contrast to those who view death as a natural and necessary end to life, many regard death as an even greater mystery than life and assert unequivocally that there is no intrinsic reason why living beings should die by their inner nature. They even claim that the universe was originally an immense, living entity, that death only emerged later, and that some animals remain immortal. Such language finds ready acceptance among those who today believe in

the pre-existence of souls and consider death a transformation that man undergoes to ascend to a higher life, much like the caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly.

This contradiction of opinions proves in itself that science cannot penetrate to the deepest and ultimate causes of phenomena, nor can it explain death and life. Both remain mysteries to it. Science may assert that life is original and eternal, yet it faces the question of where death originated and reduces it to a mere transformation. Alternatively, it may seek to understand death as entirely natural, but then it knows nothing about life and must deny immortality. In both cases, it obliterates the boundary between death and life, as well as between sin and holiness.

The confession that death is the wages of sin is not proved by science, nor is it refuted; it lies beyond its domain and reach, and requires no proof from it. For it rests on divine testimony and is confirmed hourly by the fear of death, with which men, all their lives, are held in bondage (Heb. 2:15). Whatever may be argued in favor of its necessity and defense of its right, death remains unnatural. It is so in view of man's nature and destiny, in connection with his creation in God's image, because communion with God is incompatible with death; God is not the God of the dead, but of the living (Matthew 22:32). On the other hand, it is perfectly natural for fallen man, because sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death (James 1:15). In the Scriptures, death is not synonymous with destruction, nor is life synonymous with mere existence. Life is enjoyment, bliss, abundance; death is misery, poverty, hunger, discontent, unhappiness. Death is dissolution, the separation of what belongs together. Man, created in God's image, belongs in communion with

God, and then he lives fully, eternally, blissfully. But if he severs that communion, he dies at that very moment and continues to die; his life is robbed of peace, joy, and bliss, becoming a death in sin. This spiritual death, the separation between God and man, continues in the physical and culminates in eternal death. For with the separation of soul and body, man's fate is sealed, though his existence does not cease. It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27).

And who can stand in that judgment?

Study Questions for Reflection

1. What does the Genesis account reveal about the immediacy of the fall following creation, and how does this proximity between creation and fall impact our understanding of sin?

- Reflect on the significance of the fall occurring shortly after creation and its implications for understanding the human condition and sin's pervasive nature.

2. How does the fall of angels, as discussed in the chapter, relate to the fall of man, and what can we learn about the nature of sin from these two events?

- Consider the similarities and differences between the fall of angels and the fall of man, and what these events teach us about pride and rebellion against God.

3. In what ways does the deception of Eve by the serpent illustrate the process by which sin enters human experience?

- Reflect on the steps leading to Eve's sin—doubt, disbelief, desire, and disobedience—and how these steps are relevant to understanding temptation and sin in our own lives.

4. How does the chapter describe the role of Satan in the fall of man, and what are the implications for understanding spiritual warfare and human responsibility?

- Discuss the influence of demonic power in the temptation of man and how this shapes our view of spiritual warfare and personal accountability.

5. What does the chapter suggest about the relationship between God's testing and human sin, particularly in the context of Adam's trial in the Garden of Eden?

- Reflect on the purpose of divine testing and how God's tests differ from temptations designed to cause failure.

6. How does the chapter address the issue of original sin and its transmission to all humanity through Adam?

- Consider the theological concept of original sin and its implications for understanding human nature, guilt, and the need for redemption.

7. In what ways does the chapter differentiate between the first sin of Adam and subsequent sins committed by humanity?

- Discuss the unique characteristics of Adam's sin and how it serves as the foundation for understanding all other sins.

8. How does the narrative of the fall in Genesis 3 explain the continued presence of sin in the world and its impact on human relationships and society?

- Reflect on the consequences of sin as described in Genesis 3, particularly regarding shame, fear, and the breakdown of relationships.

9. What role does conscience play in human awareness of sin, according to the chapter, and how does this shape our understanding of moral responsibility?

- Consider the function of conscience in recognizing sin and its importance in guiding moral behavior and accountability.

10. How does the chapter describe the distinction between different types and degrees of sins, and what are the practical implications for Christian living and ethical decision-making?

- Reflect on the various categories of sin—sins of omission and commission, sins against different commandments, and degrees of guilt—and how this understanding informs our daily conduct and pursuit of holiness.

14. The Covenant of Grace

To that profound question, humanity in all ages and places has consistently given the answer that they, as they are, cannot appear before God nor dwell in His presence. Is there anyone who can declare with confidence: "I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin"? (Proverbs 20:9). All feel the weight of guilt and uncleanness, and all acknowledge, if not to others, then at least inwardly to themselves, that they are not as they ought to be. Even the hardened sinner experiences moments when discontent and unrest grip his heart, and the self-righteous harbor a lingering hope that God will overlook their shortcomings and accept their intentions in place of perfect deeds.

It is true that many strive to dismiss these serious thoughts from their minds and live as if there were no God and no commandments. They deceive themselves with the hope that there is no God (Psalm 14:1), or that He does not concern Himself with the sins of humanity, believing that those who do evil are regarded as good in His eyes (Malachi 2:17). Yet, the Scriptures call such reasonings foolishness (Psalm 14:1) and even suggest they blaspheme God's holy name (Psalm 10:13). Those who uphold the moral law and its lofty ideals cannot help but agree. Certainly, God is love, but this profound truth can only be fully appreciated when we understand that divine love is also holy and perfectly aligned with righteousness. God's grace can only find its proper place when His law is firmly established.

Indeed, the entire history of the world bears unequivocal witness to this divine law. We cannot separate the world from the special revelation in Christ, which reveals the love of God, for without it, the general revelation with its blessings and benefits would soon fade. But even if we momentarily turn our thoughts away from the

revelation in Christ, little ground remains for belief in a God of love. The history of the world indicates, if anything, that God has a dispute with His creatures. There exists a fundamental disagreement, a separation, a conflict between God and His world. God does not consent to the ways of man, and man does not align with the will of God. Each follows their own paths and harbors their own thoughts and intentions about all things. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are His ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8).

Thus, the history of the world is also a history of judgment. It is not, as the poet once suggested, the final world judgment, which will come at the end of days, nor is it merely a series of judgments, for the earth is still filled with the goodness of God (Psalm 104:24). Nevertheless, the history of the world is a history replete with judgments, a narrative of strife and struggle, of blood and tears, of trials and divine judgments. It is as though the words of Moses, uttered when he witnessed the generation of Israelites dying in the wilderness, are inscribed over it all: "We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation" (Psalm 90:7).

This historical testimony affirms that humanity has continually searched and still searches for a lost paradise, for lasting happiness, for deliverance from all the evils that beset them. Within all people lies a yearning and a quest for redemption, which finds particular expression in religion. The concept of redemption can be so broadly understood that it encompasses all human endeavor on earth. When man strives to provide for his needs through the labor of his hands, when he seeks to defend himself against various hostile forces in nature and society, when he endeavors through science and art to

subdue the earth, all these efforts are directed toward the redemption of some evil and the attainment of some good.

The notion of redemption is never truly associated with human efforts. No matter how much these endeavors enhance the comfort and richness of life, humanity understands that all this progress and civilization cannot address its deepest needs or deliver it from its greatest distress. Salvation is a religious concept and belongs firmly within the realm of religion. All civilizations have been preceded by religion, and even today, religion maintains its unique and irreplaceable position alongside science, art, and technology. It cannot be substituted or compensated for by any human endeavor or the splendid achievements of human labor. Religion addresses a profound and distinct need of humanity and, after the fall, serves to rescue him from a unique and pervasive distress.

Hence, the concept of salvation is present in all religions.

It is true that some categorize religions into those of nature, morality, and salvation, distinguishing the latter as a special type. However, this classification is rightly contested by others. In a broad sense, the idea of salvation is intrinsic to all religions; every religion of the people aims to be a religion of salvation. Opinions may differ regarding the evil from which salvation is sought, the means by which it is achieved, and the ultimate good that is pursued. Nonetheless, the pursuit of salvation from evil and the attainment of the highest good are central to all religions. The fundamental question in religion is always: "What must I do to be saved?" What no civilization or development, no mastery over the earth can accomplish, that is precisely what religion seeks: enduring

happiness, eternal peace, perfect bliss. In religion, man is ever concerned with God. In his sinful state, he often misconstrues God's nature, seeks Him with wrong intentions, along the wrong paths, and in the wrong places, but he nevertheless always seeks God, if only he might reach out and find Him.

This quest for salvation, unique to humanity and seeking fulfillment in the myriad self-made religions of the peoples, holds immense significance for Christianity. For this need is continually awakened and sustained by God Himself in the heart of man. It signifies that God has not yet wholly abandoned the fallen human race to itself. It is an inextinguishable hope that drives humanity to live and labor on its long journey through the world. It serves as a guarantee and prophecy that such salvation exists and that where people search for it in vain, it is granted by God out of pure mercy.

To better understand and appreciate the redemption that God's grace has prepared in Christ, it is useful to reflect on humanity's attempts, apart from special revelation, to deliver itself from evil and attain the highest good. When we do this, we are struck by both the great diversity and the great uniformity characterizing these attempts.

The diversity is evident in the multitude of religions that have existed throughout the ages and continue to exist today, far surpassing the diversity of peoples and languages. Just as thorns and thistles spring forth from the earth, false religions proliferate from human nature into the wild. They are so numerous and varied that they are almost impossible to categorize comprehensively. Since religion occupies a central place in human life, it assumes different characteristics as the relationships between God and the world, nature and spirit, freedom

and necessity, fate and guilt, history and development are variously interpreted. The more definitively or negatively evil is perceived—whether as an independent entity or as a diminishing point in development, whether natural or moral, sensual or spiritual—the more the concept of redemption shifts, and the direction in which redemption is sought changes accordingly.

And yet, when we pierce the essence of all these religions, they reveal traits of similarity and kinship. Each religion harbors a set of ideas about God and the world, spirits and men, soul and body, and the origin, nature, and ultimate purpose of things. Each religion presents a doctrine, a worldview, and dogma. Moreover, no religion is content with merely accepting these ideas rationally; it insists that man, through and with the aid of these ideas, must enter into a relationship and fellowship with the supernatural realm of the Godhead and spirits. Man universally understands that he does not naturally share in the favor of the Godhead; he recognizes that for his eternal happiness and the salvation of his soul, he must possess this favor. Concurrently, he feels deeply that he lacks this favor due to his sin and thus lacks fellowship with God. Therefore, a third component in every religion emerges—an attempt to obtain or secure this favor and fellowship permanently. Every religion brings with it a set of ideas, strives to cultivate certain conditions, and prescribes a series of actions.

These religious acts fall into two categories. The first includes those acts referred to as worship, primarily consisting of religious gatherings, sacrifices, prayers, and hymns. However, religion is never confined to these explicitly religious acts; because it occupies a central place in life and embraces all humanity, it permeates every

aspect of life, seeking to bring it into harmony with itself. Every religion raises a moral ideal and proclaims a moral law to which man must conform in his personal, domestic, civil, and social life. Thus, in every religion, alongside ideas and attitudes, there are actions related to both worship and moral life, distinct in cultural and ethical terms.

There is no religion devoid of these elements. Yet, significant differences exist in the content of each element, their relationship to one another, and the value assigned to each. Paul declares that the essence of paganism is that men have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of some creature (Romans 1:23). This principle of paganism stands firm, and no study of religions can overturn its truth.

However, this principle admits of varied manifestations. The apostle himself notes that the heathens sometimes transformed the glory of God into the likeness of a corruptible man, at other times into that of birds, and yet again into that of four-footed and creeping creatures. The more the Godhead is identified with the world, with nature, with spirits or souls, with humans or animals, the more religious ideas, emotions, and actions are altered.

Three main forms can be discerned. When the Divine is identified with the mysterious forces of nature, religion degenerates into gross superstition and fearful witchcraft; soothsayers and magicians are sought to grant mankind power over the capricious nature of the invisible, divine beings. If the Divine is equated with the human, then religion adopts a more human character, but it easily descends into ritualistic formalism or dry moralism. When the Divine is conceived as the idea, the soul, or the substance of the world, then

religion retreats from outward appearances into the mysticism of the heart, seeking communion with the Divine through asceticism and ecstasy. In the various religions, one or the other of these main forms predominates, but never in such a way as to entirely exclude the others. Salvation is always pursued through reason and knowledge, will and deed, or heart and feeling.

Philosophy concurs with this; it too grapples with the problem of salvation and seeks a worldview that satisfies both reason and emotion. Philosophy, born from religion, continually integrates elements of religion, and for many, it functions as a quasi-religion. Yet, despite its reflective endeavors, it does not transcend the fundamental notions of religion. Whenever it derives a rule for life from its worldview, it invariably strives to chart a path to salvation, whether through the knowledge of the state, the moral acts of the will, or the experiences of the heart. Without special revelation, neither man's religion nor the philosophy of thought possesses true knowledge of God, nor of man and the world, sin and salvation. Both search for God, stretching out their hands, but they do not find Him.

Therefore, to general revelation must come the special revelation; and it is through this that God emerges from His hiddenness, reveals Himself to man, and takes residence within him. Between the self-invented, self-willed religions of the nations and the religion founded on the special revelation to Israel and in Christ, there exists a profound difference. In the former, man seeks God, yet forms a false conception of Him, never gaining a proper understanding of the nature of sin and the way of salvation. But in the religion of the Holy Scriptures, it is always God who seeks man, revealing to him his guilt and impurity, yet also making Himself known in grace and mercy.

There, the longing cry rises from the depths of man's heart: "Oh, that God would rend the heavens and come down!" Here, the heavens part, and God Himself descends. There, man toils, striving through knowledge, adherence to commandments, or seclusion within his own mind, to achieve redemption from evil and fellowship with God. Here, all human effort falls away, and it is God who acts, intervenes in history, paves the path of redemption in Christ, and by His grace leads man along it. Special revelation is the response God Himself provides in word and deed to the questions that arise in the human heart through His guidance.

Immediately after the fall, we witness God coming to man. At that moment, man, having sinned, is seized with shame and fear; he flees from his Creator and hides among the trees of the garden. But God does not abandon man; He does not let him go. He descends to him, seeks him out, speaks to him, and leads him back to His fellowship, Gen. 3:7-15.

What transpired immediately after the fall continues through history, generation after generation; as it happened then, so it always occurs. In the entire work of redemption, it is God and God alone who acts as the seeker and caller, the speaker and doer; the entire redemption flows from Him and returns to Him. It is He who substitutes Seth for Abel, Gen. 4:25, who grants favor to Noah, Gen. 6:8, and preserves him through the flood, Gen. 6:12 ff, who calls Abram and covenants with him, Gen. 12:1, 17:1, who elects Israel as His inheritance by sheer grace, Deut. 4:20, 7:6-8, who, in the fullness of time, sends His only begotten Son into the world, Gal. 4:4, and who now gathers from all nations a congregation chosen for eternal life, preserving them for the heavenly inheritance to the end, Eph.

1:10, 1 Pet. 1:5. As in creation and providence, so also in re-creation, God is the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end, Isa. 44:6, Rev. 22:13. He can be nothing else, for He is God; from Him, through Him, and to Him are all things, Rom. 11:36.

That God is first in the work of salvation is manifest not only by the fact that the special revelation springs solely from Him, but also by the clear testimony that the entirety of this work is founded upon an eternal counsel of redemption. We have previously shown that all of God's creation and providence stem from such counsel; but, if possible, in even clearer and more forceful language, Scripture teaches us that this same eternal and unchangeable counsel also underpins the whole work of re-creation.

For Scripture often speaks of a counsel that precedes all things (Isa. 46:10), works all things (Eph. 1:11), and particularly aims at the work of redemption (Luke 7:30; Acts 20:27; Heb. 6:17); this counsel of God is the foundation of the entire work of creation (Heb. 6:17). Moreover, this counsel, which belongs not only to God's understanding but also to His omnipotent will (Eph. 1:5, 11), is indissoluble (Isa. 14:27; 46:10) and unchangeable (Heb. 6:17), and will endure forever (Ps. 33:11; Prov. 19:21). Other names clarify this idea: not only do we find mention of a counsel of God, but also of a pleasure which God has revealed in Christ towards men (Luke 2:14), and delights in their attainment and adoption as children (Matt. 11:26; Eph. 1:5, 9); of a purpose which works electively (Rom. 9:11; Eph. 1:9), made in Christ (Eph. 3:11), and realizes itself in the calling (Rom. 8:28); of a predestination and foreknowledge that have grace as their origin (Rom. 11:5) and Christ as their center (Eph. 1:4), specific persons as their object (Rom. 8:29), and their salvation as

their goal (Eph. 1:4); finally, of a predestination which, through the preaching of God's wisdom (1 Cor. 2:7), leads to adoption as children, conformity to Christ, and eternal life (Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:5).

Summarizing all these scriptural data, it appears that God's counsel has three main contents.

Firstly, it includes election, which is God's gracious intention, according to which He has predestined those whom He has known in love to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). One might also speak of an election of the peoples, because in the days of the Old Testament, Israel alone out of all peoples was accepted by the Lord for His inheritance; and in the New Testament dispensation, one people is acquainted with the Gospel much earlier than another. But the election of Scripture does not stop at the acceptance of the peoples; it continues in humanity to the nations, and in the nations to individuals, so that an Esau is rejected and a Jacob accepted (Rom. 9:13), and the same individuals, who were known beforehand, are also called, justified, and glorified in time (Rom. 8:30).

Even though the election has certain individuals as its object, it is not grounded in those individuals but only in God's grace; the Lord has mercy on whom He has mercy, and He is merciful towards whom He is merciful, so that it is not the will of the one who wills, nor the will of the one who runs, but the mercy of God (Rom. 9:15, 16). Faith is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8); the faithful were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that in time they might come to faith and through that faith be holy and blameless before God (Eph. 1:4); so

that there are always as many believers as God has predestined to eternal life (Acts 13:48). The will of God is for us the ultimate ground of all that exists and happens, and His good pleasure is the deepest cause to which the distinction in the eternal destiny of mankind can be traced.

Secondly, in the counsel of redemption, the entire plan of salvation that God intends to bestow upon His elect is firmly established. This divine decree encompasses not only the individuals who are destined to inherit eternal life but also appoints the Mediator who will secure this redemption for them. Thus, Christ Himself may be regarded as the object of God's election; not in the manner that He, like the members of His Church, was elected from a state of sin and misery to a state of salvation, but in this other sense: that He, who was the Mediator of creation, should also serve as the Mediator of re-creation and achieve this through His suffering and death (Matt. 12:18). As a Mediator, subject and obedient to the Father (Matt. 26:42; John 4:34; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8), Christ has a command and a work to fulfill, which the Father has appointed Him (Isa. 53:10; John 6:38-40; 10:18; 12:49; 17:4). In return for His accomplished work, He receives His own glory, the salvation of His people, and the highest authority in heaven and earth (Ps. 2:8; Isa. 53:10; John 17:4, 24; Phil. 2:9).

Like the counsel of creation and providence, that of re-creation does not extend beyond the Son. Indeed, we read explicitly that the eternal purpose was purposed in Christ (Eph. 3:11), and that those who come to faith in time were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). This does not imply that Christ is the foundation or cause of election, for He is Himself the object of

the Father's election in the sense previously described and therefore cannot act as the foundation or cause in re-creation any more than He does in creation and providence. As with all things, the counsel of God finds its starting point and basis in the Father. But just as creation and providence come into being through the decision and agency of the Father through the Son, so the plan of redemption is also established by the Father in and with the Son. With the Father, the Son designates Himself as the Mediator of salvation and the Head of His Church. From this, we may deduce that election, although it has certain persons as its object, nevertheless excludes all chance and arbitrariness. For the purpose of election is not to bring a random few to salvation and leave them isolated as individuals; rather, God's intent is to appoint Christ the Mediator as the Head of the Church and to form the Church into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:16). In the Church, humanity is organically preserved, and the world is restored in the new heavens and earth.

Therefore, in the third place, the effect and application of the salvation acquired by Christ is also determined in the counsel of God. The plan of redemption is established by the Father in the Son, but also in the fellowship of the Spirit. Just as creation is providentially brought about by the Father through the Son and in the Spirit, so too does re-creation occur solely through the appropriate work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who is acquired, promised, and given through Christ (John 16:7; Acts 2:4, 17), who testifies of Christ and takes everything from Christ (John 15:26; 16:13-14), and who now works in the Church through regeneration (John 3:3), faith (1 Cor. 12:3), adoption (Rom. 8:15), renewal (Tit. 3:5), and sealing until the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13; 4:30).

And all this the Holy Spirit can effect and accomplish because He, with the Father and the Son, is the one true God, who lives and reigns forever. The love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit are established for the people of the Lord in the eternal and unchangeable counsel of God.

This counsel of God is therefore unspeakably rich in consolation. Often, it is misconstrued and presented as a cause of discouragement and despair. It is then argued that, with everything determined from eternity, man becomes a mere plaything in the hands of divine arbitrariness. What benefit is there for a man to strive for a virtuous life if, being rejected, he is nevertheless lost? Conversely, what does it profit a man to live in sin and surrender to the most abominable godlessness if, being elected, he is nevertheless saved? Such a counsel of God seemingly leaves no room for man's freedom and responsibility, and thus he lives according to the will of his heart and commits sin so that grace may abound.

It is true that the confession of the counsel of God has often been abused in this manner. Such an abuse was not only made since Augustine and Calvin, but also occurred in the days of Jesus and the apostles. The Pharisees and the lawgivers rejected the counsel of God manifested in the baptism of John, thus turning what should have been a means of conversion into an instrument of their destruction (Luke 7:30). The apostle Paul calls it blasphemy when accused of recommending the doing of evil that good may come (Romans 3:8) and silences the ignorant who dare to accuse God (Romans 9:19-20). He has every right to do so; for the counsel of God establishes not only the outcome but also the means; it records not only the effects but also the causes, and it establishes a connection between the two

as reality itself reveals. It does not destroy man's rational and moral nature but rather creates and safeguards it, as history consistently reveals.

The misuse of this confession is particularly grievous because the counsel of God is revealed and preached in Scripture, not to harden our hearts against its reality, but to move us to trust in God's counsel with childlike faith and full assurance in all our need and distress. If salvation depended to any extent on man's faith and good works, it would be lost to him forever. But now, the counsel of God teaches us that salvation is entirely God's work, from beginning to end. Re-creation, like creation and providence, is solely a divine work; no man has been His counselor, nor has anyone given Him anything that might be repaid (Rom. 11:34-35). Father, Son, and Spirit together have conceived, established, and carry out the entire work of salvation. Nothing originates from man. All things are of, through, and to God. Therefore, our soul can rest in this with unshakable certainty; it is His will—His eternal, independent, and unchanging will—that in the Church, humanity will be restored and saved.

We are even more convinced of the comfort of this election when we consider that God's counsel is not merely a work of His mind but also a work of His will. It is not only a thought belonging to eternity but also an omnipotent power realized in time. Thus, all of God's virtues and perfections are not idle, silent, inoperative qualities but omnipotent forces, full of life and action. Each quality is His essence. When God is called the Just and the Holy, it means that He reveals Himself in this way and upholds His right in the world, in history, and in every human conscience. When He is called Love, it means that He not only thinks of us benevolently in Christ but also

demonstrates this love and pours it into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. When He calls Himself our Father, it means that He resurrects us, accepts us as His children, and through His Spirit, bears witness with our spirit that we are His children. When He makes Himself known as the Merciful One, He not only declares this but also shows it by actually forgiving our sins and comforting us in all our woes. Likewise, when Scripture speaks to us of the counsel of God, it proclaims that God Himself fulfills and fully realizes that counsel. The counsel of redemption is itself a decree, a work of God in eternity, but as such, it is also the principle, the driving force, and the guarantee of the work of salvation in time. Therefore, whatever may happen to the world, to mankind, and to our own person, the ever-wise counsel of the Lord endures forever with everlasting power. Nothing can ever reverse His high decree; it remains from generation to generation. There is not the slightest reason for despondency and doubt. Everything is certain to come as God in His wisdom and love has determined. His almighty and merciful will is the guarantee of mankind's redemption and the world's salvation. In the greatest of sorrows, our hearts remain at rest in the Lord.

As soon as mankind has fallen, the counsel of salvation begins to work. Entirely of His own accord, God descends, seeks mankind, and calls him back to Himself. There follows an interrogation, a declaration of guilt, and a denunciation of punishment. Yet the punishment pronounced upon the serpent, the woman, and the man is simultaneously a blessing and a means of preservation. In the mother promise, Genesis 3:14-15, not only is the serpent humiliated, and the evil power, whose instrument it was, condemned, but it also announces that enmity will henceforth exist between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. It is God Himself who will

establish and maintain this enmity, culminating in the seed of the serpent bruising the heel of the woman's seed, but ultimately, the woman's seed crushing the head of the serpent's seed.

This is nothing less than the proclamation and institution of the covenant of grace. Though the word "covenant" is not explicitly used here, it will emerge later with Noah, Abraham, and others, as mankind learns through experience the necessity and utility of covenants and agreements. But in essence, the mother promise encapsulates all that constitutes the covenant of grace. Due to his transgression, mankind ceased to obey God, forsook His fellowship, and instead sought friendship with Satan, entering into an alliance with him. Now, in His grace, God breaks this alliance and instills enmity between mankind and Satan. God brings the woman's seed, which had surrendered to Satan, back to His side by an almighty act of His merciful will and adds the promise that, despite resistance and tribulation, it will ultimately triumph over the serpent's seed. There is nothing conditional or uncertain here. God Himself comes to mankind, initiates enmity, opens the battle, and promises victory. Man has only to hear this and accept it with childlike faith. Promise and faith are the core of the covenant of grace, which now established with mankind, opens the way to the Father's house and the entrance to eternal salvation for the fallen and lost.

Thus, there is a great difference in the manner in which man was to inherit eternal life before the fall and the way in which he can only acquire it after the fall. Before the fall, the rule was: Do this and you will live. In the path of perfect obedience to God's commandment, man was to strive for eternal life. This was a good way, and if man had walked it to the end, it would have led him infallibly to heavenly

salvation. God, for His part, has not broken His rule either. He still upholds it; if there were a man who could keep God's commandment perfectly, he would receive eternal life as his reward (Lev. 18:5; Ezek. 20:11, 13; Matt. 19:16ff; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12).

But man has rendered that way of life impossible for himself; he can no longer keep the law because he has broken his fellowship with God and now hates rather than loves His law (Rom. 8:7). Therefore, the covenant of grace opens to him a different and safer way, wherein man no longer has to work to enter into life. Instead, he first receives eternal life at the very moment of entering, accepts it through filial faith, and then produces good works through that faith. The order is thus reversed: before the fall, works led to eternal life; now, after the fall and in the covenant of grace, eternal life precedes and produces good works as the fruits of faith. Then, man had to ascend to God and His full communion; now, God descends to man and seeks to dwell in his heart. Then, workdays preceded the Sabbath; now, the week begins with the Sabbath, sanctifying all its days.

That there is now for fallen mankind a distinct and newly established, as well as a living and infallibly certain, way into the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 10:20), is solely due to God's grace and the counsel of redemption. The counsel of salvation, which lies in eternity, and the covenant of grace, which is revealed to man immediately after the fall and established with him, are intimately connected. They are so closely intertwined that the existence of one depends on the other. Many hold a contrary opinion; standing on the covenant of grace, they deny and contest the counsel of salvation; in the name of the purity of the Gospel, they reject the doctrine of

election. Yet, in doing so, they undermine the covenant of grace and revert the Gospel into a new law.

If the covenant of grace is severed from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and reverts into a covenant of works. Election signifies that God freely grants salvation, which mankind has forfeited and can never regain through his own efforts. When salvation is not purely a gift of grace but depends in any way on human behavior, the covenant of grace is transformed back into a covenant of works; man must then fulfill certain conditions to partake in eternal life. Grace and works are opposed and mutually exclusive. If it is by grace, it is no longer by works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. And if it is by works, it is no longer by grace, otherwise work is no longer work. The Christian religion is uniquely characterized as the religion of salvation by pure grace. It can only be recognized and maintained as such if it is entirely a gift arising wholly from God's counsel. Election and the covenant of grace are not in conflict; rather, election is the basis and guarantee of the covenant's heart and core. The intimate connection between them is so crucial that any weakening of it not only deprives the believer of a proper understanding of salvation's acquisition and application but also robs him of his sole consolation in his spiritual life.

An even richer light falls on this connection when the covenant of grace is not exclusively related to election but to the entire counsel of salvation. Election is not the whole counsel of redemption but is its first and fundamental part. That counsel also includes and determines how election will be realized, the entire acquisition and application of salvation. The election was made in Christ, and the counsel of God is not only a work of the Father but also a work of the

Son and the Holy Spirit, a divine work of the entire Trinity. The counsel of redemption is itself a covenant; a covenant in which each of the three persons, so to speak, receives His task and performs His work. The covenant of grace, established in time and propagated from generation to generation, is the effect and imprint of that covenant fixed in the Eternal Being. As in the counsel of God, so in history, each of the persons acts: the Father is the origin, the Son is the Acquirer, and the Holy Spirit is the Provider of our salvation. Therefore, anyone who shifts the basis of eternity away from time and separates history from the gracious and omnipotent divine will undermines the work of the Father, the Son, or the Spirit.

Although time cannot do without eternity and history is closely related to God's thought and will, the two are not identical in all respects. In the history of time, the eternal thought of God is revealed and realized. Similarly, the counsel of redemption and the covenant of grace cannot and must not be separated, but they differ in that the latter is realized. The plan of redemption must also be executed; as a decree, it carries its execution within itself and brings it about. It would lose its character as a counsel and decree if it were not revealed and realized in time. Thus, the covenant of grace is made known to man immediately after the fall, established with him, and continued in history from generation to generation. What is one in decision unfolds in the breadth of the world and develops over the centuries.

When we turn our attention to the historical unfolding of the covenant of grace, we observe three notable peculiarities.

Firstly, the covenant of grace, in its essence, remains unaltered throughout all ages, though it manifests in varied forms and dispensations. Essentially and objectively, it remains one covenant before, under, and after the Law. It is consistently a covenant of grace, named thus because it emanates from God's grace, contains grace as its essence, and aims ultimately at the glorification of God's grace.

Just as it was God who, in His initial proclamation, established enmity, declared war, and promised victory, so God remains the Alpha and the Omega in every expression of the covenant of grace, be it with Noah, Abraham, Israel, or the New Testament congregation. Promise, gift, grace—these are the constants. Over time, the promise's content and the richness of the grace it contains are made clearer, yet all is encapsulated in the mother promise. The central, all-encompassing promise of the covenant of grace is this: "I will be your God and the God of your seed" (Gen. 17:7). Within this promise is everything—the entire acquisition and application of salvation, Christ and all His benefits, the Holy Spirit with all His gifts. From the mother promise in Genesis 3:15 to the apostolic benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14, there is a direct line: all salvation for the sinner is found in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, we must recognize that this promise is not conditional but as definite and firm as possible. God does not say He will be our God if we do this or that; rather, He declares that He will establish enmity, that He will be our God, and that in Christ He will give us all things. The covenant of grace can remain unchanged in essence throughout all ages because it depends solely on God, who is

unchangeable and faithful. The covenant of works, established with mankind before the fall, was fragile and broken because it depended on changeable man. But the covenant of grace is grounded solely in God's mercy. People may become unfaithful, but God does not forget His promise. He cannot and will not break His covenant; He has committed Himself to it voluntarily, with an everlasting oath. His name, His fame, His honor depend on it. For His own sake, He pardons the transgressions of His people and remembers their sins no more (Isa. 43:25; 48:9; Jer. 14:7, 21). Thus, the mountains may depart, and the hills may be removed, but His steadfast love shall not depart from us, nor shall the covenant of His peace be removed, says the Lord, our Savior (Isa. 54:10).

However, despite its unchanging nature, the covenant manifests in different forms across various administrations. Before the flood, a separation existed between the Sethites and the Cainites, yet the promise extended to all people and no formal separation occurred. General and special revelation still flowed together. When this promise seemed at risk of expiring, the Flood became necessary, and Noah carried the promise in the Ark. For a time, the promise remained general, but as a new danger arose post-flood, threatening the continuation of the covenant of grace, God did not expel the people but allowed the nations to walk in their own ways, isolating Abraham as the bearer of the promise. The covenant of grace found realization in the families of the patriarchs, marked by circumcision as a sign of the righteousness of faith and the circumcision of the heart.

The covenant of grace, established at Sinai with Israel as the seed of Abraham, assumes a national character, requiring Israel to walk as a

holy nation before God. It employs not only moral laws but also civil and ceremonial laws to guide the people as a disciplinarian to Christ. The promise predates the law, and the law does not replace the promise but is added to develop and prepare for its fulfillment in the fullness of time. In Christ, the promise reaches fulfillment, the shadow becomes substance, the letter transforms into spirit, and servitude turns into freedom. Thus, it liberates itself from all external, national bonds and, as in the beginning, extends itself to all mankind.

Regardless of the forms the covenant of grace takes, it consistently maintains the same essential content. It is always the same Gospel (Rom. 1:2; Gal. 3:8), the same Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), the same faith (Acts 15:11; Rom. 4:11; Heb. 11), and the same benefits of forgiveness and eternal life (Acts 10:43; Rom. 4:3). The light in which believers walk may differ, but they tread the same path.

The second peculiarity of the covenant of grace is its organic character in all its dispensations.

Election focuses on particular, individual persons, known by God beforehand, who are therefore called, justified, and glorified in time. However, it does not inherently imply the relationship between these individuals. Scripture further reveals that election occurred in Christ (Eph. 1:4; 3:11), enabling Christ to act as the Head of His congregation, with the congregation forming the body of Christ. The elect are not isolated from one another but are united in Christ. Just as the people of Israel in the Old Testament were one holy people of God, the New Testament congregation is a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's possession. Christ is the

Bridegroom, and the congregation is His bride; He is the vine, and they are the branches; He is the cornerstone, and they are the living stones of God's building; He is the King, and they are His subjects. The unity between Christ and His church is so intimate that Paul summarizes them both under the name of Christ: as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of this one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). It is a community preserving the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace; one body and one Spirit, just as they are called to the one hope of their calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, through all, and in all (Eph. 4:3-6).

Thus, election cannot be an arbitrary or accidental act. If it is guided by the intention to make Christ the Head and to form the congregation into His body, it possesses an organic character and inherently contains the idea of a covenant.

In affirming that election is made in Christ, a further truth is indicated. The organic unity of the human race under a single head does not commence with Christ, but with Adam. Paul explicitly refers to Adam as a type of the one who was to come (Rom. 5:14), and he designates Christ as the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45). Thus, the covenant of grace aligns with the fundamental ideas and outlines of the covenant of works; it is not the abolition but the fulfillment of it, just as faith does not nullify the law but upholds it (Rom. 3:31). Hence, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace are sharply distinct on one hand, yet intimately related on the other. The great difference lies in that Adam, having forfeited and lost his position as the head of the human race, is now replaced by Christ. Christ undertakes the fulfillment of what the first man failed to do, as well as what he ought

to have done; He fulfills for us the demands imposed by the moral law and gathers His entire congregation as a renewed human race under His headship. In the dispensation of the fullness of time, God brings together all things in Christ, both in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:10).

This gathering must, therefore, occur organically. If the covenant of grace is organically conceived in Christ, it must also be established and continued accordingly. Thus, we see that it is never made with a single, isolated individual, but always with a person and his family: with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, the church, and their seed. The promise never applies to a solitary believer in isolation, but always to him and his house. God does not realize His covenant of grace by selecting a few individuals from mankind and assembling them outside the world; instead, He integrates it into humanity, making it part of the world while ensuring its preservation from evil within that world. As the Resurrector, He follows the path He has laid as Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of all things. Grace is distinct and higher than nature, yet it joins nature and does not destroy it but restores it. It is not an inheritance passed on by natural birth, but it flows within the channels established by natural human relations. The covenant of grace does not leap from one branch to another but continues historically and organically through families, generations, and peoples.

This brings us to a third and final peculiarity: the covenant of grace materializes in a manner that fully respects man's rational and moral nature. It rests on God's counsel, a truth that must not be underestimated. Behind the covenant of grace lies the sovereign and

omnipotent will of God, which proceeds with divine energy, ensuring the triumph of the Kingdom of God over all sin's violence.

However, this will is not a destiny imposed upon mankind from above but the will of the Creator of heaven and earth, who does not deny His own work in creation and providence and cannot treat man, whom He created as a rational and moral being, as a mere stick or block. This will is the will of a merciful and benevolent Father, who never coerces with brute force but always conquers our opposition through the spiritual power of His love. The will of God is not a blind, unreasonable force but a will that is wise, merciful, loving, and simultaneously free and omnipotent. Therefore, it works against our darkened understanding and sinful will, so that Paul can declare that the Gospel is not according to man, not in accordance with the foolish insights and wrong desires of fallen humanity (Gal. 1:11).

This explains why the covenant of grace, which intrinsically knows no demands or conditions, yet operates for us in the form of a commandment, exhorting us to faith and repentance (Mark 1:15). In its essence, the covenant of grace is purely grace, excluding all works. It grants what it demands and fulfills what it prescribes. The Gospel is sheer glad tidings, not a demand but a promise, not a duty but a gift. However, to manifest itself in us as a promise and a gift, it assumes the character of a moral exhortation in accordance with our nature. It does not compel us but merely requires that we freely and willingly accept in faith what God wishes to bestow. God's will is realized only through our intellect and will. Thus, it is rightly said that mankind, through the grace it receives, believes and repents of its own accord.

Since the covenant of grace enters the human race historically and organically, it cannot appear on earth in a form that fully corresponds to its nature. True believers possess much that is in direct conflict with a life according to the covenant's demand: walk before Me and be blameless; be holy, for I am holy. Moreover, there can be individuals who are outwardly accepted into the covenant of grace yet remain deprived of all its spiritual blessings due to their unbelieving and unrepentant hearts. This situation is not only contemporary but has existed throughout the ages. In the Old Testament, not all who were descended from Israel were truly Israel (Rom. 9:6), for it is not the children of the flesh but the children of the promise who are counted as the seed (Rom. 9:8, 2:29). Similarly, in the New Testament congregation, there is chaff among the wheat, there are evil branches on the vine, and there are not only vessels of gold but also of clay (Matt. 3:12, 13:29; John 15:2; 2 Tim. 2:20).

Based on this contradiction between nature and appearance, some have posited a distinction and separation between an inner covenant, established only with true believers, and an outer covenant, which includes only external professors. However, such a separation cannot align with the teaching of Scripture; what God has united, man must not separate. There must be no departure from the requirement that nature and appearance should correspond, that confession with the mouth and belief with the heart should align (Rom. 10:9). While there are not two separate covenants, there are two aspects to the one covenant of grace: one visible to us and the other fully visible to God. We must adhere to the rule that we cannot judge the heart, only the outward actions, and even then imperfectly. Those who walk in the way of the covenant before the eyes of mankind should, in the judgment of love, be regarded and treated by us as fellow heirs.

Ultimately, however, it is not our judgment but God's that decides. He is the Knower of hearts and the Searcher of reins; with Him, there is no respect of persons. Man sees the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7).

Therefore, let everyone examine himself to see whether he has faith, whether Jesus Christ is in him (2 Cor. 13:5).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the universal sense of guilt and uncleanness among humanity highlight the need for the covenant of grace?

- Reflect on why humans universally acknowledge their sinfulness and how this understanding emphasizes the necessity of God's grace for redemption.

2. In what ways does God's law establish the foundation for understanding His grace?

- Consider how the recognition of God's holy and righteous law helps us appreciate the depth and significance of His grace.

3. How does the history of the world serve as a testament to both God's judgments and His ongoing grace?

- Reflect on the dual nature of world history as a record of divine judgment and continuous grace, and how this perspective informs our understanding of God's interaction with humanity.

4. What role does the quest for redemption play in all human religions, and how is this quest uniquely fulfilled in Christianity?

- Discuss the universal human pursuit of salvation and how Christianity uniquely answers this quest through the revelation of God's grace in Christ.

5. How does the concept of general revelation differ from special revelation, and why is special revelation necessary for understanding God's grace?

- Reflect on the limitations of general revelation and the essential role of special revelation in fully comprehending the nature and work of God's grace.

6. How does the doctrine of election relate to the covenant of grace, and what comfort does this connection provide to believers?

- Consider the theological relationship between God's eternal counsel of election and the covenant of grace, and how this provides assurance of salvation.

7. In what ways does the covenant of grace demonstrate God's initiative in seeking and redeeming humanity?

- Reflect on the narrative of God's pursuit of fallen humanity, beginning with the promise in Genesis 3:15, and how this shapes our understanding of divine grace.

8. How does the transition from the covenant of works to the covenant of grace represent a fundamental shift in humanity's relationship with God?

- Discuss the differences between the covenant of works, based on human obedience, and the covenant of grace, founded on God's initiative and promise.

9. What are the various forms and dispensations of the covenant of grace throughout biblical history, and how do they maintain the same essential content?

- Reflect on the continuity and development of the covenant of grace from the Old Testament to the New Testament, focusing on its unchanging promise and grace.

10. How should the knowledge of God's eternal counsel and unchangeable will impact our trust in His promises and our response to His grace?

- Consider the practical implications of believing in God's sovereign plan and faithful execution of His covenant of grace for our daily lives and spiritual assurance.

15. The Mediator of the Covenant

The counsel of redemption is not a human design, contingent upon all manner of unforeseen circumstances and therefore inherently uncertain. Rather, it is infallibly certain, being the decree of God's gracious and omnipotent will. As it was determined in eternity, so it is accomplished in time. The doctrine of faith's task, therefore, is to delineate the manner in which the unchangeable counsel of the Lord concerning the salvation of His elect is executed and applied. This counsel primarily concerns three major elements: the Mediator through whom salvation is procured, the Holy Spirit through whom it is applied, and the people to whom it is given. Consequently, instruction in the Christian faith must address these three topics.

Firstly, it must deal with the person of Christ, who procures salvation through His suffering and death. Secondly, it must explain how the Holy Spirit applies the person of Christ and all His benefits to the elect. Thirdly, it must give attention to the recipients of this salvation, speaking of the church or congregation as the body of Christ. Finally, this teaching naturally leads to the consummation of the salvation that awaits believers hereafter. Throughout this treatment, it will become evident that the counsel of redemption is well-ordered and assured in all its parts; the unspeakable grace, the manifold wisdom, and the almighty power of God are manifest therein.

These virtues shine forth most clearly in the person of Christ. Faith in an intermediary is not unique to Christianity. All men and peoples, conscious of their separation from salvation, carry the

conviction in their hearts that this salvation must be mediated to them by certain persons. It is widely held that man, as he is, cannot approach God and live in His presence; he needs a mediator to open the way to God. Hence, in all religions, there are mediators who reveal divine truths to mankind and convey the prayers and offerings of mankind to God.

Sometimes these intermediaries are lower gods or spirits, but often they are individuals endowed with supernatural knowledge and power, perceived to be especially holy. These figures hold a prominent place in the religious life of the people and are consulted on significant occasions, such as disasters, wars, diseases, and ventures. Whether acting as soothsayers, magicians, saints, or priests, they show the way that, according to their belief, man must follow to obtain divine favor. However, they are not the way itself. The religions of the peoples are independent of these persons. Even in those religions founded by particular individuals, such as Buddha, Confucius, Zarathustra, and Mohammed, the founders are not the substance of the religion and are related to it in an external and somewhat incidental manner. Their religions could remain unchanged even if their names were forgotten or their persons replaced by others.

In Christianity, however, the situation is wholly different. It has sometimes been claimed that Christ never sought to be the sole Mediator and would be content to see His name forgotten, provided His principles and spirit lived on in the congregation. Yet, even those who have severed ties with Christianity have often contested and refuted this notion in an unbiased manner. Christianity's relationship to the person of Christ is entirely unique compared to

the relationship of other religions to their founders. Jesus was not merely the first confessor of the faith that bears His name; He was not merely the foremost Christian. Rather, He holds a unique and unparalleled place within Christianity. He is not merely the founder of Christianity in the usual sense; He is the Christ, the Anointed One of the Father, who established His Kingdom on earth and continues to extend and preserve it until the end of the ages. Christ is Christianity itself; He is not apart from it but is central to it. Without His name, person, and work, Christianity ceases to exist. In essence, Christ is not merely a guide to salvation; He is the way itself. He is the sole true and complete Mediator between God and man. What other religions have anticipated and longed for in their belief in a mediator, is perfectly and wholly realized in Him.

To fully grasp the unique significance of Christ, we must begin with the scriptural assertion that He did not commence His existence at His conception and birth, as we do, but that He existed long before and was from eternity the only-begotten and beloved Son of the Father. In the Old Testament, the Messiah is referred to as the "Father of eternity," who is an eternal Father to His people (Isa. 9:6), and whose origins are from of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2). The New Testament affirms this, expressing the eternity of Christ even more clearly. This is evident in all those passages where Christ's entire earthly life is presented as the fulfillment of a divine commission. While it is true that John the Baptist is described as coming in the spirit of Elijah (Mark 9:11-13; John 1:7), the emphasis and frequency with which Christ is said to have come into the world to accomplish His work indicate a special and unique mission.

It is not only stated generally that He went forth from the Father to preach (Mark 1:38) and that He came to call sinners to repentance and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 2:17; 10:45). It is explicitly stated that He was sent to preach the Gospel (Luke 4:43), that it was the Father who sent Him (Matt. 10:40; John 5:24, 30, 36), that He came from the Father and in His name (John 5:43; 8:42; 13:3), and that He descended from heaven to proclaim the Gospel (Mark 1:38). Jesus understood Himself to be the only Son, who loved the Father and was sent into the vineyard after many other servants (Mark 12:6). He, who is the Son of David, was already David's Lord (Mark 12:36), existed before Abraham (John 8:58), and shared glory with the Father before the world was (John 17:5, 24).

This self-consciousness of Jesus regarding His eternal existence is further unfolded in the apostolic testimony. In Christ, the eternal Word became flesh, who in the beginning was with God and was God Himself (John 1:1, 14). He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, superior to all the angels, and deserving of their worship. He is an eternal God and an eternal King, who remains the same, and whose years will never end (Heb. 1:3-13). He was rich (2 Cor. 8:9), existing in the form of God, equal to the Father not only in essence but also in position and glory. Yet He did not consider equality with God something to be exploited for His own advantage (Phil. 2:6), but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant and becoming human (Phil. 2:7-8). In this way, He was exalted as the Lord from heaven, in contrast to Adam, the man from the earth (1 Cor. 15:47). In short, Christ is, like the Father, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (Rev. 1:11, 17; 22:13).

The activity of this Son of God, made flesh, did not begin with His appearance on earth but reaches back to the creation. Through the Word, all things were made without exception (John 1:3; Heb. 1:2, 10); He is the firstborn, the head, the principle of all creatures (Col. 1:15; Rev. 3:14), existing before all things (Col. 1:17). The creatures were not only created by Him but also continue to exist in and through Him (Col. 1:17), being sustained by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). Ultimately, they were created for Him (Col. 1:16), for God appointed Him, the Son, as heir of all things (Heb. 1:2; Rom. 8:17). In Him was life, the full, rich, inexhaustible life, the source of all life in the world. This life was the light of men, illuminating them with divine truth to be known and practiced. Though mankind became darkness through sin, the light of the Word continued to shine in that darkness (John 1:5); it enlightened every man who came into the world (John 1:9). The Word was in the world and continued to work in it, though the world did not recognize Him (John 1:10).

Therefore, the Christ who appears on earth in the fullness of time is not merely a man among other men, nor the founder of a new religion or a preacher of a new moral doctrine. He occupies a wholly unique place. He was the Creator, Sustainer, and Ruler of all things; in Him was the life and light of men. When He appears in the world, He does not come as a stranger but as its Lord, intimately connected to it. Recreation is related to creation, grace to nature, the work of the Son to the work of the Father. Salvation is built upon the foundations laid in creation.

The significance of Christ for us becomes even clearer when we examine His relationship to Israel. The Word dwelt and acted in the entire world and among all mankind. However, although the Light

shone in the darkness, the darkness did not comprehend it; and although the Word was in the world, the world did not recognize Him (John 1:5, 10). Israel was His own, and He did not come to Israel as He did to the world, but deliberately and after centuries of preparation. Christ is of the fathers according to the flesh (Rom. 9:5). Though He was rejected by His own—the world did not know Him (John 1:10), and the Jews did not accept Him, rejecting and refusing Him—His coming was not in vain. Those who received Him were given the right and power to become children of God (John 1:12).

When John 1:11 speaks of the Word coming to His own, it undoubtedly refers to the Incarnation, to Christ coming in the flesh. However, it also implies that the relationship of ownership the Word had with Israel did not begin with the Incarnation but existed long before. Israel was His, and thus, the Word came to His own in the fullness of time. At the moment Jehovah claimed Israel as His own, a special relationship between this people and the Word (the Logos) was established. He Himself is the Lord whom Israel sought, the Angel of the Covenant, who would soon come to His Temple (Mal. 3:1), and who had dwelt and worked among Israel from ancient times.

In many places in the Old Testament, we find references to the Angel of the Covenant or the Angel of the Lord. Through this Angel, as previously demonstrated in the doctrine of the Trinity, the Lord reveals Himself in a special way to His people. Although distinct from the Lord, He is so united with Him that the same names, attributes, works, and honors are ascribed to Him as to God Himself. He is the God of Bethel (Gen. 31:13), the God of the fathers (Exod. 3:2, 6), who promises Hagar the multiplication of her seed (Gen.

16:10; 21:18), who guided and redeemed the patriarchs (Gen. 48:15-16), and who gave the people the gift of God. The Angel of the Covenant assures Israel that the Lord Himself is in their midst as the God of salvation and redemption (Isa. 63:9). His appearance was a preparation and announcement of the complete self-revelation of God, which would occur in the fullness of time through the Incarnation. The entire Old Testament dispensation was an ever-closer approach of God to His people, culminating in His dwelling among them forever in Christ (Ex. 29:43-46).

This teaching about the existence and activity of the Word before He appeared in the flesh as Christ is of utmost importance for a proper understanding of human history and for a correct consideration of the people and religion of Israel. It allows us to recognize all that is true, good, and beautiful in the heathen world while upholding the special revelation given to Israel. Although the Word and the wisdom of God were active throughout the world, they manifested among Israel as the Angel of the Covenant, as the manifestation of the Lord's name. In both the Old and New Testaments, the covenant of grace is one; the believers of the Old Testament were saved in the same way as we are now. It is the same faith in the promise, the same trust in the grace of God, that opens the way to salvation then and now. The same benefits of forgiveness, regeneration, renewal, and eternal life were given to the faithful then as they are now. They all walk the same path, though the light that shines upon it differs in brightness between the Old and New Testaments.

There is, however, another significant peculiarity here. Paul says of the Ephesians that in former times, when they lived as Gentiles, they were without Christ, alienated from the citizenship of Israel,

strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:11-12). They had no promise from God to which they could cling, they lived without hope in the world, and they had no God in their hearts whom they could know and serve. The Apostle does not mean that the Gentiles believed in no gods; elsewhere he acknowledges their religious nature, as seen in his address to the Athenians (Acts 17:22), and speaks of a revelation given to them by God (Acts 17:24ff). Yet, knowing God, they did not glorify or give thanks to Him as God; they were corrupted in their reasoning and served gods that by nature are not gods (Rom. 1:21ff; Gal. 4:8). Paul does not deny that the Gentiles had various expectations about the future, both in this life and beyond the grave. However, he emphasizes that all these expectations, as well as the gods they served, were in vain because there was no firm, unquestionable promise from God in Christ.

Among Israel, the situation was different. God accepted them as His children, dwelt among them with His glory, and bestowed upon them successive covenant gifts—the Law, worship, and especially the promises concerning the Messiah, indicating that He would come forth from Israel according to the flesh. Yet, although Christ, as far as the flesh is concerned, is of the fathers, He is more than a mere man; He is God over all, blessed forever (Rom. 9:5), and existed and worked even in the days of the Old Testament. The Christians in Ephesus lived without Christ as long as they were Gentiles, but the Israelites of old were connected with Christ—the promised Christ—who already existed and was active as their Mediator. He was engaged not only in distributing His benefits but also in preparing for His own coming in the flesh, through word and deed, prophecy

and history, casting a shadow of the spiritual goods He would bring about in the fullness of time over all Israel.

The Apostle Peter expresses this thought clearly and unambiguously in the first chapter of his first letter. When he speaks of the great salvation, which the faithful already possess in principle and which they can fully expect in the future, he highlights the glory of this salvation by noting that the prophets of the Old Testament made it the subject of their study and reflection. All the prophets share this common trait: they prophesied about the grace now given to believers in the New Testament era. They received knowledge of this through revelation, but this revelation did not render them passive; rather, it spurred them to investigate and inquire. They did so not as philosophers seeking to uncover the mysteries of creation through their own understanding, but as holy men of God, focusing on special revelation and the future salvation in Christ, guided not by their own thoughts but by the Spirit of God. They sought to know when and how the Spirit of Christ within them would reveal the sufferings Christ was to endure and the subsequent glory (1 Pet. 1:10-11). The testimony that Jesus breathes into the hearts of His own and bears about Himself is the proof that they partake in the Spirit of prophecy (Rev. 19:10).

Through this revelation of the Spirit, Israel developed those rich and glorious expectations summarized under the name "Messianic."

These Messianic expectations are typically divided into two groups. The first concerns the future of the Kingdom of God. These are of great significance and closely related to the promise of the covenant of grace. That promise implies that God will be the God of His people

and their seed, and therefore pertains not only to the past and present but also to the future. It is true that the people are continually guilty of unfaithfulness, apostasy, and breaking the bonds with the Lord. But because it is a covenant of grace, the unfaithfulness of the people cannot nullify the faithfulness of God. By its very nature, the covenant of grace is eternal, continuing from generation to generation. If the people do not walk in the way of the covenant, God may abandon them for a time, subject them to chastisement, judgment, and exile, but He cannot break His covenant. It rests solely on His mercy, independent of human conduct. He cannot break the covenant, for His own name, fame, and honor are bound to it. Thus, after wrath, God's goodness is always revealed; after judgment, His mercy; after suffering, His lordship.

Israel learned all this throughout its history via prophecy. Prophecy provided them with an understanding of the nature and purpose of history, unparalleled among other nations. The Old Testament reveals that the reign of God's will—the Kingdom of God—is the essence and ultimate goal of history. It is His counsel, His good pleasure and redemption, existing forever and destined to overcome all opposition. Through suffering, we attain glory; behind the cross lies the crown. One day, God will triumph over all His enemies and fulfill all His promises to His people. There will come a kingdom of justice and peace, of spiritual and material prosperity. In the glory of that kingdom, both Israel and the nations will share. The unity of God brings with it the unity of mankind and the unity of history. Then the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, and the promise of the covenant will be fulfilled: "I will be your God, and you will be My sons and daughters."

The prophecies and psalms are replete with these expectations, yet they do not merely anticipate a distant future; they also delineate the manner in which the Kingdom of God will be established and consummated. These expectations crystallize into the Messianic hopes, specifically foretelling how God's rule on earth will be instituted by a singular figure, the Messiah. Recent scholarship has attempted to dissociate these Messianic hopes from Israel's original religion, placing them post-exile. However, this notion has been robustly challenged and decisively refuted. The Messianic expectations revolve around two central ideas: the day of the Lord—a day of judgment for Israel and the nations—and the Messiah, who will bring salvation and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. These concepts did not originate with the prophets of the eighth century but existed long before, later being elaborated and applied by the prophets whose writings we now have.

Scripture itself testifies to the ancient origins of these expectations. Initially, they are general in nature, underscoring their antiquity, and their gradual development through successive prophecies strongly corroborates this. In the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15, enmity is declared between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, with the promise that the former will crush the latter's head. According to Calvin, the seed of the woman first refers to the human race, which, transferred to God's side in the covenant of grace, must combat all forces hostile to Him, ultimately finding its Head and Lord in Christ. History reveals that this human race, contending against the serpent's seed, increasingly narrows and becomes more defined, with the promise continuing through the line of Seth.

When the antediluvian world was destroyed by the flood, a division soon emerged within Noah's family—Cham and Japhet on one side, Shem on the other. The promise became more specific: Jehovah would be the God of Shem, Japheth would expand and eventually dwell in Shem's tents, and Canaan would serve both (Gen. 9:26-27). From Shem's lineage, when the pure knowledge and service of God were once again endangered, Abraham was chosen. He received the promise that he would be a blessing to many, and that all the families of the earth would seek the blessing bestowed on him and his seed, thus all nations would be blessed in him (Gen. 12:2-3). Among Jacob's sons, Judah was later designated to have preeminence over his brethren. Judah, whose name signifies praise (Gen. 29:35), would be mighty among his brothers (1 Chron. 5:2); his siblings would praise and serve him, and his enemies would bow before him. This reign would endure until the coming of one to whom the nations would obey (Gen. 49:8-10). Though the name "Shiloh" in verse 10 is difficult to interpret, the blessing on Judah is clear: he holds preeminence among the tribes, dominion over his brothers, and from him the future ruler of the nations will emerge.

This promise found its initial fulfillment in David, but also entered a new phase of development. When David sought to build a house for the Lord, the Lord, through Nathan, declared that He would establish David's house by perpetuating the royal line through his descendants. The Lord promised to make David's name great, like the greatest men of the earth. After David's death, his son Solomon would succeed him, and the Lord would be his father. Ultimately, David's house and kingdom would be established forever; his throne would be secure for all time (2 Sam. 7:9-16; Ps. 89:19-38). Henceforth, the hopes of Israel's devout were anchored in David's

house, with prophecy frequently reinforcing this expectation (Amos 9:11; Hos. 3:5; Jer. 17:25; 22:4).

History, however, showed that no king from David's lineage met the divine expectations. In light of this, prophecy increasingly pointed to a future where the true Son of David would emerge, reigning on His father's throne for eternity. Gradually, this future David was referred to by the name Messiah as a proper title. Initially, Messiah was a general term applied to anyone anointed to an office in Israel. Anointing with oil, a common Eastern practice, was used to refresh the body, symbolize joy, and act as a sign of hospitality, friendship, healing, and reverence (Ps. 104:15; Matt. 6:17; Prov. 27:9; 2 Sam. 14:2; Dan. 10:3; Ps. 23:5; 2 Chron. 28:15; Luke 7:46; Mark 6:13; Luke 10:34; James 5:14; Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56; John 19:40).

This practice of anointing also acquired religious significance within Israel's worship. Jacob anointed the stone at Bethel to consecrate it to the Lord (Gen. 28:18; 31:13; 35:13). Later, Moses' law prescribed the anointing of the tabernacle, its utensils, and the altar to sanctify them for God's service (Ex. 29:36; 30:23; 40:10).

We occasionally read of prophets being anointed; Elijah anointed Elisha (1 Kings 19:16), and Psalm 105:15 uses "anointed" interchangeably with "prophet." More frequently, priests, especially the high priest, were anointed (Lev. 8:12, 30; Ps. 133:2), earning the title "anointed priest" (Lev. 4:3, 5; 6:22). Kings, such as Saul, David, and Solomon, were also anointed (1 Sam. 10:1; 16:13; 2 Sam. 2:4; 5:3; 1 Kings 1:34), and thus called "the Lord's anointed" (1 Sam. 26:11; Ps. 2:2). The term widened to include those whom God chose and empowered for His service without a literal anointing with oil. In

Psalm 105:15, “anointed” refers to the patriarchs, while in Psalms 84:10, 89:39, 52, and Habakkuk 3:13, it may refer to Israel or their king. Isaiah 45:1 applies it to Cyrus. Anointing with oil was merely a sign, symbolizing dedication to God's service and God’s election, calling, and appointment. When David was anointed by Samuel, the Spirit of the Lord came upon him from that day forward (1 Sam. 16:13).

Thus, the name “Anointed One” or “Messiah” was especially reserved for the future King from David’s house. He is the Anointed One par excellence, anointed not by man but by God Himself, and not with oil, but immeasurably with the Holy Spirit (Ps. 2:2, 6; Isa. 61:1).

When the name “Messiah” began to be used as a proper name for the future King of David's house is uncertain. However, Daniel 9:25 uses the term in this sense, and by the time of Jesus, it was commonly understood in this way. The Samaritan woman at the well referred to Jesus as Messiah without the article, indicating the proper name usage (John 4:25). Although “anointed” initially had a general meaning, over time it became a proper name applied exclusively to the future King of David's house. He is the Messiah, the Anointed One par excellence, singularly holding that title.

The image of the Messiah is elaborated in multifaceted ways throughout Old Testament prophecy. His Kingship is always central; He is called the Anointed because He is anointed King (Ps. 2:2, 6). David himself, on the foundation of the promise given to him, anticipates a ruler over men from his house, who will reign in righteousness, for God has made an everlasting covenant with him, in which everything is properly regulated and secured (2 Sam. 23:3-

5). This expectation is shared by all the prophets and psalmists; the future salvation of Israel is inseparably linked with the Davidic royal house, and the future king from that house is also the King of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is not a mere poetic or philosophical concept but a reality, a part of history. It is from above, spiritual and ideal, yet it will come about in time under a King from the house of David. It is a kingdom of God and yet a thoroughly human, earthly, historical kingdom. Thus, the future Kingdom of God is depicted in prophecy with imagery derived from the conditions of that time. These images are not to be taken literally but nonetheless convey a profound sense of the reality of that Kingdom; it is not a dream but is being realized here on earth, in history, under a King of David's house.

Yet, this kingdom of the Messiah, while perhaps less tangible in reality than any other earthly kingdom, is radically different. Although established through struggle and victory over all enemies (Ps. 2:1ff; 72:9ff; 110:2), it is a kingdom of perfect righteousness and peace (Isa. 32:1; Ps. 45:7-8; 72:7), characterized above all by the salvation of the needy and the assistance of the wretched (Ps. 72:12-14). Furthermore, it extends over all enemies, to the ends of the earth, and endures for all eternity (Ps. 2:8; 45:7; 72:5, 8, 17; 110:2, 4).

At the head of the Kingdom of God stands a Sovereign who, though a man, far exceeds all men in dignity and honor. He is a man, born of David's house, a son of David, and called the Son of Man (2 Sam. 7:12ff; Isa. 7:14; 9:5; Micah 5:1; Dan. 7:13). He is Immanuel, God with us (Isa. 7:14), the Lord our righteousness (Jer. 23:6; 33:16), in whom the Lord Himself comes with His grace to His people and dwells among them. In prophecy, it is the same whether the Lord or

His Messiah rules over His people; at times it is said that the Lord will appear, judge the nations, and redeem Israel, and at other times that His anointed King will do so. For instance, Isaiah declares, "The Lord will come with power, His arm ruling for Him; He will shepherd His flock" (Isa. 40:10-11), while Ezekiel states that the Lord will raise up a shepherd, namely His servant David, who will lead His people and be their shepherd (Ezek. 34:23). Ezekiel further declares that the name of the New Jerusalem will be "The Lord is there" (Ezek. 48:35), and Isaiah presents it such that in the Messiah, God is with us (Isa. 7:14). Ezekiel unites these thoughts, saying, "I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be Prince among them" (Ezek. 34:24), just as Micah proclaims that the Messiah will lead the people of Israel in the power of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God (Mic. 5:4). This is why, in the New Testament, both sets of texts are understood in the Messianic sense. In the Messiah, God Himself comes to His people; He is more than a man, being the perfect revelation and indwelling of God, and thus He also bears divine names: He is called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

However great the dignity and power of this Messiah, prophecy introduces a most remarkable feature. He will be born in humble circumstances and amidst great distress. Isaiah hints at this when he declares that a virgin, a young woman without any specific distinction, will bear a son who will partake in the sufferings of His people, subsisting on curds and honey—the staples of a devastated and uncultivated land (Isa. 7:14-15; 53:2). The prophet further describes a tree springing from the severed stump of Jesse, indicating that while the Davidic house will survive, it will be reduced to a felled stump, yet capable of producing a new shoot.

Similarly, Micah prophesies that the house of Ephrathah, referring to the Davidic royal lineage located in Bethlehem, though the least among Judah's clans, will produce a ruler whose greatness will reach the ends of the earth (Micah 5:2). Hence, the Messiah is often called the Branch (Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12). When Israel is scattered and Judah is in desolation, when hopes are nearly extinguished, the Lord will raise a Branch from David's decayed house to build the Lord's temple and establish His kingdom on earth. Though the Messiah will come in power and glory, He will appear in humility, not on a warhorse, but on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9). He will be King, but also Priest, merging both offices in Himself as Melchizedek did, and will hold them forever (Ps. 110:4; Zech. 6:13).

This notion of the Messiah's humility leads us to another profound image presented by Isaiah: the suffering servant of the Lord. Israel was destined to be a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6), serving God in priestly capacity and then reigning over the earth, just as man was originally created in God's image and given dominion over the entire earth. In this future vision, the dual destiny of Israel is depicted. The prophecies and psalms recurrently affirm that God will vindicate His people and grant them victory over their enemies. Sometimes this victory is portrayed in stark terms: God will rise, His enemies will scatter, and His adversaries will flee from His presence; they will be driven away like smoke, melt like wax before the fire; He will crush the heads of His enemies and bring them back from the depths of the sea so that His people may bathe their feet in their blood and the tongues of their dogs be stained with it (Ps. 68:1-3, 22-24; see also Ps. 28:4; 31:18; 55:10, 16; 69:23-29; 109:6-20; 137:8-9). These imprecations are not expressions of personal vengeance but Old

Testament language depicting God’s retribution on His and His people's enemies. Yet, the same God who punishes the wicked will grant justice, peace, and joy to His people, who will serve Him with unified hearts. Through tribulation and suffering, they will reach a state of glory and blessedness, wherein the Lord will establish a new covenant, inscribe His law on their hearts, and bestow upon them a new heart and a new spirit, enabling them to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments.

These two features of Israel's future are similarly present in its Messiah. He will be a King who crushes His enemies with a rod of iron and shatters them like pottery (Ps. 2:9; 110:5-6). Nowhere is victory over God's enemies depicted more vividly than in Isaiah 63:1-6. The Lord is portrayed arriving in garments stained red, advancing in the fullness of His power, speaking in righteousness, and mighty to save. When the prophet asks, “Why are Your garments red, and Your clothes like one who treads the winepress?” the Lord replies, “I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the nations no one was with Me. I trampled them in My anger and trod them down so that their lifeblood has splashed on my garments and all my garments have been stained by it. For a day of vengeance was in my heart and my year of salvation had come. In Rev. 19:13-15 some of the characteristics of this description are applied to Chris when he returns in the last days and subdues all his enemies. And this is absolutely right, because He is a Saviour and a Judge, a Lamb and a Lion, at the same time.

Moreover, He is also a Redeemer and Savior. Just as the Lord is both just and merciful, His day being one of vengeance and redemption, so Israel will rule royally over his enemies and serve God as a priestly

nation. In the same manner, the Messiah is simultaneously the King anointed by God and the suffering servant of the Lord. Isaiah, in particular, introduces us to this figure. Initially, the prophet envisions the people of Israel in exile, called to fulfill a mission to the Gentiles during their time of suffering. However, as his prophecy unfolds, this suffering figure increasingly assumes the character of a specific individual who, in a priestly manner, atones for the sins of His people through His suffering, proclaims salvation as a prophet to the ends of the earth, and receives a royal portion among the great, sharing the spoils with the mighty (Isa. 52:13-53:12).

In the anointed King, God reveals His glory, power, and the majesty of His name (Micah 5:4); in the suffering servant of the Lord, He reveals His grace and the richness of His mercy (Isa. 53:11). The prophecy concerning Israel culminates in these two forms, and that prophecy is deeply rooted in history. Israel, as a people, is God's son (Hos. 11:1), a priestly kingdom (Exod. 19:6), adorned with the glory of the Lord (Ezek. 16:14), and simultaneously God's servant (Isa. 41:8-9), enduring the reproach with which the enemies reproach the Lord (Ps. 89:51-52), and being slain all day long for His sake, regarded as sheep for slaughter (Ps. 44:23). Both the glory and the suffering of Israel, as a nation and through its servants such as David, Job, and others in a particular sense, possess a prophetic character; they both point to Christ. The entire Old Testament—with its laws and institutions, its offices and ministries, its events and promises—is a foreshadowing of the suffering to come for Christ and the glory that will follow (1 Peter 1:11). As the church in the New Testament era has become united with Christ in the likeness of His death and will be in the likeness of His resurrection (Rom. 6:11), as it fills up in its body the afflictions of Christ (Col. 1:24), and is

transformed into the image of Christ from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18), so the church of the Old Covenant, in all its suffering and glory, was a preparation and foreshadowing of the humiliation and exaltation of that Priest-King who, in the fullness of time, would establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

There is no doubt that the New Testament perceives itself in this light and understands its relationship to the Old Testament accordingly. What Jesus declares, that the Scriptures testify of Him (John 5:39; Luke 24:27), is a theme that undergirds the entire New Testament and is consistently expressed. The first disciples of Jesus recognized Him as the Christ because they found in Him the fulfillment of what Moses and the prophets had spoken (John 1:46). Paul attests that Christ died, was buried, and rose again according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Peter states that the Spirit of Christ in the prophets testified beforehand of the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory (1 Pet. 1:11). Every book of the New Testament, directly or indirectly, reveals that the whole Old Testament finds its fulfillment in Christ: the Law with its moral, ceremonial, and civil commandments, its temple, altar, priesthood, and sacrifices, and prophecy with its promises concerning the anointed King from the house of David and the suffering servant of the Lord. The entire Kingdom of God, prefigured in Israel's people and history, outlined in the law in national forms, and proclaimed in Old Testament language through prophecy, drew near in Christ and descended from heaven to earth in Him and His congregation.

This close connection between the Old and New Testament is of paramount importance for the veracity of the Christian faith. For the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised to Israel,

forms the core of the Christian religion and sets it apart from all other religions. It is, therefore, fiercely opposed by Jews, Muslims, and all heathen peoples, and today it is also contested by many who bear the name of Christians. Some argue that Jesus never considered Himself the Messiah, or that at best He clothed His profound religious consciousness and His high moral calling in a form that is now obsolete for us. But the testimonies of the New Testament are too numerous and too compelling for such a view to endure. Thus, others have gone much further in recent times. Unable to deny that Jesus regarded Himself as the Messiah and attributed various superhuman qualities and powers to Himself, they conclude instead that Jesus was a man afflicted with delusions, fanaticism, and all manner of excesses. Indeed, the contention goes so far that some attribute various mental and physical ailments to Jesus to explain the lofty thoughts He held about Himself.

This ongoing struggle concerning the person of Jesus, which has recently intensified, demonstrates the enduring relevance of the question: "What do you think about the Christ?" As in previous centuries, it still occupies and divides minds today. Just as the Jews had differing opinions about Jesus, with some seeing Him as John the Baptist, others as Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets (Matt. 16:13), and there were those who accused Him of madness and demonic possession (Mark 3:21-22), so it has been throughout the ages, and so it remains today. Even if we discount the few who openly accuse Jesus of being a fanatic, there are thousands who still recognize Him as a prophet but no longer profess Him as the Christ of God.

And yet, Jesus maintains His full claim to this name and is satisfied with nothing less than this confession. He is indeed a man and is described as such throughout the New Testament. Though He is the eternal Word, made flesh in time (John 1:14; Phil. 2:7), He shared our flesh and blood and was made like His brothers in every respect (Heb. 2:14, 17). According to the flesh, He is of the fathers (Rom. 9:5), the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16), of the tribe of Judah (Heb. 7:14; Rev. 5:5), of the lineage of David (Rom. 1:3), born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), fully human, with a body (Matt. 26:26), a soul (Matt. 26:38), and a spirit (Luke 23:46), possessing a human mind (Luke 2:52) and a human will (Luke 22:42), experiencing human emotions of joy, sorrow, wrath, and mercy (Luke 10:21; Mark 3:5), and with human needs for rest, food, and drink (John 4:6-7). Throughout the Gospels, Jesus appears as a human being to whom nothing human is alien. He was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15), and in the days of His flesh, He offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, learning obedience through what He suffered (Heb. 5:7-8).

His contemporaries never doubted His true human nature. In the Gospels, He is typically referred to by the simple, historical name of Jesus. Though this name was given by explicit divine command, indicating that He would save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21), it was a common name in Israel, borne by many. Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Jehoshua or Jeshua, derived from a verb meaning to save. Moses' successor was initially named Hosea but was later called Jehoshua (Joshua) by Moses (Num. 13:16), appearing in Acts 7:45 and Hebrews 4:8 as Jesus. Other individuals named Jesus are also mentioned in the New Testament (Luke 3:29;

Col. 4:11). The name alone did not lead the Jews to recognize Mary's son as the Christ.

They often referred to Him as the man called Jesus (John 9:11), the son of Joseph, the carpenter, whose father, mother, sisters, and brothers they knew (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3; John 6:42), the son of Joseph from Nazareth (John 1:45), Jesus the Nazarene (Matt. 2:23; Mark 10:47; John 18:5, 7; 19:19; Acts 22:8), Jesus the Galilean (Matt. 26:69), the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee (Matt. 21:11). The usual title by which Jesus was addressed was Rabbi or Rabboni, meaning teacher or master (John 1:39; 20:16), a title commonly used for scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:8). Jesus accepted and claimed this title for Himself (Matt. 23:8-10). These names and titles did not imply recognition of Him as the Christ. This recognition was still absent when He was called Lord (Mark 7:28), Son of David (Mark 10:47), or a prophet (Mark 6:15; 8:28).

Yet, while being truly and completely human, Jesus from the beginning was aware that He was more than a man, and this was recognized and confessed by His disciples with increasing clarity. This understanding is not confined to the Gospel of John and the Apostolic Letters but is evident in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The alleged contradiction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the Church is entirely unfounded. It is claimed that Jesus was merely a devout Israelite, a religious genius, an exalted teacher of virtue, a prophet like many before Him in Israel, and that all else professed by the Church—His supernatural conception, Messianic mission, resurrection, and ascension—are later additions by His disciples. However, the testimonies of the New Testament are too numerous and too robust to sustain such a view.

But there are so many and so serious objections to this whole idea that it cannot satisfy anyone. If all those aforementioned facts did not transpire, but were later fabricated and inserted into the life of Jesus, one must explain how the disciples of Jesus devised such fabrications and from where they sourced the material for these skillfully constructed fables. The impression that Jesus' extraordinary personality made on them would be insufficient, for it would only convey that of a highly exalted man and would not include any elements of the Christ as the church confesses Him. These elements must then be sought in the Jewish sects of the time, or in the Greek, Persian, Indian, Egyptian, and Babylonian religions, which would reduce Christianity to a syncretistic amalgam of Jewish and pagan errors, thereby stripping it of its independence and uniqueness.

Moreover, the first three Gospels were written by men who themselves firmly believed that Jesus was the Christ. They were composed at a time when the church had already been established for a considerable period, when the Apostolic preaching had spread throughout the known world, and when Paul had already penned several epistles. Despite this, these Gospels were universally accepted and recognized. In the early days of the Apostles and their co-workers, no conflict is known to have arisen concerning the person of Christ. They unanimously believed that Jesus was the Christ, that God had made this Jesus, whom the Jews crucified, both Lord and Christ, and that in His name, He granted repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

This faith has been the foundation of the Christian community from the beginning. Paul argues in the fifteenth chapter of his first letter to

the Corinthians that the Christ, according to the Scriptures, who died, was buried, and rose again, was the essence of apostolic preaching and the object of Christian faith, and that without these facts, both the preaching and the faith are in vain, rendering the salvation of those who died in Christ a mere illusion. There is no choice but between these two: either the apostles are false witnesses of God, or they have testified and proclaimed what they have seen, heard, and touched concerning the Word of life. Similarly, Jesus was either a false prophet, or He was the faithful Judge, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth, who loved us and washed us from our sins in His blood and made us kings and priests unto God and His Father (Rev. 1:5-6). There is no contradiction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of the church. The testimony of the apostles is the unfolding and explanation of the self-witness of Christ, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The church's foundation rests on the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

However tempting it may be to expound fully on the testimony given by Christ about Himself and by the Apostles about their Master and Lord, let us here focus on a few essential points.

Like John the Baptist, Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand and that entry into this kingdom required faith and repentance (Mark 1:15). However, He positioned Himself in a completely different relationship to that kingdom than John or any of the prophets. All of them prophesied about it (Matt. 11:11, 13), but Jesus is its owner and possessor. He received it from the Father, who ordained it for Him in His eternal decree (Luke 22:29). Therefore, it is His kingdom, which He freely bestows upon His disciples. The

Father prepares a wedding feast for His Son (Matt. 22:2), but the Son is the bridegroom (Mark 2:19; John 3:29), who celebrates His wedding in the future union with His people (Matt. 25:1). The Father owns the vineyard, but the Son is the heir (Matt. 21:33, 38). Thus, Jesus calls the kingdom of God His kingdom (Matt. 13:41; 20:21; Luke 22:30) and speaks of His church as being founded upon the rock of His confession (Matt. 16:18). For His sake, everything—father, mother, sisters, brothers, house, field, even one's own life—must be forsaken and denied. Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than Him is not worthy of Him. Whoever confesses or denies Him before men will accordingly be confessed or denied by Him before His Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33; Mark 8:34).

All His words and deeds correspond to the high place Jesus claims in the kingdom of heaven. They perfectly align with the will of His Father. Jesus is entirely without sin, conscious of no transgression against God's will, and never confesses to any error or sin. He allows Himself to be baptized by John, but not to receive forgiveness of sins as others do (Matt. 3:6). John objects to baptizing Jesus because his baptism is one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus acknowledges this objection but sets it aside, explaining that His baptism is to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:14-15). He does not do this to deny His moral perfection but to fulfill the divine plan. When the rich young man approaches Him, calling Him "Good Master," Jesus resists the flattery, redirecting the young man's praise to God alone, the source of all goodness (Matt. 19:16-17). This is not a denial of His own moral perfection but a refusal to accept superficial adulation.

In Gethsemane, His human nature recoils from the suffering ahead, expressing its authenticity in the prayer to let the cup pass from Him. Yet, it also demonstrates complete submission and obedience: "Not my will, but Thine be done" (Matt. 26:39). Even in that dreadful hour, neither in Gethsemane nor on Golgotha does any confession of sin escape His lips. On the contrary, everything He says and does aligns perfectly with God's holy will. All that He reveals in words and deeds concerning God and His kingdom is given to Him by the Father (Matt. 11:27).

He did not teach like the scribes, with their shrewd and scholastic manner, but as one possessing authority, as one who had received prophetic power from God (Matt. 7:29). This same power was evident in His works. He cast out devils by the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28), by the finger of God (Luke 11:20), had the authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6), and even the power to lay down His life and take it up again (John 10:18). All this power He received from His Father.

Jesus attributed all His words and deeds to His Father's commandment (John 5:19, 20, 30; 8:26, 28, 38; 12:50; 17:8). To do His Father's will was His sustenance (John 4:34), so that at the end of His life He could say that He had accomplished His Father's work (John 17:4).

This relationship, in which Jesus connects to the Kingdom of God through His person, words, and works, is expressed in His Messianic character. Much research has been undertaken to determine whether Jesus regarded Himself as the promised Messiah, and if so, how He came to this realization.

Regarding the first, there can be no doubt upon an unbiased reading of the Gospels—not only John but also Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Consider a few examples: in the synagogue at Nazareth, He proclaimed that the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled that day (Luke 4:16-21). When John the Baptist questioned whether He was the promised Messiah, Jesus affirmed it by referring to His works (Matt. 11:4-6). He accepted Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," and acknowledged it as a revelation from His Father (Matt. 16:16-17). The prayer of the mother of the Zebedee brothers, based on the belief that Jesus is the Messiah, was understood and responded to by Jesus in this sense (Matt. 20:20-23). His actions in the temple (Matt. 21:12-13), His institution of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-29), all rest on the assumption that He is the Messiah, David's Son, and David's Lord, capable of replacing the old covenant with a new one. Indeed, it was for this confession—that He was the Christ, the Son of God—that He was condemned and put to death (Mark 14:62), and the inscription above His cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," confirmed it.

Another question is how and by what means Jesus came to this awareness that He was the Messiah. However, all widely accepted modern ideas that Jesus was initially unaware of His Messianic role, that this realization came only later—at His baptism, or even later through Peter’s confession—that He accepted it reluctantly or tolerated it as a necessary but imperfect form of His religious-moral calling, are entirely disconnected from reality and in direct conflict with the testimony of Scripture and the nature of Jesus' personality. There was undoubtedly a development in the human consciousness of Christ, for we read explicitly that He increased in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). In the quiet family life of

Nazareth, under His mother's guidance, His human insight into His own person and mission, the work the Father had given Him to do, and the kingdom He had come to establish, gradually became clearer and deeper based on the Old Testament Scriptures.

Even as a boy in the temple, Jesus already knew that He must be about His Father's business (Luke 2:49). Before His baptism by John, He was aware that He did not need it for the forgiveness of sins, but to fulfill all righteousness and to be obedient to God's will in all things. For Jesus, this baptism was not a renunciation of a sinful past—He had none—but rather a complete surrender and dedication to God, and from God's side, a full equipping and enabling for the mission He was to undertake. As the Messiah, He was acknowledged by John and the disciples who followed Him (John 1:29-52).

This confession, however, was preliminary. It was not yet complete or fully understood. The disciples still harbored misconceptions about the nature of His Messiahship, expecting Him to be a political and military leader who would liberate Israel from foreign oppression and restore its national glory. When Jesus did not meet these expectations, even John the Baptist began to have doubts (Matt. 11:2-3). The disciples frequently needed correction and instruction from Jesus to understand His true mission. Their deeply ingrained Jewish expectations led them to ask, even after the resurrection, whether Jesus would now restore the kingdom to Israel.

These prevailing misconceptions made it necessary for Jesus to adopt a particular pedagogical approach in proclaiming His Messiahship. In the early period of His ministry, Jesus did not

explicitly declare Himself to be the Christ. Instead, His preaching focused on the kingdom of heaven, elucidating its nature, origin, progress, and consummation, often through parables. His works consisted of acts of mercy, healing infirmities, and curing diseases among the people. These works testified of Him, and from them, His disciples and John the Baptist were to discern His identity and the character of His Messiahship. It was as though His Messiahship was a secret that was not to be publicly declared. Frequently, after performing miracles that hinted at His identity, He instructed those involved to keep it to themselves (Matt. 8:4; 9:30; 12:16; Mark 1:44; 5:43; 7:36). Even when His disciples, through Peter, confessed Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God, He strictly commanded them not to tell anyone (Matt. 16:20; Mark 8:30). Jesus was indeed the Christ, but not in the manner the Jews expected. He did not want to conform to their expectations and even avoided situations where the people might forcibly make Him king (John 6:14-15). He was the Messiah according to the will and counsel of His Father, fulfilling the prophecy of the Old Covenant.

Thus, He chose to refer to Himself by the peculiar title "Son of Man," which appears frequently in the Gospels. This title is undoubtedly derived from Daniel 7:13, where the dominion of God's people is depicted in contrast to the beastly empires of the world, symbolized by the Son of Man. This term, while known in some Jewish circles as a Messianic title (John 12:34), did not carry the same political and nationalistic expectations as titles like "Son of David" or "King of Israel." It was, therefore, the most fitting title for Jesus, expressing both His fulfillment of Messianic prophecy and His distinction from popular Jewish expectations of the Messiah.

This is evident from Jesus' use of the title "Son of Man." He refers to Himself by this name in two distinct contexts: those that speak of His poverty, suffering, and humiliation, and those that speak of His power, majesty, and exaltation. For example, in the first context, He says, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). In the second, He declares before the High Council that He is indeed the Messiah and adds, "But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64). This dual aspect is evident when we compare passages like Matt. 8:20, 11:19, 12:40, 17:12, 18:11, 20:18 with Matt. 9:6, 10:23, 12:8, 13:41, 16:27, 17:9, 19:28, 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 25:13, 31. By this title, Jesus describes Himself in His full Messianic identity, in His humiliation and exaltation, in His grace and power, as Saviour and Judge.

In this, He encapsulates the entire Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. As previously noted, this prophecy developed in two directions: the anointed King from David’s house and the suffering servant of the Lord. In the Old Testament, these lines run parallel, but they converge in Daniel’s vision. The Kingdom of God is portrayed as a true and full reign, yet it is the reign of a "Son of Man." Thus, Jesus asserts that He is indeed a King, the King of Israel, the divinely promised and anointed King, but in a different sense than the Jews expected. He is a King who rides on a donkey’s colt, a King of righteousness and peace, a King who is also a Priest, a King who is also a Saviour. In Him, power and love, justice and mercy, majesty and humility, God and man are united.

He is the complete fulfillment of the entire Old Testament law and prophecy, of all the suffering and glory which were the preparatory and foreshadowing elements of Israel, the antitype of the kings and priests of Israel, and the representative of the people of Israel, who were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. He is the King-Priest and Priest-King, Immanuel, God with us. Thus, the kingdom He preached and established is both internal and external, invisible and visible, spiritual and physical, present and future, particular and universal, from above yet below, from heaven yet on earth. Jesus will come again; He came to save the world, and He will return to judge it.

One more characteristic must be added to this image of Jesus as presented in the Gospels: His consciousness of being the Son of God in a unique sense.

In the Old Testament, this title was used for angels (Job 38:7), for the people of Israel (Ex. 4:22; Deut. 14:1; Isa. 63:16; Hos. 11:1), and within that nation, for judges (Ps. 82:6) and kings (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 2:7; Ps. 89:27). In the New Testament, Adam is called the son of God (Luke 3:38), the children of God bear this name (2 Cor. 6:18), and it is particularly given to Christ. He is referred to as the Son of God by various individuals: John the Baptist and Nathanael (John 1:34, 50), Satan and the demons (Matt. 4:3; 8:29; Mark 3:11), the high priest, the Jewish crowd, and the centurion (Matt. 26:63; 27:40, 54), the disciples (Matt. 14:33; 16:16), and the Evangelists (Mark 1:1; John 20:31). Although Jesus does not frequently call Himself by this name, He accepts this confession of His divine Sonship without contradiction and at times openly declares that He is the Son of God (Matt. 16:16-17; 26:63-64; 27:40, 43).

Now, there is no doubt that the various individuals who referred to Jesus as the Son of God did not all invest this title with the same depth of meaning. When the centurion at the cross declared, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54), his understanding was likely different from that of the High Priest who asked Jesus if He was the Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 26:63). Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), came after prolonged contact with Jesus and carried a profound recognition of Jesus' divine mission and identity, a recognition that deepened after the Resurrection.

Indeed, Jesus can be referred to as the Son of God in an Old Testament, Theocratic sense. As the divinely anointed King, He can rightly be called God's Son. He is the Son of the Most High, to whom the Lord God will give the throne of His father David (Luke 1:32), the holy seed born of Mary (Luke 1:35), the Holy One as acknowledged by the demon-possessed man (Mark 1:24), and the Son of the Blessed, as identified by the High Priest (Mark 14:61-62). However, this Theocratic Sonship has a more profound meaning for Jesus, emerging from His unique relationship with the Father. He did not become the Son of God merely by His supernatural conception (Luke 1:35), nor by receiving the Holy Spirit without measure at His baptism (Matt. 3:16), nor by being made Lord and Christ through His resurrection (Acts 2:36). These events revealed and affirmed His Sonship, but His Messianic dignity did not begin with them. It goes back further, rooted in eternity. Scripture teaches that Christ is not called the Son of God because He is the anointed King of Israel; rather, He was appointed as King because He is, in the most profound sense, God's Son.

This is affirmed throughout Scripture. Micah 5:2 speaks of the origins of the Ruler from Bethlehem as being from ancient times, from the days of eternity. Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5 interpret the declaration, “You are My Son; today I have begotten You,” from Psalm 2 as referring to Christ's eternal generation. Romans 1:4 declares that Christ was powerfully proven to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead. He is the Son of God in a unique sense, existing from eternity (Rom. 8:32; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6), and His supernatural conception, baptism, and resurrection increasingly revealed this truth.

The same teaching is evident in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Jesus was conscious of His unique relationship with the Father, different from that of all other people. Even as a boy, He knew He must be about His Father's business (Luke 2:49). At His baptism and again at the Transfiguration, God’s voice from heaven declared Him to be His beloved Son, in whom He was well pleased (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). This divine affirmation confirmed His identity and mission, setting Him apart as the eternal Son of God.

He speaks of Himself as the Son, exalted above the angels, saying, “Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matt. 24:36, Mark 13:32). Other men sent by God are but servants; He is the beloved Son, the heir of the Father (Matt. 21:37-38). The kingdom in which He reigns was predestined to Him by His Father (Luke 22:29). He sends to His disciples the promise of His Father (Luke 24:49) and will one day come in the glory of His Father (Mark 8:38). Jesus never says “our Father” in reference to Himself and others together, but always “my Father” or “your Father” separately, placing the prayer “Our Father” on the lips

of His disciples alone (Matt. 6:9). He is, in one word, the Son (Mark 13:32), while all His disciples are children of their Father (Matt. 5:45). All things have been given over to Him by the Father, for no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him (Matt. 11:27). After the resurrection, He commanded His disciples to teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and teaching them to observe all things that He had commanded (Matt. 28:19-20).

The Gospel of John, in which not only the evangelist but also the apostle speaks, does not introduce anything essentially new but delves deeper and expands upon what is given. The title Son of God here sometimes retains its theocratic sense (John 1:34, 50; 11:27; 20:31), but generally it bears a deeper significance. Jesus is often called the Son of God by others (John 1:34, 50; 6:69), and He also refers to Himself as such (John 5:25; 9:35-37; 10:36; 11:4). More frequently, He speaks of Himself simply as the Son without further qualification. As such, He claims the authority to perform miracles (John 9:35; 11:4), to raise the dead both spiritually and physically (John 5:21), and the Jews understood Him to be making Himself equal with God (John 5:18; 10:33). He speaks of the Father and of Himself as the Son in such an intimate manner that these statements only make sense if God is, in a unique sense, His Father, His own Father (John 5:18). Everything He attributes to the Father, He also attributes to Himself. The Father gave Him authority over all flesh (John 17:2), so that the fate of all men depends on their relationship with Him (John 3:17; 6:40). Like the Father, He quickens whom He wills (John 5:21), presides over all judgment (John 5:27), does everything the Father does (John 5:19), and has received life in

Himself from the Father (John 5:26). He and the Father are one (John 10:30); He is in the Father, and the Father is in Him (John 10:38); to see Him is to see the Father (John 14:9). It is true that the Father is greater than He (John 14:28) because the Father sent Him, as Jesus repeatedly declares (John 5:24, 30, 37). But this does not negate the fact that He existed in the glory of God before His conception and will return there after His earthly mission (John 17:5). His Sonship is not based on His mission; rather, His mission is based on His Sonship (John 3:16-17, 35; 5:20; 17:24). Therefore, He is the Son, the only begotten Son (John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), the only begotten of the Father (John 1:14), the Word who was with God in the beginning and was God Himself (John 1:1), the Savior of the world (John 4:42), whom Thomas addresses and confesses as "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the doctrine of the Mediator of the Covenant emphasize the certainty and infallibility of God's plan for salvation?

- Reflect on how the eternal counsel of God ensures that salvation is accomplished and applied without fail.

2. What are the three major elements of the counsel of redemption, and how do they interrelate to fulfill God's plan for salvation?

- Consider the roles of the Mediator, the Holy Spirit, and the people to whom salvation is given, and how each contributes to the overall execution of God's plan.

3. In what ways does the person of Christ uniquely fulfill the role of Mediator compared to mediators in other religions?

- Reflect on how Christ's identity and work set Him apart as the sole true Mediator between God and man, unlike other religious figures who only partially fulfill this role.

4. Why is it essential to understand Christ's preexistence and His role in creation to fully grasp His significance as the Mediator?

- Discuss the importance of Christ's eternal nature and His work in creation for understanding His mediating role in redemption.

5. How does the Old Testament preparation and prophecy point to the coming of Christ as the Mediator of the New Covenant?

- Reflect on the ways in which Old Testament figures and events foreshadow Christ's work and how the prophecies build up to His arrival.

6. What is the significance of the Messianic expectations in the Old Testament for understanding the nature and work of Christ?

- Consider how the hopes and promises of a coming Messiah shape the understanding of Christ's mission and identity.

7. How does the dual role of Christ as both suffering servant and reigning king fulfill Old Testament prophecy and reveal God's plan for salvation?

- Discuss the integration of these two roles in Christ and their importance in the unfolding of redemptive history.

8. In what ways does the New Testament affirm and expand upon the Old Testament revelation of Christ as the Mediator?

- Reflect on specific New Testament passages that confirm and deepen the understanding of Christ's role as foretold in the Old Testament.

9. How does the unique relationship between Christ and the Father, as described in the New Testament, underscore His role as the Mediator?

- Consider how Christ's divine Sonship and His mission from the Father highlight His qualifications and authority as the Mediator.

10. What practical implications does the doctrine of Christ as the Mediator have for your faith and daily Christian life?

- Reflect on how understanding Christ's mediating work influences your relationship with God, your assurance of salvation, and your worship and obedience.

16. The Divine and Human Nature of Christ

The testimony that Christ gave of Himself, as recorded in the Gospels, is further developed and confirmed by the apostolic

preaching. The confession that a man named Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten of the Father, stands in stark contrast to all human experience, thinking, and the inclinations of our hearts. No one can sincerely and wholeheartedly accept this confession without the persuasive work of the Holy Spirit. By nature, everyone is hostile to this confession because it is contrary to human nature. No one can declare that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit, and no one who speaks by the Holy Spirit can call Jesus accursed; rather, they acknowledge Him as their Savior and King (1 Cor. 12:3).

When Christ appeared on earth and declared Himself to be the Son of God, He did not merely leave this proclamation to stand alone; He ensured that it took root in the world and was believed by His congregation. He called and taught His apostles, making them witnesses of His words and deeds, of His death and resurrection. He gave them the Holy Spirit, who led them personally to confess that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit enabled them to act as witnesses to what they had seen with their eyes and touched with their hands of the Word of life (1 John 1:1). The apostles were not the ultimate witnesses; rather, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, is the original, infallible, and omnipotent witness to Christ. The apostles testified only in and through Him (John 15:26-27; Acts 5:32). This same Spirit of truth, through the witness of the apostles, leads the congregation of all ages to confess and remain steadfast in their faith: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life, and we have believed and known that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:68-69).

When the four Evangelists recount the events of Jesus' life in a regular sequence, they typically refer to Him simply as Jesus, without any further description or addition. They recount that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that Jesus was led into the desert, that Jesus saw the multitudes and ascended the mountain, and so forth. Jesus, the historical figure who lived and died in Palestine, is the subject of their narrative. Similarly, in the Apostolic Letters, Jesus is sometimes referred to only by His historical name. Paul, for instance, states that no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). John testifies that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God (1 John 5:1), and in Revelation, the faith, witness, and testimony of Jesus are mentioned without further specification (Rev. 14:12; 17:6; 19:20; 20:4).

Yet, the use of this simple name, without further qualification, is rare in the Letters of the Apostles. Typically, the name Jesus appears in conjunction with titles such as the Lord, Christ, or the Son of God. The full appellation often reads: our Lord Jesus Christ. Whether the name Jesus is employed alone or in combination with other titles, it consistently signifies the connection to the historical person who was born in Bethlehem and crucified.

The entirety of the New Testament, both in the Letters and the Gospels, rests on the bedrock of historical facts. The figure of Christ is not a mere abstraction or an ideal born of human imagination, as some in earlier centuries and even today would suggest, but rather a real person who appeared at a specific time and in a specific individual, namely, the man Jesus.

It is true that the various events in Jesus' life recede into the background in the Letters; their purpose differs from that of the Gospels. The Letters do not provide a chronological history of Jesus' life but rather illuminate the significance of that life for the redemption of humanity. Nevertheless, the apostles are thoroughly acquainted with the person and life of Jesus, His words and deeds, and they declare that this Jesus is the Christ, whom God exalted to His right hand to grant repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:36, 5:31).

The apostles frequently refer to events from Jesus' life in their preaching; they vividly portray Him before the eyes of their hearers and readers (Gal. 3:1). They mention that John the Baptist was His forerunner (Acts 13:25, 19:4), that He is of the lineage of Judah and the tribe of David (Rom. 1:3, Rev. 5:5, 22:16), that He was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), circumcised on the eighth day (Rom. 15:8), raised in Nazareth (Acts 2:22, 3:6), and had brothers (1 Cor. 9:5).

Furthermore, He was perfectly holy and sinless (2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 7:26, 1 Pet. 1:19, 2:22, 1 John 3:5), setting Himself as an example for us (1 Cor. 11:1, 1 Pet. 2:21), and spoke words with authority (Acts 20:35, 1 Cor. 7:10, 12). Betrayed by one of the twelve apostles He appointed (1 Cor. 15:5, 11:23), and unrecognized by the rulers of this world as the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8), He was killed by the Jews (Acts 4:10, 5:30, 1 Thess. 2:15), and died on the cross.

He died on the accursed tree of the cross (Gal. 3:13, Col. 2:14).

But though He suffered greatly in Gethsemane and on Golgotha (Phil. 2:6, Heb. 5:7-8, 12:2, 13:12), by His shedding of blood He made atonement for the sins of the world. Consequently, God raised Him

up, exalted Him at His right hand, and appointed Him as Lord and Christ, Prince and Savior for all peoples (Acts 2:32-33, 36, 5:30-31, Rom. 8:34, 1 Cor. 15:20, Phil. 2:9).

From these few facts, it is evident that the apostles did not disregard or undermine the facts of Christianity but, on the contrary, fully recognized and comprehended their spiritual significance. There is no trace among the apostles of a separation or opposition between the fact of salvation and the word of salvation, as some have advocated in past and later times. The fact of salvation is the realization of the word of salvation; the latter is given concrete and real form in the former and thereby serves as its explanation.

If any doubt remained about this, it was completely dispelled by the struggle the apostles had to wage even in their own days. Not only in the second and third centuries but already in the apostolic age, there emerged men who considered the facts of Christianity of secondary and transitory importance, or even denied them altogether, thinking the idea alone sufficient. "What does it matter," they argued, "whether Christ is risen bodily; as long as He lives on in spirit, our salvation is assured!" But the Apostle Paul held quite a different opinion, and in 1 Corinthians 15, he placed the reality and significance of the bodily resurrection in the clearest light. He proclaims Christ according to the Scriptures, the Christ who died, was buried, and rose again according to the counsel of the Father, who was seen by many disciples after His resurrection, and whose resurrection is the foundation and guarantee of our salvation. Even more emphatically, John insists that he proclaims what he has seen with his eyes and touched with his hands from the Word of life (1 John 1:1-3). The principle of antichrist lies in denying the

incarnation of the Word; the Christian confession, by contrast, consists in believing that the Word became flesh, that the Son of God came by water and blood (John 1:14, 1 John 3:2, 5:6). The entire apostolic preaching in the Gospels and Epistles, indeed in the entire New Testament, argues that Jesus, born of Mary and crucified, is, according to His exaltation, the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31, 1 John 2:22, 4:15, 5:5).

It is noteworthy that, in connection with the content and purpose of apostolic preaching, the use of the single name Jesus, without further description, is very rare in the Epistles. As a rule, the apostles speak of Jesus Christ, or Christ Jesus, or even more fully of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even the evangelists, who usually refer to Jesus in the narrative, use the full name Jesus Christ at the beginning or at significant turning points in their Gospels (Matt. 1:1, 18, 16:21, Mark 1:1, John 1:17, 17:3) to indicate the person of whom their Gospel speaks. In the Acts and the Epistles, this usage becomes the norm; the apostles do not speak about a person, Jesus, without qualification, but in the addition of Christ, Lord, etc., they express the value of who this person is to them. They are proclaimers of the Gospel, that in the man Jesus, the Christ of God has appeared on earth.

In this way, they had gradually come to know Jesus during their contact with Him, and especially after the pivotal moment at Caesarea Philippi, a light had dawned on them about His person, and they had all confessed through Peter that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). In His supreme prayer, He identifies Himself by the name of Jesus Christ, whom the Father has sent (John 17:3). Precisely because He presented Himself as the Christ,

the Son of God, He was accused of blasphemy by the Jewish council and sentenced to death (Matt. 26:63). And the inscription above His cross read: Jesus, the Nazarene, the King of the Jews (Matt. 27:37, John 19:19).

Indeed, the disciples struggled to reconcile Jesus' Messianic claims with His impending suffering and death, as seen in Matthew 16:22. However, through and after the Resurrection, they came to grasp the necessity and significance of the Cross. They now understood that God had made this Jesus, whom the Jews had put to death, both Lord and Christ through the Resurrection, exalting Him to be a Prince and Savior (Acts 2:36, 5:31). This does not imply that Jesus was not already Christ and Lord before His Resurrection and only became so afterward. Even before the Resurrection, Jesus proclaimed Himself to be the Christ, and His disciples recognized and confessed Him as such (Matthew 16:16). Yet, before the Resurrection, He was the Messiah in servant form, a form that concealed His divine dignity from the eyes of humanity. In and after the Resurrection, He laid aside that servant form, reclaimed the Lordship He had with the Father before the world began (John 17:5), and was thus appointed the Son of God in power, according to the Spirit of holiness that dwelt within Him (Romans 1:3).

Hence, Paul asserts that now, after it pleased God to reveal His Son in him, he no longer knew Christ according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 5:16). Before his conversion, Paul knew Christ only according to the flesh, judging Him solely by His outward appearance, by the servant form in which He walked on earth. At that time, he could not believe that this Jesus, stripped of all glory and crucified, was the Christ. But his conversion transformed his

understanding. Now, he knows and judges Christ not by appearances, not by the outward, temporary servant form, but by the Spirit, by what was within Christ, by what He truly was internally and revealed Himself to be through His Resurrection.

This transformation is true, in a certain sense, for all the apostles. It is accurate that even before Christ's suffering and death, they had already come to a believing confession of His Messianic dignity. But for them, this dignity remained veiled by His suffering and death. The Resurrection, however, reconciled this apparent contradiction. The same Christ who descended to the lowest parts of the earth is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens to fulfill all things (Ephesians 4:9). When the apostles speak of Christ, they simultaneously think of the Christ who died and was raised, the Christ who was crucified and glorified. They relate their Gospel not only to the historical Jesus, who lived and died a few years prior in Palestine, but also to the same Jesus, now exalted and seated at the right hand of God's power. They stand at the intersection of the horizontal line, connecting them with the past and history, and the vertical line, connecting them with the living Lord in the heavens. Christianity, therefore, is a religion of history but also a religion that lives out of eternity in the present. The disciples of Jesus were not called Jesuits after His historical name, but Christians after His official title (Acts 11:26).

This peculiar stance that the apostles adopted in their preaching after the Resurrection elucidates why they almost never refer to Jesus simply by His historical name. Instead, they frequently speak of Him as Jesus Christ, Christ Jesus, our Lord Jesus Christ, etc. The name Christ soon shed its appellative significance within the circle of

the disciples, assuming the nature of a proper name. The conviction that Jesus was the Christ was so deeply ingrained that He could be referred to simply as Christ, even without the prefix. This usage appears occasionally in the Gospels (Matt. 1:1, 16, 17, 18, 27:17, 22; Mark 1:1, 9:41; Luke 2:11, 23:2; John 1:17), but it becomes standard with the apostles, particularly Paul. Moreover, in Acts (3:20, 5:41, etc.), and especially with Paul, both names—Jesus Christ—are frequently used to underscore the Messianic dignity of Jesus, transforming into Christ Jesus. This compound name, Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus, became the preferred designation in the early congregations. The use and significance of the name in the Old Testament is transferred to Christ in the New Testament. In the Old Covenant, the Name of the Lord, or simply the Name, denoted the revealed Lordship of God. In the New Covenant, that glory of God has manifested in the person of Jesus Christ; thus, His name embodies the church's power. In that name, there is baptism (Acts 2:38), speaking and teaching (4:18), healing of the lame (3:6), and forgiveness of sin (10:43). That name faces resistance and opposition (26:9), yet is suffered for (5:41), invoked (22:13), and exalted (19:17). Consequently, the name of Jesus Christ encapsulates the church's confession, the strength of its faith, and the anchor of its hope. As Israel once gloried in the name of Jehovah, so the New Testament church finds its strength in the name of Jesus Christ. In this name, the name of Jehovah is fully revealed.

The title "Lord," invariably linked to the name of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, points in the same direction. In the Gospels, Jesus is frequently addressed as "Lord" by those outside His immediate circle seeking His help (Matt. 8:2, 6, 21; 15:22; 16:22; 17:4, 15, etc.). Initially, this title bore no more weight than that of rabbi or master.

However, His disciples also frequently used this title (Matt. 14:28, 30; 26:22; John 6:68; 11:3; 21:15, 16, 17, 21). In the Gospel narratives, Luke and John sometimes interchangeably use the names Jesus and Lord (Luke 1:43; 2:11, 38; 7:13, 31; 10:1; 11:39; 17:6, etc.; John 4:1; 6:23; 11:2; 20:2, 13, 18, 25, 28, etc.). Moreover, Jesus Himself employs this title, referring to Himself as the Lord (Matt. 7:21; 12:8; 21:3; 22:43-45; Mark 5:19; John 13:14, etc.).

In the usage of Jesus and His disciples, the title "Lord" takes on a far deeper significance than the mere title of rabbi or master. It is impossible to ascertain precisely what those who sought Jesus' help and addressed Him as "Lord" thought or meant by this title. However, Jesus' self-awareness was that of a teacher, master, and Lord surpassing all others. He attributed to Himself an authority far exceeding that of the scribes. This is already evident in passages like Matt. 23:1-11 and Mark 1:22, 27, where Jesus elevates Himself as the sole Master above all others. This is even more evident when He calls Himself the Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8) and the Son of David and David's Lord (Matt. 22:43-45). This clearly indicates that He is the Messiah, who sits at the right hand of God, shares in His power, and holds authority over the living and the dead (Matt. 21:4, 5; 13:35; 24:42 f; 25:34 f).

This profound significance has likely also become associated with the name "Lord" because the Old Testament names Jehovah and Adonai are rendered in the Greek translation by "kurios," the same term applied to Christ. As Christ revealed more clearly who He was and as the disciples grew in their understanding of the divine revelation in Christ, the name "Lord" acquired a richer meaning. Old Testament texts that spoke of God were seamlessly applied to Christ. Thus, in

Mark 1:3, the quotation from Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," is seen as fulfilled in the preparation of Christ, the Lord, through John the Baptist. In Christ, God Himself, the Lord, has come to His people. By confessing Jesus as Lord, the disciples increasingly recognized that in Christ, God Himself had revealed and given Himself to them. The climax of this confession during Jesus' earthly ministry is reached when Thomas falls at the feet of the risen Christ and addresses Him as: "My Lord and my God," John 20:28.

After the Resurrection, "Lord" became the common name among Jesus' disciples. We find it repeatedly in Acts and the Epistles, particularly those of Paul. Sometimes the name "Lord" is used alone, but usually it appears in combination with others: the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ, or our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. By the name "Lord," believers expressed that Jesus Christ, who was humbled to death on the cross, is exalted by God to be Lord and Prince due to His complete obedience to God (Acts 2:36, 5:31), seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:34), Lord of all and everything (Acts 10:36), especially of the church, which He bought with His blood (Acts 20:28), and also of all creation, which He will judge as the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42, 17:31).

Therefore, whoever calls upon this name, the name of Jesus as Christ and Lord, shall be saved (Acts 2:21, 1 Cor. 1:2). To be a Christian means to confess with one's mouth the Lord Jesus and to believe in one's heart that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 12:3, Phil. 2:11). The essence of Christian preaching is encapsulated in the declaration: Christ Jesus the Lord (2 Cor. 4:5). This confession

so thoroughly encapsulates the essence of Christianity that the name "Lord" with Paul almost becomes a proper name for Christ, distinct from the Father and the Spirit. Christians profess one God, the Father, of whom all things are, and we unto Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are, and we by Him; and one Spirit, who distributes gifts to each individually as He wills (1 Cor. 8:6, 12:11).

Thus, the apostolic blessing invokes for the congregation the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:13). The singular name of God is explicated in the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

Given the apostles' testimony of Christ's exalted position, it is unsurprising that divine attributes and works are attributed to Him, indeed, even His divine nature. A unique figure emerges in the person of Christ as depicted in the Holy Scriptures. On the one hand, He is truly human, made flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14, 1 John 4:2-3), bearing the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3), of the patriarchs concerning the flesh (Rom. 9:5), Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:16), of Judah's lineage (Heb. 7:14), of David's line (Rom. 1:3), born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), sharing our flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14), with a spirit (Matt. 27:50), a soul (Matt. 26:38), and a body (1 Pet. 2:24). He was fully human, growing from infancy, increasing in wisdom and stature, and finding favor with God and humanity (Luke 2:40, 52). He hungered, thirsted, grieved, rejoiced, was moved with compassion, and felt anger (Matt. 4:2, 26:28, John 11:27, 35, 19:28). He submitted to the law and was obedient unto death (Gal. 4:4, Phil. 2:8, Heb. 5:8, 10:7, 9). He suffered, died on the cross, and was buried

(Isa. 53:2-3). He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, and bore our infirmities.

And yet this same man is set apart from all men and placed high above them all. Not only was He, according to His human nature, conceived by the Holy Spirit, but throughout His life He remained untainted by sin, and after His death, He was raised again and ascended into heaven. Yet, this same subject, the same person, the same "I," who humbled Himself so profoundly by taking on the form of a servant and becoming obedient to death on a cross, existed in a different state long before His incarnation and humiliation. He existed in the form of God and did not consider it robbery to be equal with God (Phil. 2:6). At His resurrection and ascension, He received back the glory He had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5). He is eternal as God Himself, having been with Him from the beginning (John 1:1, 1 John 1:1), and just as He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (Rev. 22:13); omnipresent, so that while He walked the earth, He was also in the bosom of the Father in heaven (John 1:18, 3:13). After His glorification, He remains with His church and fills all in all (Matt. 28:20, Eph. 1:23, 4:10); unchangeable and faithful, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8); omniscient, so that He hears prayers (Acts 1:24, 7:59-60, Rom. 10:12-13); omnipotent, so that all things are subject to Him, all power is given to Him in heaven and on earth, and He is the Prince of all kings (Matt. 28:18, 1 Cor. 15:27, Eph. 1:22, Rev. 1:4, 19:16).

Possessing all these divine perfections, He also participates in all divine works. With the Father and the Spirit, He is the Creator of all things (John 1:3, Col. 1:16), and the firstborn, the principle and head

of all creation (Col. 1:15, Rev. 3:14). He sustains all things by the word of His power, so that they exist not only of Him but also in Him and through Him forever (Heb. 1:3, Col. 1:17). Above all, He preserves, reconciles, and restores all things, gathering them under Himself as the head. As such, He bears the name Saviour of the world. In the Old Testament, the name Saviour, Redeemer, was attributed to God (Isa. 43:3, 11, 45:15, Jer. 14:8, Hos. 13:4). But in the New Testament, both the Son and the Father bear this name. In 1 Timothy 1:1, Titus 1:3, 2:10, God is called Saviour, and in 2 Timothy 1:10, Titus 1:4, 2:13, 3:6, 2 Peter 1:11, 2:20, 3:18, Christ is named Saviour, in whom and through whom the salvific work of God is fully accomplished.

All this indicates a unity between the Father and the Son, between God and Christ, that is unparalleled between the Creator and His creatures. Even though Christ assumed a human nature that is finite and limited and began to exist in time, as a person, as an entity, Christ is not positioned on the side of creation in Scripture but on the side of God. He shares in His attributes, participates in all His works, and possesses the same divine nature. This is especially evident in the three titles ascribed to Christ: the Image, the Word, and the Son of God.

Christ is the Image of God, the radiance of God's glory, and the express image of His being (2 Cor. 4:4, Col. 1:15, Heb. 1:3). In Christ, the unseen God becomes visible; he who sees Him sees the Father (John 14:9). Anyone desiring to know who and what God is, must look to Christ; as Christ is, so is the Father. Christ is also the Word of God (John 1:1, Rev. 19:13); in Him, the Father has fully revealed Himself, His wisdom, His will, all His attributes, His entire being; He

has given Himself to have life in Himself (John 5:26). Whoever wishes to know God's thought, counsel, and will for humanity and the world must listen to Christ and heed Him (Matt. 17:5). Finally, Christ is the Son of God, as John frequently calls Him without further qualification (1 John 2:22, Heb. 1:1, 8), the only begotten and the one true Son. Whoever desires to be a child of God must accept Christ, for all who receive Him are given the right and authority to be called children of God (John 1:12).

Finally, Scripture crowns its testimony concerning Christ by attributing to Him the Divine Name. Thomas confessed Him as his Lord and God even before the ascension, as recorded in John 20:28. John affirms that in the beginning, the Word was with God and was God Himself. Paul declares that, according to the flesh, He is of the fathers, but in His divine nature, He is God over all, blessed forever, Romans 9:5. The letter to the Hebrews exalts Him far above the angels, with God Himself addressing Him as God, Heb. 1:8-9. Peter speaks of Him as our God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 2 Peter 1:1. In the baptismal command of Jesus, Matt. 28:19, and in the apostolic blessings, 2 Cor. 13:13, 1 Peter 1:2, Rev. 1:4-6, Christ the Son is placed on the same level with the Father and the Spirit. The name and essence, the attributes and works of God belong to the Son as much as to the Father.

Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God - upon this foundation, the church is built. From the very beginning, the unique significance of Christ was clear to all believers. He was confessed by all as the Lord, who had secured salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and immortality through His teachings and life, then was exalted by the Father at His right hand, and would soon return as the Judge of the living and the

dead. With the same titles, Christ, Lord, Son of God, God, etc., which appear in the Apostolic Letters, He is also mentioned in the earliest Christian writings and invoked in prayers and hymns. All believers were united in the conviction of one God, whose children they were, one Lord, who had assured them of God's love, and one Spirit, who guided them in newness of life. The baptismal command in Matt. 28:19, which became widely adopted towards the end of the apostolic era, is evidence of this unified belief.

However, as soon as people began to ponder the content of this confession, various differences of opinion emerged. The members of the congregation, previously educated in Judaism and Paganism, and mostly from humble backgrounds, struggled to fully grasp the apostolic teaching immediately; they lived amidst a society filled with diverse ideas and influences and were thus continually vulnerable to temptation and error. Even during the Apostles' lifetimes, we read of various deceivers infiltrating the congregation and attempting to undermine the firmness of their faith. For example, in Colossae, some members failed to appreciate the person and work of Christ, turning the Gospel into a new law, Col. 2:3, 16. In Corinth, libertines arose who, abusing Christian freedom, refused to be bound by any rules, 1 Cor. 6:12. In his first letter, the Apostle John battles against false doctrines that deny the incarnation of Christ and thereby misunderstand the truth of His human nature, 1 John 2:18, 4:1, 5:5.

This struggle continued into the post-apostolic age; the errors of the second century grew in variety, strength, and spread. There were those who believed in the true human nature of Christ, His supernatural birth, resurrection, and ascension, yet saw the divine

only as an extraordinary measure of the gifts and powers of the Spirit, bestowed upon Him by God at His birth or baptism, enabling Him for His religious and moral work. Followers of this view, influenced by the deistic Jewish concept of the relationship between God and the world, could not conceive of a more intimate relationship between God and man than a mere communication of gifts; thus, Jesus was a richly gifted man, a religious genius, but in their view, He remained merely a human.

However, others, nurtured in the philosophies of paganism and more inclined to polytheistic concepts, found it plausible to conceive of Christ as one of the most exalted, perhaps the supreme of all divine beings, according to His inner essence. Yet, they could not accept that such a divine, pure being could have assumed a human, material, fleshly nature. Thus, they denied the true humanity of Christ, asserting that He merely appeared on earth in a phantom form, similar to how the angels of the Old Testament had occasionally manifested. These inclinations persist to this day; at times, the divinity is sacrificed for the sake of humanity, while at other times, the divinity is preserved at the expense of humanity. There are always extremes, those who forsake the idea for the fact, or the fact for the idea; they fail to recognize the unity and harmony of the two.

From its inception, the Christian Church stood on a different foundation, professing in the person of Christ the most intimate and profound, and therefore entirely unique, union of God and man. Early interpreters of the Church sometimes expressed themselves in a clumsy manner; they first had to wrestle for a somewhat clear understanding of the matter and then strive to articulate this

understanding clearly. Yet, the congregation did not waver from its foundation; it avoided the extremes and steadfastly adhered to the apostolic teaching concerning the person of Christ.

When the same person partakes of both the divine nature and true humanity, it becomes necessary to establish His place and clearly define the relationship between Him, the Godhead, and the world. Here, too, errors arose on both sides.

If the unity of God, a foundational truth of Christianity, were to be interpreted such that the essence of the Godhead completely coincided with the person of the Father, then there would be no place in the Godhead for Christ; He would be outside the Godhead and thus a creature, for there is no gradual transition between Creator and creature. Consequently, as Arius asserted, it could be claimed that Christ preceded the entire world in time and rank, that He was the first creature and excelled them all in stature and honor. Yet, Christ would still be a creature; there was a time when He was not, and in that time, He was brought into being by the will of God, like all other creatures.

In attempting to maintain the unity of God and to accord Christ the place and honor due to Him, it was easy to fall into another error, named after its chief proponent, Sabellius. While Arius effectively identified the essence of the Godhead with the person of the Father, Sabellius merged all three persons into that essence. According to his doctrine, the three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—are not eternal entities within the Godhead's essence, but forms and appearances in which the one Godhead has successively revealed itself over time: under the Old Testament, in the earthly life of Christ, and after

Pentecost. Both errors have had adherents through the centuries: the Groninger Theology essentially revived Arius's teachings, while modern Theology initially followed Sabellius's path.

Finding the correct path amidst these errors required much prayer and struggle, as these errors were further modified and mingled in various ways. Yet, under the leadership of great men, distinguished by their piety and intellectual prowess, and thus rightly called Church Fathers, the Church remained faithful to the apostolic teachings. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Church proclaimed its faith in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of all things visible and invisible, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as the only-begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, through whom all things in heaven and earth were made, and in the Holy Spirit.

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Important as this outcome was, it by no means brought about an end to the *Iyristian Disputes. On the contrary, the Nicene Creed opened the way to new questions and different answers. For although the relationship of Christ to the essence of God and to the world and humanity was determined in the sense that He shared both in His person and was God and humanity in one person, the question could not be left unanswered as to how the relationship of these two natures in one person should be conceived. And on this point, too, various avenues were explored for an answer.

Nestorius decided that if there were two natures in Christ, there must also be two persons, two selves, in Him, who could only be united by a moral bond, as, for example, in marriage between a man and a woman. And Eutyches, starting from the same identification of nature and person, came to the conclusion that, if in Christus there was only one person, one I, then the two natures must have been so mixed and fused that only one divine nature emerged from that mixture. There the distinction between the natures was maintained at the expense of the unity of the person, here the unity of the person at the expense of the duality of the natures.

But after long, hard struggles, the church also overcame these disagreements. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451, it declared that the one person of Christ consisted of two natures, which existed unchanged and unmixed (against Eutyches), and undivided and undivided (against Nestorius), but had their unity in the one person. This decision, which was later supplemented and completed on a specific point at the Synod in Constantinople in 680, put an end to the centuries-long struggle over the person of Christ. The Church had preserved the essence of Christianity, the absolute character of the Christian religion, and with that also her own independence.

It goes without saying that this Nicene and Chalcedon creeds cannot claim infallibility. The terms used by the church and theology, such as person, nature, unity, etc., are not found in Scripture, but are the fruit of the reflection which Christianity gradually had to devote to the verbosity of salvation; it was forced to do so by the errors which arose from all sides, both within and outside the church. All the expressions and descriptions used in the Church's confession and in the language of theology do not serve to explain the mystery before

us, but to preserve it purely and unimpaired in the face of all those who weaken or deny it. The Incarnation of the Word is not a problem that we must or can solve, but it is a wonderful fact that we thankfully confess, as God Himself places it before our eyes in His Word.

But understood in this way, the confession, which the church established at Nicea and Chalcedori, is of great value. There have been many, and there are still many, who look down on the doctrine of the two natures in Christ and try to replace it with other words and terms. What does it matter, they say, whether we agree with this doctrine or not; what matters is that we possess the person of Christ Himself, who stands high behind and above this clumsy confession. But later on all these men will themselves also introduce words and terms in order to describe in more detail the person of Christ whom they accept. No one can escape this, for what we do not know, we do not have. If we believe that we possess Christ, that we have fellowship with Him, that we are His property, then that faith must also speak, and resort to words, terms, expressions and descriptions. But then, history has also shown that the expressions used by those who oppose the doctrine of two natures lag far behind those of the confession in value and force, and often even, in disregard of the fact that they are true, fall short of the latter.

Even when disregarding the fact of the Incarnation, as Scripture reveals it to us, they foster error.

Today, for instance, there are many who view the doctrine of the two natures as the pinnacle of absurdity and hold an entirely different perception of the person of Christ. They cannot deny that there is

something in Christ that sets Him apart from all men and elevates Him above all. Yet, this divinity they acknowledge in Christ, they do not consider as partaking of the Divine nature itself but as a divine gift or power bestowed upon Christ in a special measure. They assert that Christ has two aspects, a divine and a human side; or that He can be viewed from two perspectives; or that He lived in two successive states, of humiliation and exaltation; or that He, though merely a man, has, through His proclamation of God's love and the establishment of His kingdom, become the extraordinary and perfect instrument of God's revelation, thus acquiring for us the value of God. However, any impartial reader will sense that these representations do not merely modify ecclesiastical expressions but transform the person of Christ into something entirely different than what the Church has always professed based on the Apostolic witness concerning Him.

Divine gifts and powers are, in a certain sense, bestowed upon every human being, for all good and perfect gifts descend from the Father of Lights. The prophets and apostles were men subject to the same passions as we are. If, therefore, Christ received nothing more than extraordinary divine gifts and powers, He was no more than a man, and there can be no question of His becoming flesh. But then He could never, as others suggest, have been exalted to God through resurrection and ascension after His death or have acquired the significance of God for us. For between man and God, there is no gradual transition but a profound chasm. They stand in relation to each other as creature and Creator, and the creature can never become the Creator nor ever hold the value and significance for us, human beings, of the Creator, on Whom we are wholly dependent.

It is noteworthy, then, that after comparing all these new ideas about the person of Christ with the teachings of the Church and Scripture, some have come to the honest conclusion that ultimately, the creed of the Church still aligns best with the teachings of Scripture. The doctrine that Christ was God and Man in one person is not a product of pagan philosophy but is rooted in the Apostolic Testimony.

Herein lies the mystery of godliness, that He who, as the Word, was in the beginning with God and was God Himself, John 1:1, who was in the form of God and did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, Phil. 2:6, who was the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being, Heb. 1:3, became flesh in the fullness of time, John 1:14, was born of a woman, Gal. 4:4, humbled Himself, took on the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men, Phil. 2:7.

The first thing to note here is that Christ was and is God and remains eternal. He was not the Father nor the Spirit, but the Son, the Father's own, only begotten, beloved Son. And it was not the Divine essence, nor the Father and the Spirit, but the person of the Son who became man in the fullness of time. And when He became man and walked upon the earth as a man, even when He agonized in Gethsemane and hung on the cross, He remained the Son, in whom the Father had all His good pleasure. It is true that the apostle says that Christ, who was in the form of God and did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage, made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, Phil. 2:6-7.

But this is wrongly understood by some to mean that Christ, at His incarnation, in the state of humiliation, stripped Himself of His

divinity in whole or in part, and laid down His divine attributes, and then gradually took them back in the state of His exaltation. For how would this be possible, since God cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13), and since the unchangeable One in Himself is above all creation and corruption? No, even when He became what He was not, He remained what He was, the only-begotten of the Father. But the Apostle does say that Christ humbled Himself in this sense: that He, who was in the form of God, took on the form of a man and a servant. To put it humanly and simply, before His incarnation, Christ was not only equal to the Father in essence and virtues, but He also had the form of God. He radiated the glory of God and was the express image of His person. Whoever could have seen Him would have recognized Him immediately as God. But this changed at His conception; then He took on the form of a man, the figure of a servant. Whoever saw Him now could no longer see in Him the only Son of the Father, except through the eye of faith. He had laid aside His divine form and glory; He hid His divine nature behind the form of a servant; on earth, He appeared as one of us.

Secondly, the incarnation includes the fact that He, who remained what He was, became what He was not. He became this at a point in time, at a particular moment in history, at that hour when the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her (Luke 1:35). But that does not take away from the fact that this Incarnation was prepared centuries ago.

If one wants to understand it well, one can say that even the generation of the Son and the creation of the world prepared the incarnation of the Word. Not in the sense that the generation and creation already included the incarnation in principle. For the

Scriptures always connect the incarnation of the Son with the redemption from sin and the acquisition of salvation (Matt. 1:21, John 3:16, Rom. 8:3, Gal. 4:4-5). But generation and creation, especially the creation of man in God's image, both teach that God is communicable, in a complete sense within and in a relative sense outside the Divine being. If this were not the case, there would be no room for the incarnation of God. Whoever considers the incarnation of God impossible, in principle also denies the creation of the world and the generation of the Son; and whoever recognizes the latter, can no longer raise any principled objection to the former.

However, the Incarnation of the Word was directly prepared in the Revelation, which began immediately after the fall, continued in the history of Israel, and reached its highest point in the conception of Mary. The entire Old Testament is an approach of God to man, in order to make His home permanently in him in the fullness of time.

However, since the Son of God, who assumed human nature in Mary, already existed before that time and from eternity as the person of the Son, His conception in Mary's womb did not take place through the will of the flesh and the will of man, but through the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost. The Incarnation joins and completes the previous revelation, but it is not itself a product of nature or mankind. It is a work of God, a revelation, the highest revelation. Just as it was the Father who sent His Son into the world, and the Holy Spirit who came upon Mary, so it was the Son Himself who became a partaker of our flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14). He became flesh by His own will and by His own act. Therefore, at the time of His incarnation, He set aside the will of the flesh and the will

of man, and He prepared Himself a human nature in Mary's womb by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit.

This human nature did not exist beforehand. It was not brought by Christ out of heaven and carried into Mary from outside and led through her. The Anabaptists taught this, in order to be able to maintain the sinlessness of human nature in Christ; but in doing so they were following in the footsteps of the old Gnosticism and starting from the idea that flesh and matter are in themselves sinful. Yet the Scriptures uphold the goodness of creation and the divine origin of matter, even in the incarnation.

Christ assumed His human nature from Mary, as attested in Matt. 1:20, Luke 1:52, 2:7, and Gal. 4:4. He is, as far as the flesh is concerned, of David and of the fathers (Acts 2:30, Rom. 1:3, 9:5). Hence, it is also a true and perfect human nature, akin to us in all things, except sin (Heb. 2:14, 17, 4:15). Nothing human was foreign to Christ. The denial of the coming of Christ in the flesh is the principle of antichrist (1 John 2:22).

Just as the human nature of Christ did not exist before His conception in Mary, so it did not exist for a time before or after His birth, separate from Christ. The seed received in Mary, and the child born of her, did not first grow up independently into a human being, into a person, into an entity, and was then accepted by Christ and united with Himself. This error, too, was defended in the past and later, but Scripture knows nothing of such an idea. The Holy One, who was conceived in Mary's womb, was and bore from the beginning the name of God's Son (Luke 1:35). The Son, whom the Father sent, was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4). The Word did not take

upon Himself a man at a later date but became flesh (John 1:14). Thus, the Christian church rightly confessed that the person of the Son did not take upon Himself a human person, but a human nature; and that only in this way can the duality of natures be maintained in the unity of the person.

For - and this is the third point that merits our consideration - although Scripture states as clearly as possible that Christ was the Word and became flesh, that according to the flesh He is of the fathers but according to His essence He is God over all, to be praised for all eternity, yet in this Christ He always appears as one person to us. It is always the same "I" that speaks and acts out of Christ. The child that was born bears the name of Mighty God and Everlasting Father (Isa. 9:6). David's son is also David's Lord (Matt. 22:43). The same, who descended, also ascended far above all heavens (Eph. 4:10). He who according to the flesh is of the fathers, is according to His essence the God of all things, to be praised forever and ever (Rom. 9:5). Walking on the earth, He was and remains in heaven, in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18, 3:13). The fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him in bodily form (Col. 2:9).

In a word, to the same subject, to the same person, are ascribed Divine and human characteristics and works: eternity and time, omnipresence and limitedness, creative omnipotence and creaturely weakness. This being so, the union of the two natures in Christ cannot have been as that between two persons. For two persons can be intimately united by love, but they can never become one person, one "I". Love presupposes duality and brings about nothing but a mystical and ethical unity. If the union of the Son of God with humanity had this character, it would be different, at best in degree

but not in essence, from that which God establishes with His creatures, especially His children.

But Christ occupies a wholly unique place. He did not form a moral alliance with a human being and did not take an existing human being into His community, but He prepared Himself a human nature in Mary's womb, and became a human being and a servant. Just as a human being can pass from one state of life to another, can live successively or sometimes even simultaneously in two spheres of consciousness, so Christ, who was in the form of God, walked the earth in the form of a servant by way of analogy. The union that came about in His incarnation was not a moral one between two persons, but the union of two natures in the same person. Man and woman, however intimately united in marriage, remain two persons; God and man, although united by the most intimate love, remain distinct in nature. But in Christ, the man is the same subject as the Word, which in the beginning was with God and was God Himself, and the Word is the same subject that became flesh. Here is a completely unique, incomparable and incomprehensible union of God and man. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

Through this union, Christ, in the unity of His person, possesses all the qualities and powers that are peculiar to both natures. Some have tried to obtain a stronger and more intimate union of the two natures by teaching that the two natures were at once fused into one divine nature at the conception of the flesh, or that divine nature divested itself of its own attributes and descended into the narrowness of human nature, or that human nature lost its attributes and received

those of divine nature (either all or some, such as omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience and life-giving power) as its own. But the Reformed confession has always rejected and disputed such a fusion of both natures and such a communication of characteristics by one nature to the other. For such a fusion and communication amounted to confusion and mixing of the two natures and thus to a pantheistic denial of the distinction between God and man, between Creator and creature.

There exists a profound union between the two natures of Christ, each retaining its own properties and powers. This union is actualized within the unity of His person, forming a bond that is unparalleled in its depth and intimacy. Just as, in an analogy but not an exact comparison, the soul and body are united in a single human being while remaining distinct in essence and properties, so in Christ, the same person is the subject of both natures, with all their respective properties and powers. The distinction between soul and body forms the basis and condition for their intimate unity in one man; likewise, the distinction between the divine and human natures underpins their unity in the person of Christ. A fusion of these natures or a communication of their attributes to one another does not create a more intimate union but rather dissolves it into a confusion, impoverishing the fullness that resides in Christ. Such actions either diminish the divine or human nature, or both, thereby weakening the scriptural declaration that the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Him (Col. 2:9). The true fullness remains only if both natures remain distinct, communicating their qualities not to each other but to the one person, serving Him. It is always the same rich Christ who, in His humiliation and exaltation, has the qualities and powers of both natures at His disposal, thus accomplishing those

mediatorial works which, being distinct from the works of God and man, hold their unique place in the history of the world.

This doctrine of the two natures has the great merit of allowing everything that Scripture says about the person of Christ to be fully appreciated. On one hand, He is and remains the only and eternal Son of God, who, with the Father and the Spirit, created, sustains, and governs all things (John 1:3, Col. 1:15-16, Heb. 1:2), and thus may rightfully be the object of our worship. He was already this in the days of the apostles (John 14:13, Acts 7:59, 9:13, 22:16, Rom. 10:12-13, Phil. 2:9, Heb. 1:6), just as He was then and is now the object of the faith and confidence of all His disciples (John 14:1, 17:3, Rom. 14:9, 2 Cor. 5:15, Eph. 3:12, 5:23, Col. 1:27). He cannot and must not be both if He is not truly God, for it is written, "The Lord thy God shalt thou worship, and Him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:10). The basis for the religious worship and adoration of Christ lies in His divine nature; denying this while maintaining such worship constitutes idolatry. The divinity of Christ is not a speculative doctrine but is of utmost importance for the life of the church.

On the other hand, Christ became a true and complete human being, like us in all things except sin. He was an infant, a child, a youth, and a man like us, increasing in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and man. This was not mere appearance but full reality. In Christ, there was a gradual development, a steady progress in bodily growth, in mental powers, and in favor with God and man. The gifts of the Spirit were not all given to Him at once but were bestowed in increasing measure. There were things He had to learn, which He did not initially know (Mark 13:32, Acts 1:7). Though He possessed an inherent inability to sin due to His weak human nature, He was still

capable of being tempted, suffering, and dying. While on earth, He was not in heaven according to His human nature, thus living by faith and not by sight. He fought and suffered, continually clinging to the Word and promise of God. In this manner, He learned obedience from what He suffered, continually establishing Himself in obedience, thereby sanctifying Himself (John 17:19, Heb. 5:8-9). Simultaneously, He left us an example and became the cause of eternal salvation for all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the testimony of Christ in the Gospels and the apostolic preaching confirm His identity as the Son of God?

- Reflect on the ways Jesus' self-proclamation and the apostles' witness affirm His divine nature and messianic role.

2. What role does the Holy Spirit play in enabling individuals to confess Jesus as Lord?

- Consider the necessity of the Holy Spirit's work in transforming human hearts to acknowledge and believe in Jesus as the Christ.

3. How does the historical narrative of Jesus' life in the Gospels support the claim that He is both fully divine and fully human?

- Reflect on the significance of the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection in understanding His dual nature.

4. In what ways do the apostles emphasize both the historical facts and the spiritual significance of Jesus' life and work?

- Discuss how the apostles balance the historical reality of Jesus' life with the theological implications for salvation.

5. Why is it important to maintain the unity and distinction of Jesus' divine and human natures in Christian theology?

- Reflect on the dangers of either conflating or separating Jesus' two natures and the importance of holding to the orthodox teaching.

6. How do the titles "Lord," "Christ," and "Son of God" used in the New Testament highlight different aspects of Jesus' identity and mission?

- Consider the implications of each title for understanding who Jesus is and what He accomplished.

7. What does the New Testament teaching about Jesus' exaltation after His resurrection reveal about His divine authority and lordship?

- Reflect on how Jesus' resurrection and ascension affirm His role as Lord and Christ, and the significance of His current reign.

8. How do the apostles address and refute early heresies that denied either Jesus' humanity or divinity?

- Discuss the importance of the apostles' teachings in preserving the true doctrine of Christ against early church heresies.

9. What does the incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) teach us about the relationship between God and humanity?

- Reflect on the theological significance of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us, and how this impacts our understanding of redemption.

10. How can believers today find assurance and hope in the truth that Jesus is both fully God and fully man?

- Consider the practical and devotional implications of Jesus' dual nature for your faith and daily walk with Him.

17. The Work of Christ in His Humiliation

The Incarnation marks the outset and initiation of Christ's earthly ministry, yet it is neither the entirety nor the core of His work. It is prudent to rightly conceive and lucidly understand this in light of those who contend that the full reconciliation and union of God and man was consummated through the assumption of human nature. Proceeding from the notion that religion constitutes such a communion between God and man, wherein both are necessary and complementary, they assert that this communion, disrupted by sin or unattainable at a lower, carnal level, was first embodied and realized historically in Christ. Thus, the singularity of Christianity resides in the fulfillment of the religious ideal, implanted as a disposition and seed within human nature, in the person of Christ.

Indeed, it is a profound honor for humanity that the only begotten Son, who was in the form of God and with the Father, assumed the form of a servant. Christ thus shares in our humanity; He is of the same flesh and blood, and with us, He possesses a common soul and body, mind and will, emotions and sensations. In this natural sense, Christ is our brother, flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone. Yet this natural (physical) communion, significant as it is, must not be equated or conflated with the spiritual and moral communion. Amongst men, it is evident and frequent that kin and blood relatives may be spiritually estranged and sharply opposed to one another. Christ Himself declared that His coming would set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and that a man's foes would be those of his household (Matt 10:35, 36). Thus, natural descent does not determine spiritual kinship; the communion of blood and the communion of souls are often worlds apart.

Had Jesus done nothing more than take on human nature and proclaim the unity of God and man, it would be utterly incomprehensible how we could thereby enter into spiritual fellowship with Him and be reconciled to God. On the contrary, by assuming a sinless human nature and living in unbroken communion with God, He would have set Himself apart from us, deeply impressing upon us our own powerlessness, for we, as frail, sinful creatures, could never emulate His exalted example. Hence, the Incarnation of the Son of God, in itself, cannot constitute the act of reconciliation and redemption; it is the commencement, the groundwork, and the prelude, but not the act itself.

Moreover, had the Incarnation alone effected the reconciliation and union of God and man, there would have been no necessity for the life and, particularly, the death of Jesus. It would have sufficed that He, whether through conception and birth or otherwise, assumed human nature, sojourned on earth for a brief or extended period, and then ascended to heaven. In such a scenario, the comprehensive and profound humiliation of Christ would have been rendered superfluous.

However, the Holy Scriptures instruct us otherwise. They declare that the Son of God not only assumed human nature, being like us in all things except sin, but also took on the form of a servant, humbling Himself and becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:7-8). It was fitting for Him to fulfill all righteousness according to the law (Matt. 3:15) and to be perfected through suffering (Heb. 2:10). The Scriptures foretell that the Christ must suffer and rise again on the third day (Luke 24:46; 1 Cor. 15:3-4). The Father sent Him to accomplish His work on earth (John 4:34), and even commanded Him to lay down His life and take it up again (John 10:18). Thus, all that befell Christ was the fulfillment of what God's hand and counsel had foreordained (Acts 2:23; 4:28). Only upon the cross could Christ declare that all was accomplished and that He had completed the work given to Him by the Father (John 17:4; 19:30). While the Gospels provide a relatively brief account of Jesus' life, they elaborate extensively on His passion and death. Similarly, the apostolic preaching seldom refers to Jesus' conception and birth but consistently emphasizes the Cross, the death, and the blood of Christ. We are reconciled to God not by His birth, but by the death of His Son (Rom. 5:10).

Through this scriptural lens, the entirety of Christ's life takes on unparalleled significance and immeasurable value. It is a single, perfect work commissioned by the Father. Though it can be viewed from various angles and perspectives, we must always remember it as a unified work, encompassing His entire life from conception to the death on the cross. Just as Christ's person is one despite the diversity of His natures, so too is His work singular; it is the supreme work of God on earth. Indeed, it is interconnected with the eternal counsel and foreknowledge of God, His revelation to Israel, and His governance of the nations. It extends forward into the ongoing work that Christ continues to perform today in His exalted state. This work, centered in time on this earth, originates from eternity, is rooted in eternity, and extends into eternity.

From antiquity, this singular work of Christ has been encapsulated in the doctrine of the threefold office, and it is particularly due to Calvin that this schema has gained widespread acceptance in the doctrine of faith concerning Christ's work. Nonetheless, objections have been raised periodically, including the contention that the three offices are indistinguishable in the life of Jesus and that their functions are interwoven. This objection holds against a misinterpretation of the three offices but not against their proper understanding.

If Jesus had intended the three offices of prophet, priest, and king to be exercised separately, or temporarily one after the other, such a division and separation in the work of Christ would indeed be impossible to carry out. It is true that sometimes one ministry is more prominent than the other, so that, for example, His public preaching is more reminiscent of the prophetic, His final suffering and death more of the priestly, and His exaltation at the right hand

of the Father more of the royal; but essentially Jesus was always and everywhere active in His three ministries simultaneously. When He spoke, He proclaimed God's words as a prophet, but in doing so He also demonstrated His priestly mercy and His royal power, for through His word He healed the sick, forgave sins, calmed the storm; He was the King of truth. His miracles were signs of his divine mission and of the truth of his word, but at the same time they were also revelations of his compassion on all kinds of wretched people and of his rule over sickness and death and the violence of Satan. His death was a seal of his life, but also a sacrifice of perfect obedience and a willing act of power to give up life. In a word, his whole appearance, word and work always carries a prophetic, priestly and royal character at the same time.

But having put this in the foreground, it remains of the utmost importance to look at the person and work of Christ from the point of view of the three offices. There are advantages to this which would otherwise be lost.**

If Christ had intended the three offices of prophet, priest, and king to be exercised separately or in succession, such a division in His work would indeed be untenable. It is true that at times one office appears more prominent—His public preaching resonates with the prophetic, His final suffering and death reflect the priestly, and His exaltation at the right hand of the Father manifests the royal. Yet, fundamentally, Christ was perpetually and ubiquitously active in His threefold office. When He spoke, He proclaimed the words of God as a prophet, yet He also displayed His priestly compassion and kingly authority, for by His word He healed the sick, forgave sins, and calmed the tempest; He was indeed the King of truth. His miracles attested to

His divine mission and the veracity of His word, yet simultaneously revealed His mercy toward the afflicted and His dominion over sickness, death, and Satan's tyranny. His death was the culmination of His life, a sacrifice of perfect obedience, and a sovereign act of surrendering His life. In essence, His entire presence, speech, and deeds consistently embodied the prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices concurrently.

Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance to consider the person and work of Christ through the lens of these three offices. This perspective yields several benefits that might otherwise be overlooked.

First, this approach illuminates that Christ's advent and entire earthly life were the execution of a ministry entrusted to Him by the Father. With Christ, we cannot speak of a vocation, a craft, or even a moral profession of His own choosing.

According to the Holy Scriptures, He was appointed to an office. An office, unlike a craft or profession, cannot be self-selected but must be conferred by a higher authority. Though He differs from Moses, who served as a faithful servant, Christ, as the Son over His own house, was faithful in all things to the Father (Heb. 3:5-6). He was faithful to the One who appointed Him as Apostle and High Priest of our confession (Heb. 3:2). Christ did not assume the honor of becoming a high priest Himself but was glorified by God, who declared, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee" (Heb. 5:5). Jesus continually emphasized that the Father sent Him, that His sustenance was to do the Father's will, that He acted under the Father's command in all things, and that He completed the Father's

work on earth (John 4:34; 5:20, 30; 6:38; 7:16; 8:28; 10:18; 12:49-50; 14:10, 24; 17:4).

This appointment to His ministry predates His incarnation. Scripture teaches that Christ was with God and was God from the beginning. Furthermore, in Hebrews 10:5-7, it is explicitly stated that when He came into the world, He said, “Sacrifices and offerings You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me; behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.” Thus, His coming into the world and His incarnation were already part of executing the work commissioned by the Father. This commission did not originate in time with the incarnation but was established in eternity.

Thus, it is written elsewhere that Christ was foreknown before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20), that election and grace were bestowed upon us in Christ Jesus before the ages (Eph. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:9), and that the book of life, which has been before God from the foundation of the world, belongs to the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 13:8; 17:8). The conception of Christ's work as the exercise of a ministry links that work to God's eternal counsel. He bears the name of Messiah, Christ, Anointed One, because He was predestined by the Father from eternity and anointed by Him with the Holy Spirit in time.

Secondly, the three offices conferred upon Christ hark back to man's original calling and destiny. It is by no means arbitrary or accidental that Christ was appointed to these precise offices of Prophet, Priest, and King, and no others; this is rooted in God's intention for humanity and, therefore, in human nature itself. Adam was created in the image of God, in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness,

that he might as a prophet declare the words of God, as a king rule justly over all creation, and as a priest consecrate himself and all his possessions to God as a pleasing sacrifice. He was endowed with a head to know, a hand to rule, and a heart to encompass all in love. The unfolding of the image of God, the harmonious development of all his gifts and powers, and the exercise of the three offices of prophet, priest, and king, comprised man's destiny. Yet mankind has trampled upon this calling. Therefore, Christ came to earth to reveal once more the true image of humanity and fulfill its destiny. The doctrine of the three offices establishes a fixed connection between nature and grace, creation and re-creation, Adam and Christ. The first Adam is the type, preparation, and prophecy of the last Adam, who is the image and fulfillment of the original design.

Thirdly, the doctrine of Christ's threefold office is intricately linked to Old Testament revelation. As humanity, fallen in Adam, strayed further from its purpose, God chose a peculiar people to be His own. To Israel, He assigned a prophetic, priestly, and royal mission; they were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation unto the Lord (Ex. 19:6). This mission, in a special sense, was vested in those individuals whom God called to serve as prophets, priests, and kings within Israel. While Israel, as a whole, could be referred to as the Lord's anointed, this designation particularly applied to the prophets, priests, and kings (Ps. 105:15; Ex. 28:41; 1 Sam. 2:10). Yet, all these individuals were sinners, unable to fulfill their offices perfectly; they, along with the people, looked forward to another who would simultaneously be prophet, priest, and king, the uniquely anointed One of the Lord (Isa. 61:1). Christ is the fulfillment of all Old Testament revelation, the counterpart of Israel and all its

prophets, priests, and kings. In and through them, He testifies of Himself and prepares for His coming (1 Pet. 1:11).

Finally, only when Christ's work is considered under the rubric of His three offices does it achieve its full depth. Throughout Christian history, there have been those who, like rationalists, saw in Him only a prophet, or mystics who focused solely on His priestly sufferings, or chiliasts who recognized only His kingship. Yet we need a Christ who embodies all three offices. We require a prophet to reveal God to us, a priest to reconcile us to God, and a king to rule and preserve us in the name of God. The entire image of God must be restored in man; not only knowledge but also holiness and righteousness. The whole person must be saved—soul and body, head and heart and hand. We need a Saviour who redeems us wholly and fully, realizing our original purpose in us. Christ, as Prophet, Priest, and King, renews us as prophets, kings, and priests unto God and His Father (Rev. 1:6; 22:4).

Although anointed from eternity and prefiguring His mediatorial role in the covenant of grace during the Old Testament era, Christ did not fully and truly assume the offices of prophet, priest, and king until He entered the world, declaring, "Behold, I come to do Your will, O God." It was then that He took on human nature, enabling Him to fulfill His mediatorial work. He had to be human to reveal God's name to mankind, to suffer and die on the Cross, and to bear witness to the truth as the King of Truth.

His reception of the Holy Spirit was, therefore, an initial qualification of Christ's human nature for the task to which He was later called. In recent times, the confession that Christ was conceived

by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary has faced numerous objections. Many have attempted to dismiss the accounts of Matthew and Luke as Jewish or Pagan interpolations into the original Gospel. However, these challenges have only served to confirm and clarify the truth of this history. It does not derive from Judaism or Paganism but rests on the testimony of Joseph and Mary, as evident from the language in Matthew and Luke. This miraculous conception was initially known only to Joseph and Mary, and perhaps a few trusted individuals. Its very nature did not lend itself to public disclosure.

Only later, when Christ's words and deeds, particularly His resurrection, revealed His true identity, did Mary share the secret of Jesus' conception with the disciples. Even then, the reception of the Holy Spirit was not prominently featured in apostolic preaching. It is perhaps alluded to in Mark 6:4, John 1:13 (7:41-42), Romans 1:3-4, 9:5, Philippians 2:7, and Galatians 4:4, but explicitly mentioned only in Matthew and Luke. Nevertheless, it remains an essential element of the Gospel, consistent with all Scriptural teachings concerning the person of Christ. He was the only-begotten Son, who, as the Word, was with God from the beginning and was God Himself. He actively participated in His conception, and through the Holy Spirit, prepared a true and complete human nature in Mary's womb. The prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, 9:5, fulfilled in Matthew 1:23, declared that a virgin would conceive and bear a son named Immanuel, who would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Through this reception of the Holy Spirit, Christ's human nature was entirely free from sin from the beginning. Since the Son of God

existed as a person and did not unite Himself with an existing human but prepared His human nature through the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, He was not subject to the covenant of works, bore no inherited debt, and was not tainted by sin. The Roman doctrine that Mary was conceived immaculately and lived sinlessly is unnecessary, unfounded, and contrary to Scripture, as seen in John 2:4, Mark 3:31, and Luke 11:28. Mary enjoyed a high honor, greater than that given to prophets or apostles; she is the most blessed among women and the mother of the Lord (Luke 1:42-43). Yet, she was like all other humans, and the Holy One born of her (Luke 1:35) owed His purity not to Mary's nature but to the creative and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in her womb.

Although the human nature which Christ took from Mary was holy, it was nonetheless frail. Scripture emphasizes this by stating that He became flesh, not merely man (John 1:14), that He was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3), that He assumed the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), and that He was made like unto us in all things, sin excepted (Heb. 2:17; 4:15). Christ had to accept such a weak human nature to be tempted, to learn obedience through suffering, to engage in battle and be sanctified therein, to have compassion on our infirmities, and to be a merciful and faithful High Priest; in short, to suffer and die. While in this respect He resembled Adam before the fall, being without sin, He differed greatly in other respects. Adam was created instantaneously, but Christ was conceived in Mary’s womb and born as a helpless child. Adam arrived in a world prepared for him, while Christ came to an unprepared earth, with no room for Him in the inn. Adam came to rule and subdue the earth; Christ came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

The incarnation of the Son of God was not only an act of humble condescension, which remains even in His exaltation, but also an act of profound humiliation. This humiliation began with His conception and continued throughout His life unto death and the grave. Christ was not a human hero with the motto 'Excelsior,' overcoming all obstacles to finally stand at the pinnacle of fame; rather, He descended ever deeper into our human condition. He descended in stages—from conception and birth, through a hidden and humble life in Nazareth, to baptism and temptation, opposition, denial, and persecution, suffering in Gethsemane, condemnation by Caiaphas and Pilate, crucifixion, death, and burial. He moved ever farther from the Father's house and ever closer to us in the fellowship of our sin and death until, in the deepest depths, He uttered His anguished cry of abandonment by God, but then could also proclaim in victory: "It is finished!"

This humiliation encompasses, in addition to His conception and birth, the humble circumstances of His birth in a stable in Bethlehem, the persecution by Herod, the flight into Egypt with His parents, and the quiet, hidden life in Nazareth during His childhood and youth. The Gospels record little of this because they do not aim to write a biography of Jesus in the modern sense but to reveal Him as the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the Only Begotten of the Father. In line with this purpose, the brief accounts of Jesus' youth are sufficient.

Matthew records that Jesus, after returning from Egypt, lived with His parents in Nazareth of Galilee (Matt. 2:23). His mother had resided there before (Luke 1:26), and there Jesus spent His life until His public ministry among Israel (Luke 2:39, 51; Mark 1:9). Only

after He was rejected by His fellow townsmen in the synagogue did He settle in Capernaum (Luke 4:28ff; Matt. 4:13).

Matthew saw in this a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Matt. 2:23), not a specific statement, for Nazareth and Nazarene are not mentioned in the Old Testament, but rather the overall prophetic narrative that portrays the Christ as a humble and holy man, a man of God. The prophecy indicated that the Christ would have a lowly origin (Isa. 11:1) and that light would rise upon the nations in the darkness of Galilee of the Gentiles (Isa. 8:23; 9:1).

From the quiet life that Jesus led for years in Nazareth, we discern that He was a child submissive to His parents, as it is written: "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51). As a child, He grew in both physical and intellectual stature, increasing in wisdom and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:40, 52). At the age of twelve, He journeyed with His parents to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover (Luke 2:41ff). On the Sabbath, it was His custom to attend the synagogue (Luke 4:16), and during the week, He likely assisted His father in his trade, for He was later referred to as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). His subsequent life illuminates these quiet years, revealing that He could read and write, was steeped in the Old Testament, understood the doctrines of the Pharisees and Sadducees, recognized the moral needs of the people, was acquainted with civil and social life, loved nature, and often sought solitude to commune with God. These seemingly minor details indicate that during His hidden years, Jesus was preparing Himself for the task that lay ahead. Gradually, He became increasingly aware of His identity and mission. His divine Sonship and Messianic purpose, with all its implications and duties, became

clearer to Him. Finally, at the age of thirty, the appointed day came for Him to be revealed to Israel (John 1:31).

The occasion for His public appearance was the preaching of John the Baptist in the desert of Judea. John, sent by God, declared to Israel that despite their lineage from Abraham, their circumcision, and their self-righteousness, they were guilty and needed the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Many from Jerusalem, Judea, and the surrounding regions came to John, confessing their sins and being baptized by him. Jesus, too, left Galilee and came to John in Judea to be baptized, despite John's initial reluctance, for John recognized Jesus as the Messiah, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire and had no need of baptism for His own sake. Jesus insisted, saying it was necessary to fulfill all righteousness.

Jesus did not seek baptism because He needed repentance and forgiveness, nor did He confess sins as others did. He recognized John as a prophet, indeed more than a prophet, His own forerunner (Matt. 11:7-14), and viewed John's baptism as a divine ordinance, not a human invention (Mark 11:30). The baptism of John, rooted in God's will, was a righteous act that Jesus was compelled to fulfill. By submitting to this baptism, Jesus wholly conformed to His Father's will and identified Himself intimately with the people, who received repentance and forgiveness through baptism. For Jesus, John's baptism signified a solemn commitment to the entire will of the Father, a public entrance into fellowship with His people, and a royal inauguration into His Messianic mission.

Thus, baptism held a unique significance for Him. It was not a sign and seal of personal conversion and forgiveness but an endowment with the Holy Spirit and fire, which He alone could bestow. Some later sects erroneously believed that the divine nature or power united with Jesus at His baptism, overlooking the incarnation of the Word at conception. Nevertheless, Jesus' baptism marked His full qualification for ministry. As He emerged from the water, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended upon Him, and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17). Though few comprehended it, the day of Jesus' baptism was the day of His revelation to Israel and the commencement of His public ministry as the Messiah.

Yet, before commencing this sacred ministry, Christ withdrew into the solitude of the wilderness for a period of forty days. There He encountered no one, but was surrounded solely by the silent wilderness and wild beasts, engaging Himself in fasting, contemplation, and prayer (Mark 1:13; Luke 4:2). The essence of His contemplation is partially revealed through the narrative of His temptation. The temptation by Satan, occurring at the conclusion of the forty days and detailed by Matthew and Mark, represents a significant moment in the spiritual battle Jesus endured, but it was not the sole instance. Luke explicitly states that He was tempted by the devil throughout the entire forty days (Luke 4:2), and that the devil, after completing every temptation, departed from Him for a season. Jesus, in all things, was tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15).

The temptation in the wilderness encapsulated the strategy for His public ministry. Having been baptized, He was now full of the Holy

Spirit (Luke 4:1), and it was the Spirit who led Him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1). Moreover, Jesus was fully aware of His identity as the Son of God, the Messiah, endowed with divine authority. Yet, the critical question was how He would wield that power. Would He employ it to selfishly satisfy His own needs, to win over the people through spectacular miracles, or by yielding to worldly power to secure an earthly kingdom? The tempter tested Him on these three fronts. But Jesus withstood every temptation; He clung to the Word of God, rebutted Satan's enticements, submitted to the will and path of the Father, affirmed His obedience, and sanctified Himself as an offering to God. Thus, He not only gained experiential knowledge of temptation, enabling Him to empathize with our frailties, but because He stood firm where Adam had fallen, He is also able to assist those who are being tempted (Heb. 2:18; 4:15).

In this manner, Jesus was prepared for and initiated into His public ministry. During the initial phase, His prophetic office prominently emerged. Soon after He began His public ministry, the people recognized Him not merely as a teacher (rabbi, master) but also as a prophet. Following the raising of the young man in Nain, the crowd exclaimed, "A great prophet has arisen among us!" and "God has visited His people!" (Luke 7:16). This perception persisted until the end of His life; many acknowledged Him as a prophet due to His words and miracles, although they remained ignorant of His priestly and kingly roles, and some even resisted these aspects. To this day, many honor Him as a prophet, one who reveals divine truths more profoundly than others. While the recognition of Christ as Priest and King is contested and dismissed as an archaic Jewish notion, He is

readily acknowledged as a prophet, a dignity even Muhammad accords Him in the Koran.

But Jesus Himself sought to be recognized as a prophet in a higher and more profound sense than many Jews perceived Him. After His baptism by John and temptation in the wilderness, He returned to Galilee and soon entered the synagogue at Nazareth. There, He applied to Himself the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted." He did not present Himself as merely another prophet, but as one far above all others; while the former prophets were servants, He is the Son (Matt. 21:37). He is the only Master (Matt. 23:8, 10; John 13:13-14), and He surpasses them all, exalted high above them. His calling and anointing were established from eternity; His consecration and empowerment began with the miraculous reception of the Holy Spirit. At His baptism, He received the Spirit without measure and was declared by a voice from heaven as the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. He did not receive sporadic revelations; He Himself is the full revelation of God—the Word who was with God, who was God, and who became flesh. He dwelt continually in the bosom of the Father, speaking and acting only as commanded by Him. Therefore, He did not deliver a partial revelation to be completed by others but is the complete and final revelation of God, fulfilling and consummating all prior prophecy. In former times, God spoke to the fathers through the prophets in various ways, but in these last days, He has spoken to us through His Son (Heb. 1:1). Indeed, the prophecy given to the fathers in the old days owes its existence to Him; it was the Spirit of Christ testifying in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11), and His testimony was about Christ (Rev. 19:10).

The preaching of Christ was, in the deepest sense, self-preaching—a proclamation of His own person and work. When He began His ministry, He echoed John and the Old Testament prophets by saying, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Yet, while the former prophets and John the Baptist foresaw the kingdom as future (Matt. 11:10-11), with Christ, the time was fulfilled, and in His person, the kingdom had come from heaven to earth. God is the King and Father of this kingdom (Matt. 5:16, 35, 45), and the Father has appointed it to Christ, to bestow upon His disciples according to His good pleasure (Matt. 11:27; Luke 12:32; 22:29).

In His teaching, Christ elucidated the origin and nature of this kingdom, the path leading to it, the blessings it contains, its gradual development, and its ultimate fulfillment. He did not employ philosophical reasoning or scholarly discourse but used proverbs and parables, drawing His imagery from natural phenomena and daily life. He spoke to the crowds in such vivid and relatable terms that they could comprehend His message (Mark 4:33). If many did not understand and resisted, it was evidence of their hardened hearts and the Father's sovereign will, who conceals the mysteries of the kingdom from the wise and reveals them to the childlike (Matt. 11:27; 13:13-15). Yet, His teachings were intrinsically simple and clear, even while addressing the profoundest mysteries of the kingdom of God. For He Himself, in His person, is the Son and heir, the dispenser and revealer of the kingdom. Jesus manifested the Father to us through His presence, His words, and His works (John 1:18; 19:6). Whoever has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9).

The word which Christ proclaimed was, in essence, no different from that which had been revealed in the days of the Old Testament. It encompassed both law and gospel; yet Jesus was not a new lawgiver, augmenting or correcting the law of God as given in the Old Testament. The gospel He proclaimed was not a novel revelation but that which had been disclosed by God since the dawn of time. Jesus did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). He accomplished this by purging them of all erroneous interpretations and human accretions, bringing them to their full realization in His person and work. Thus, Christ holds a unique position in relation to the Law and the Gospel, distinct from Moses and the prophets. For while the Law was given through Moses, and the Gospel was announced by the prophets, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Moses bore the law on tablets of stone, and his role could have been fulfilled by another in due course. Similarly, the prophets were heralds of the Gospel but were not the Gospel itself. Christ, however, embodied the law within Himself, fulfilling God's will perfectly and without flaw. He was not merely a proclaimer of the Gospel; He was the Gospel incarnate, the greatest gift God has bestowed upon the world. Grace and truth were manifested through Him, inseparable from His person.

The words of Jesus were accompanied and validated by His works. These also were integral to His mission, fulfilling the will of the Father (John 4:34). He performed them not of His own initiative, but the Father had entrusted all things to Him (Matt. 11:27; John 3:35). The Son did only what He saw the Father doing (John 5:19); it was the Father dwelling in Him who carried out these works (John 14:10). As they were divine in origin, so they bore a divine character —not only because they were miracles that transcended the natural

order, but also because they were unique and unmatched by any other. While others act according to their own will, Jesus never sought His own pleasure but, denying His own will, fulfilled the will of the Father (Rom. 15:3). Among His works, miracles occupy a significant place. On the one hand, they are signs and proofs of His divine mission and authority (John 2:11; 3:2; 4:54; 7:31; 9:16; 10:37; 11:4), and on the other hand, they always aim at the physical and spiritual salvation of humanity. The miracles of Christ are predominantly acts of healing and redemption, thus part of His priestly ministry.

This is evident from the self-restraint Christ exercised in performing miracles. In the wilderness, He resisted Satan's temptation to use His divine power for personal benefit. Throughout His life, He rejected similar temptations. In Gethsemane, He declared that He could call upon the Father to send more than twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:53), a principle that applied to His entire public ministry. He consistently refused to perform signs merely to satisfy popular curiosity (Matt. 12:38; 16:1; John 4:48). Often, He found His power constrained by the unbelief He encountered (Matt. 13:58). Moreover, He frequently enjoined those He healed to keep silent about their miracles (Mark 1:34, 44; 3:12). Jesus sought to avoid fueling the erroneous messianic expectations held by the people regarding His mission and works.

Furthermore, the works that Jesus performed are integral to His priestly ministry, for they manifest His profound compassion. We read repeatedly of His compassion in the Gospels (Matt. 9:36, 14:14, 15:32). Matthew sees in His healings a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases" (Matt.

8:17). Elsewhere, this prophecy is applied to the atoning death of Christ, by which He took away the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Pet. 2:24). Sin and sickness are intrinsically linked, and as the merciful High Priest, Christ has removed not only our sin but also the root of all our suffering. Through His various miracles—exorcising demons, healing the blind and deaf, restoring the lame and crippled, raising the dead, and exercising dominion over nature—He provides irrefutable proof that He can deliver us entirely from all our miseries. No guilt is too heavy, no sin too great, no suffering too profound for Him to remove by His priestly mercy and royal power.

The priestly nature of Christ's ministry is most evident in His final suffering and death. The giving of His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28) is the culmination of the service He rendered throughout His earthly life. As the Lamb of God, He bore the sin of the world continually (John 1:29). His humiliation began with the incarnation, continued through a life of obedience amid suffering, and was consummated in the death on the cross (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8). Christ was ordained by the Father not only as a prophet but also as a priest, and He fulfilled His priestly office throughout His life.

Notably, Christ is never explicitly called a priest in the New Testament outside of the Epistle to the Hebrews. While His life and death are often presented as a sacrifice, the term "priest" is reserved for this particular letter. This distinction is significant. Christ is indeed a priest, but He is a priest in a wholly different sense from those under the Old Covenant and the Mosaic Law. The Old Testament priests were solely priests, not prophets or kings. They served for a limited time and were succeeded by others, offering sacrifices of bulls and goats that could not take away sins. Christ,

however, descends from the tribe of Judah, and according to the Mosaic Law, He had no claim to the priesthood (Heb. 7:14).

According to the Epistle to the Hebrews, Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, not after the order of Aaron. This was foretold in Psalm 110, where the Messiah is declared a priest forever, who unites royal dignity with His priesthood. The Epistle to the Hebrews expounds on this, explaining that Christ, like Melchizedek, is a priest because He is also a king, entirely righteous and sinless. He is the King of righteousness and remains a priest forever, never replaced by another. He offers not the blood of animals but His own body and blood, securing perfect and eternal salvation for His people. Thus, He brings everlasting peace and is the King of peace (Heb. 7-10). The practical exhortation for Jewish Christians, facing the temptation to revert to their old ways, is to press forward. What the Old Testament priests symbolically and typically represented through their sacrifices and intercessions—granting the people access to God's presence—has been fully and eternally achieved by Christ. Through Him, a new and living way to eternal life has been opened, enabling Christians to approach the throne of grace with complete boldness and full assurance of faith.

Just as the priestly ministry is closely intertwined with the prophetic ministry, so too is the royal ministry of Christ intimately connected with His priestly office. One distinctive feature of Christ's priesthood is its union with His kingship, as prophesied in Psalm 110:4 and affirmed in Hebrews 7:17. Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests unto the Lord (Exod. 19:6); though the offices within Israel were distinct, prophecy foretold that the Messiah, the branch emerging from His own place to build the temple of the Lord, would bear the

royal majesty. He would sit and reign on His throne as a priest, ensuring perfect harmony and unanimous counsel between His priestly and kingly offices for the peace of His people (Zech. 6:13). Thus, the Messiah, embodying both the royal and priestly roles, would establish the perfect peace His people so desperately needed.

This fusion of the priestly and royal offices endows the Messiah's kingship with its unique character. He will arise from the house of David (2 Sam. 7:16) during a time of its decline (Mic. 5:1). He will be a righteous king, endowed with salvation by God, yet humble, symbolized by His riding on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zech. 9:9). As the Messiah eschews earthly grandeur and power, His kingdom will not be established by force of arms. On the contrary, the Lord will remove the chariots from Ephraim and the horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be cut off. The Messiah will speak peace to the nations, and His dominion will extend from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth (Zech. 9:10; Ps. 72).

This prophetic vision of the future Messiah finds its complete fulfillment in Christ. The New Testament affirms that He is of the house of David, thereby inheriting the right to David's throne in accordance with the laws of the Kingdom of Israel. Both genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 trace His lineage to David. The angel announced to Mary that her Son, called the Son of the Most High, would be given the throne of His father David and reign over the house of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32-33). Jesus is universally recognized as the Son of David (Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9; Rom. 1:3), and this Davidic descent is intertwined with the concept of His kingship and His right to a kingdom (Luke 23:42).

In His own consciousness, Jesus is indeed a king. He preaches about the kingdom of God and often refers to God as the King of that kingdom (Matt. 5:35; 18:23; 22:2). Yet, He distinguishes Himself as the Son of the King (Matt. 21:37), and also as King Himself (Matt. 25:31).

However, His kingship is understood in a different sense from that which the Jews of His time expected. Jesus never asserted His legitimate claims to David's throne before the Jewish authorities, King Herod, or the Roman Emperor. He resisted the temptation to achieve dominion over the world by worldly means (Matt. 4:8-10). When the multitudes, after the miraculous feeding, sought to make Him king by force, He withdrew to the solitude of the mountain for prayer (John 6:15; Matt. 14:23). Though He professed His royal authority, He manifested it not through dominating power like earthly rulers, but through serving and giving His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:25-28). His kingship was displayed in the authority with which He spoke, proclaimed the laws of the kingdom of heaven, subdued the people, commanded sickness and death to flee, and ultimately laid down His life on the cross, only to take it up again, thereby affirming His role as King and Judge of the living and the dead.

But the spiritual significance which Christ, in accordance with the prophecy of the Old Testament, attributes to His kingship, must not lead us to think that He was not actually a king and that He only bore this name metaphorically. Just as He is a priest not after the order of Aaron but after the order of Melchizedek, and thereby a superior priest to those of the Old Testament, so He is also, by virtue of being a different kind of king than the rulers of the nations, not a lesser but

a greater king. He is the true King, the ultimate King, and the kings of the earth are mere shadows and types of Him. He is the King of kings, the Prince of the kings of the earth, the King who reigns over all, both spiritually and physically, in heaven and on earth, to the ends of the earth and forever.

He never relinquishes His rightful claim to this perfect and eternal kingship, neither before God nor before men. Even during His earthly ministry, He never renounced His divine or human rights. He did not seek to obtain His kingship by force, but through perfect obedience to God. By doing so, He strengthened His claims. In His humiliation, He demonstrated Himself to be the Son of God and, therefore, the heir of all things.

To manifest His kingship in its true sense, He entered Jerusalem on the Sunday that begins Passion Week. At this point, there was no risk of misunderstanding the nature of His kingship. A life of humble obedience, in which He had rejected all earthly power by word and deed, lay behind Him; the enmity between Him and the people was at its peak; and within that same week, they would lay hands on Him and deliver Him to death. Whereas previously He had evaded attempts to make Him king, now He took the initiative in His royal entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1). Before His death, He needed to openly present Himself to the people as the Messiah, the Son of David, sent by God. In accordance with prophecy, He revealed Himself as a humble king, riding on the foal of a donkey. He was condemned by the Sanhedrin and Pilate for His Messianic claim, for His divine sonship and His Davidic kingship; He was indeed a King (Matt. 27:11). The inscription above His cross testified to this, despite the objections of the Jews (John 19:19-22).

The entirety of Jesus' life, in His prophetic, royal, and priestly activities, culminates in His death. Death is the culmination of His earthly mission; Jesus came to die. He was fully aware of this. At His first public appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth, He applied to Himself the prophecy concerning the suffering servant of the Lord (Luke 4:16ff), indicating that He understood He would be led like a lamb to the slaughter. He was the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). The temple of His body was to be destroyed and raised up again after three days (John 2:19). Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so, according to God's plan, the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross (John 3:14; cf. 12:32-33). He was the grain of wheat that had to fall into the earth and die to produce much fruit (John 12:24).

Thus, from the very outset of His public ministry, Jesus indicated that His death would be the culmination of His life through parables and figurative language. As that end drew nearer, He spoke more plainly and unmistakably. Particularly after Peter, representing all the disciples, confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, in a pivotal moment near Caesarea Philippi, He began to show them that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, be killed, and be raised on the third day (Matt. 16:21). The disciples failed to understand this and refused to accept it. Peter even took Him aside to rebuke Him, but Jesus perceived this as a temptation and sternly replied, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matt. 16:22-23). Christ's unwavering commitment to surrendering to death received divine confirmation a few days later on the Mount of Transfiguration; His journey to Jerusalem was in accordance with

the Law and the Prophets (Moses and Elijah) and the will of the Father. He remained the beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased, and the disciples were admonished not to rebuke Him, but to listen to Him with reverence and submission (Matt. 17:1-8).

Yet, this death was not actively sought by Jesus. He did not provoke the Pharisees and scribes to seize Him. Though He knew that His hour had come (John 12:23; 17:1), it was Judas who voluntarily betrayed Him, and the chief priests and Pharisees who apprehended Him, the members of the Sanhedrin who condemned Him, and Pontius Pilate who executed Him. God's counsel does not negate historical circumstances or human culpability. Rather, He was delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, yet the Jews took Him and crucified Him with the hands of lawless men (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

The death of Christ is central to Apostolic preaching, from the very beginning (Acts 2:23ff; 3:28; 2:23ff; 3:14ff; 4:10ff, etc.), and not only in Paul's epistles but in the teachings of all the apostles. Only after Christ's resurrection did the necessity and significance of His suffering and death become fully understood through the instruction of the Holy Spirit. That suffering and death fulfilled His prophetic role, testified to the truth of His teaching, and sealed His entire life. Under Pontius Pilate, He made the good confession (1 Tim. 6:13), and in His innocent and patient suffering, He left us an example to follow in His steps (1 Pet. 2:21). He is the faithful Witness (Rev. 1:5; 3:14), the Apostle and High Priest of our confession (Heb. 3:1), who initiates and perfects our faith (Heb. 12:2). Moreover, the death of Christ reveals His royal power; it was not a fate He merely suffered, but an act He willingly and voluntarily performed (John 10:17-18).

His crucifixion was an exaltation above the earth and a triumph over His enemies (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34), as it represented the utmost obedience to the Father's command (John 14:31).

However, we must not stop at this understanding of Christ's death according to Apostolic teaching. In His death, Jesus was not merely a witness and a guide, a martyr and a hero, a prophet and a king. Most significantly, He acted as a priest; His high priestly office is most prominently and clearly demonstrated in His death. According to the teachings of the entire Holy Scripture, His death was a voluntary sacrifice, offered by Him to the Father.

When the New Testament presents the death of Christ under the term "sacrifice," it does so in close connection with the Old Testament. Sacrifices have existed from ancient times; they appear with Cain and Abel, with Noah and the patriarchs, and are found among all peoples and in all religions. Generally speaking, their purpose is to secure or regain the favor and fellowship of the Godhead by offering a material gift, consisting of living or inanimate objects, which are destroyed in a ceremonial manner. The Lord also included these sacrifices in the legislation for His people Israel. But here they were assigned a different place and a modified meaning.

First, they were limited to the offering of cattle (oxen, sheep, lambs, goats, pigeons) and the fruits of the land (flour, oil, wine, incense, spices) and were to be brought only to Jehovah, the God of Israel. The offering of human beings, the drinking of blood, and mutilation of the body were forbidden (Gen. 22:11; Deut. 12:23; 14:1; 18:10). Similarly, all sacrifices to idols, to the dead, and to holy animals were contrary to God's will (Exod. 32:4ff; Num. 25:2ff; Hos. 11:2; Jer.

11:12; Ezek. 8:10; Ps. 106:28). Secondly, they were considered of lesser value than moral commandments; "obedience is better than sacrifice," and the Lord delights in "steadfast love, not sacrifice," and in "the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (1 Sam. 15:22; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6-8; Ps. 40:6-8; 50:7-14; 51:16-17; Prov. 21:3). Thirdly, the sacrifices served the promise, like the priesthood, the temple, the altar, and the entire legal dispensation. They did not establish the covenant of grace, for this rests solely on God's gracious election, but they served to maintain and confirm this covenant among Israel.

Since the whole nation of Israel was, by virtue of God's election and calling, a kingdom of priests (Exod. 19:6), and the priesthood was a subordinate and temporary institution, the sacrifices (especially burnt offerings, sin offerings, and trespass offerings) were ceremonial indications of how sins committed within the covenant could be atoned for, provided they were not committed with a raised hand but through error or ignorance (Lev. 4:22, 27; 5:15, 18; Num. 15:25ff; 35:11, 15; Josh. 20:3, 9). For deliberate sins that broke the covenant and incurred God's wrath, there was only an appeal to God's mercy, often through the intercession of individuals like Abraham (Gen. 18:23-33), Moses (Exod. 32:11-14; Num. 14:15-20), and Phinehas (Num. 25:11). For His name's sake, God would forgive these sins (Exod. 33:19; 34:6; Ps. 78:38; 79:8-9; Isa. 43:25; Ezek. 36:22-23; Mic. 7:18).

Through this whole system of sacrifices, God taught His people that the covenant of grace, with all its blessings, was due solely to His mercy. It originated and was grounded in His unmerited favor: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on

whom I will show mercy" (Exod. 33:19). Furthermore, through the ceremonial laws and institutions, the Lord made it clear that He could not grant the forgiveness of sins except through reconciliation. Sin inherently provokes God's wrath, rendering man guilty and unclean. Therefore, a sacrifice is necessary to appease God's wrath, remove guilt and impurity, and restore fellowship with God. For sins for which the law did not prescribe a specific sacrifice, atonement was left to God, who would forgive the sins by atoning for them Himself; forgiveness presupposes and includes atonement (Ps. 65:3; 78:38; 79:9; Prov. 16:6; Isa. 27:9; Jer. 18:23; Ezek. 16:63). Even for sins that could be atoned for by a prescribed offering, it was God who, through the sacrifice, priest, and altar, covered and took away the sins (Lev. 17:11; Num. 8:19). The entire service of atonement emanated from Him and was ordained by Him.

The blood of the sacrificial animal serves as the principal means of atonement. It represents the life of the creature, the vital essence, and was thus appointed by the Lord to make atonement for souls upon the altar (Lev. 17:11). However, for this blood to effect atonement, it had to be poured out in death through the slaughter of the sacrificial animal, which the sinner brought to the temple, laying his hands upon it. This act symbolized the transfer of guilt, followed by the priest sprinkling the blood around the altar (Ex. 29:15-16, 19-20). The laying on of hands, the slaughter, and the sprinkling of blood indicated how the life-blood became the means of atonement. When the blood thus covered and expiated sins, guilt was forgiven, impurity cleansed, and the covenantal fellowship with God restored. Priesthood and people, temple and altar, and all instruments of worship were consecrated to the Lord through the blood, thereby

sanctifying them so that the Lord might dwell among the children of Israel and be their God (Ex. 29:43-46).

Nevertheless, this entire sacrificial system was provisional, possessing only a shadow of the good things to come (Heb. 10:1). The tabernacle in the wilderness was but a figure of the true sanctuary (Heb. 8:5). The priests themselves were sinners who needed to make atonement not only for the people's sins but also for their own (Heb. 7:27; 9:7), and they were prevented by death from continuing in office (Heb. 7:23). The blood of bulls and goats could not truly take away sins or cleanse consciences (Heb. 9:9, 13; 10:4); hence, these sacrifices had to be repeated continually (Heb. 10:1). In sum, they were external, weak, and unprofitable, not perfect, and pointed forward to a better future (Heb. 7:18; 8:7). The faithful in Israel increasingly understood this and looked forward eagerly to the day when the Lord would establish a new covenant, effect true atonement Himself, and allow His people to enjoy fully the benefits of forgiveness and renewal (Jer. 31:33ff; 33:8; Ezek. 11:20; 36:25ff). This expectation finds its most beautiful expression in Isaiah, whose book of comfort begins with the proclamation that Jerusalem's struggle is over, her iniquity is pardoned, and she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins (Isa. 40:2). The prophecy then unfolds the vision of the suffering servant, who bears our sicknesses and sorrows, our transgressions and punishment, bringing us healing and peace (Isa. 53:2ff).

In harmony with the Old Testament, the New Testament regards Christ’s death as a sacrifice for our sins. Jesus declared that He had come to fulfill the law and the prophets and all God’s righteousness (Matt. 3:15). He identified Himself with the servant of the Lord in

Isaiah's prophecy, who was anointed with the Spirit to preach the Gospel to the poor (Luke 4:17ff). According to the Father's command, He came to lay down His life and take it up again, to give life to His sheep, and through His death, to prepare His flesh and blood as food and drink unto eternal life (John 2:19; 3:14).

His death is the true and perfect sacrifice, fulfilling all the sacrifices of the Old Testament law. It is the ultimate act of surrender to the Father's will, proving that He came not to be served but to serve, and thereby becoming a ransom by which many are delivered from the power of sin (Matt. 20:28). His death is the fulfillment of the covenant sacrifice that inaugurated the Old Covenant (Exod. 24:8) and lays the foundation for the New Covenant (Matt. 26:28; Heb. 9:15-22). It is described as a sacrifice and an offering (Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:14, 26), realizing the concept of the paschal lamb (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:6), the sin and guilt offerings (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 13:11; 1 Pet. 3:18), and the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement (Heb. 2:17; 9:12).

Not only have the sacrifices of the Old Testament found their fulfillment in Christ, but also all the requirements and rituals associated with them. The priest who offered sacrifices had to be a man without defect (Lev. 21:17-23), and Christ, our High Priest, is holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners (Heb. 7:26). The sacrificial animal had to be without blemish and perfect (Lev. 22:20-25), and Christ is the Lamb without blemish or spot (1 Pet. 1:19). Just as the sacrificial animal had to be slaughtered by the priest (Exod. 29:11-14), so Christ was slain as the Lamb and redeemed us with His blood (Rev. 5:6, 9). No bone of the Passover lamb was to be broken (Exod. 12:46), and likewise, Christ died without any of His bones

being broken (John 19:36). After the slaughter, the priest took the blood and sprinkled it in the sanctuary for a sin offering (Lev. 16:15; Num. 19:4) and on the people for a covenant offering (Exod. 24:8). Similarly, Christ entered the true sanctuary by His own blood, sprinkling it upon His people (Heb. 9:13; 1 Pet. 1:2; Heb. 12:24). The body of the sin offering was burned outside the camp (Lev. 16:27), and Christ, to sanctify the people by His blood, suffered outside the gate (Heb. 13:12). As in the Old Testament, the blood, as the seat of life, became the means of atonement through its outpouring in death and sprinkling on the altar. So in the New Covenant, the blood of Christ is the effective cause of atonement, forgiveness, and purification of our sins (Matt. 26:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 3:25; 5:9; 1 Cor. 11:25; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:20; Heb. 9:12, 14; 12:24; 1 Pet. 1:2, 19; 1 John 1:7; 5:6; Rev. 1:5; 5:9).

When the New Testament speaks of Christ's suffering and death as an offering, it employs imagery and terminology from the Old Testament sacrificial system. This should not lead us to think that this imagery is merely accidental or figurative and can be discarded without consequence. On the contrary, Scripture views the Old Testament sacrifices as types and shadows that find their fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ. Just as Christ is truly Prophet, Priest, and King, so His death is truly a sacrifice in the fullest sense of the word. We cannot dispense with the designation of Christ's death as a sacrifice without losing the substance of the matter, which is essential to our salvation.

If Christ's death is called a sacrifice, it means that He offered Himself as a sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:2). Christ is indeed a gift and proof of God's love (John 3:16); God demonstrates His love for us in that

while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). He did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). The birth, life, and especially the suffering and death of Christ assure us of God's love. However, this love does not negate God's righteousness but upholds it. It is a love that does not overlook sin but provides a way for its forgiveness through reconciliation. It was according to the Father's command that Christ should die (Matt. 26:54; Luke 24:25; Acts 2:23; 4:28), and by His death, He fulfilled God's righteousness (Matt. 3:15; 5:17; John 10:17-18; Rom. 3:25-26). In Christ's death, God upheld His perfect justice while making a way to justify all who have faith in Jesus.

In the second place, Christ's sacrifice is a demonstration of both His active and passive obedience. In former times, passive obedience was so emphasized that active obedience was often overshadowed; but today, the emphasis on the latter sometimes eclipses the former. According to Scripture, however, the two are inseparably linked and should be viewed as two sides of the same reality. From the moment of His conception and birth, Christ was always obedient to the Father; His entire life can be seen as the fulfillment of God's righteousness, His law, and His commandments (Matt. 3:15; 5:17; John 4:34; 6:38; Rom. 9:19). Upon entering the world, He declared, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb. 10:5-9). This obedience was fully manifested in His death, especially the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8). The New Testament emphasizes that it was through the suffering and death of Christ that sin was atoned for, forgiven, and removed. Not only the fulfillment of the Law but also the bearing of its punishment was part of the Father's will, which Christ accomplished.

In the third place, Christ's sacrifice is intimately connected with us and our sins. The Old Testament already illustrates this concept, with Abraham offering a ram in place of his son (Gen. 22:13), the Israelite laying hands on a sacrificial animal in his place (Lev. 16:21), and the servant of the Lord being wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5). Similarly, the New Testament closely links Christ's sacrifice to our sins. The Son of Man came into the world to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28; 1 Tim. 2:6). He was delivered up for our trespasses (Rom. 4:25), died in relation to our sins (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 10:6, 18; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), or, as often expressed, for our sake or for our sins (Luke 22:19-20; John 10:15; Rom. 5:8; 8:32; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:14-15, 21; Gal. 3:13; 1 Thess. 5:10; Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:21; John 3:16).

The fellowship into which Christ entered, according to these Scriptural testimonies, is so profound and deep that we cannot fully comprehend or understand it. The term "vicarious suffering" only weakly and inadequately expresses it, as it surpasses our imagination and understanding. There are some analogies among humans that suggest its possibility. We know of parents who suffer for and with their children, of heroes who sacrifice themselves for their homeland, of noble individuals who sow what others will reap. The law of life continues that some work, suffer, and fight so that others may enter into their labor and enjoy the fruit. The death of one can become sustenance for another. The grain of wheat must die to bear fruit. The mother gives life to her child through childbirth. But all these examples are mere comparisons and fall short of the profound communion into which Christ entered with us. Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might dare

to die. But God demonstrates His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:7-8).

There was, in reality, no fellowship between Christ and us, only separation and opposition. For He was the only begotten and beloved Son of the Father, while we were all like the prodigal son. He was righteous, holy, and without sin, whereas we were sinners, guilty before God and unclean from head to foot. Yet, Christ communed with us, not only physically by taking on our nature, our flesh, and blood, but also juridically and ethically by entering into communion with our sin and death. He stood in our place; He positioned Himself in relation to the law of God as we stood to it. He took upon Himself our guilt, our sickness, our pain, our punishment. He, who knew no sin, was made sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). He became a curse for us to redeem us from the curse of the law. He died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again for them (2 Cor. 5:15).

Here is the mystery of godliness, the profound mystery of divine love. We cannot fathom the vicarious suffering of Christ, for we, being estranged from God and filled with enmity towards one another, cannot even begin to comprehend the vastness of what love is capable of, especially the boundless, eternal, divine love. But we are not called to fully understand this mystery; we are called to believe it, to find rest in it, to glory in it, and to rejoice. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every

one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:5-6).

What shall we then say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? It is Christ who died, yea rather, who is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us (Rom. 8:31-34).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the Incarnation mark the beginning of Christ's work of humiliation, and why is this distinction important for understanding His ministry?

- Reflect on why the Incarnation is just the beginning of Christ's work and not the entirety of it, and what implications this has for His role in redemption.

2. Why is it insufficient to view the Incarnation alone as the act of reconciliation and redemption?

- Consider why the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are necessary beyond His assuming human nature to accomplish full reconciliation between God and humanity.

3. In what ways does Christ's taking on the form of a servant highlight His identification with humanity, and how does this impact our understanding of His mission?

- Reflect on the significance of Christ sharing in our humanity and what it means for Him to be our brother in flesh and blood.

4. What does Philippians 2:7-8 teach about the depth of Christ's humility and obedience, and how should this shape our response to His sacrifice?

- Discuss the implications of Christ humbling Himself to the point of death on a cross and how this demonstrates His obedience to the Father's will.

5. How does the life and death of Christ fulfill the Scriptures and the foreordained plan of God?

- Reflect on the role of prophecy and divine foreknowledge in Christ's mission, particularly in relation to His suffering and death as outlined in Acts 2:23 and 4:28.

6. Why is it important to view Christ's work as a unified act, encompassing His entire life from conception to crucifixion?

- Consider the benefits of understanding Christ's work as a single, continuous act of redemption and how this perspective helps in appreciating the entirety of His mission.

7. How do the three offices of Christ—prophet, priest, and king—function simultaneously throughout His ministry?

- Reflect on how Christ embodies all three offices at once and the importance of recognizing this unity in His work and mission.

8. What role does Christ's suffering play in the completion of His work, and why was it necessary for Him to be perfected through suffering (Hebrews 2:10)?

- Discuss the theological significance of Christ's suffering and how it contributes to His role as our Savior.

9. How does the doctrine of Christ's threefold office provide a comprehensive understanding of His work, and what are the practical implications for believers?

- Reflect on how viewing Christ as prophet, priest, and king helps believers appreciate the fullness of His redemptive work and how it impacts their faith and daily life.

10. How does Christ's humiliation and ultimate exaltation provide a model for Christian humility and obedience?

- Consider how Christ's journey from humiliation to exaltation serves as an example for believers in terms of humility, obedience, and trust in God's plan.

18. The Work of Christ in His Exaltation.

The benefits Christ has secured for us through His immense love are so abundant that they are nearly impossible to list exhaustively and can never be fully appreciated. They encompass nothing less than

complete and total salvation, involving the redemption from the greatest evil—sin and all its consequences of misery and death—and the bestowal of the highest good—communion with God and all its blessings. Though these benefits will be explored in greater detail later, it is necessary to mention them here to provide a deeper understanding of the profound significance of Christ's work.

Among all the benefits stemming from Christ's profound humiliation, reconciliation stands paramount. The New Testament expresses this concept with two terms, unfortunately rendered the same in our translation. The first term (or rather, related terms from the same root) appears in Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, and 1 John 2:2, 4:10. It translates a Hebrew word that originally means to cover and subsequently signifies the reconciliation effected by the sacrifice. The idea is that the sacrifice, particularly the sacrificial blood—for the blood, being the seat of life, becomes the actual means of atonement when poured out and sprinkled (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:12)—covers the sin (guilt, impurity) of the sacrificer before God, thus nullifying its power to provoke God's wrath. Through the pouring and sprinkling of the blood, into which the life, the soul of an innocent and unblemished animal, is poured out, God renounces His wrath, changes His disposition towards the sinner, forgives the transgression, and restores the sinner to His presence and fellowship. The forgiveness that follows reconciliation is so complete that it is described as an erasing (Ps. 51:1, 9; Isa. 43:25; 44:22), a casting behind the back (Isa. 38:17), a casting of sins into the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19). The atonement removes sins as completely as if they had never been committed; it dispels wrath and makes God's face shine with fatherly favor and delight upon His people.

In the Old Testament, all these symbols and sacrifices pointed forward to the future sacrifice of Christ; in the New Testament, they find their complete fulfillment in Him. Christ is the High Priest who, through His sacrificial blood, covers our sins before God, turns away His wrath, and bestows upon us His grace and favor. He is the propitiation (Rom. 3:25), the atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2; 4:10), who intercedes for us with God as the High Priest, making atonement for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17). Some reject the idea of such an objective reconciliation of Christ with God on our behalf, arguing that God is love, that He does not need to be reconciled, and that this concept belongs to a lower, legalistic, Old Testament view of God, which is supposedly condemned and set aside in the New Testament. However, they forget that sin, not only in the Mosaic law but also before and outside it, as well as in the New Testament, due to its guilty and unholy nature, arouses God's wrath and deserves punishment (Gen. 2:17; 3:14ff; Rom. 1:18; 5:12; 6:23; Gal. 3:10; Eph. 2:3). Christ and His sacrifice are not only a gift and revelation of God's love but also of His righteousness (Luke 24:46; Acts 4:28; Rom. 3:25). The forgiving love of God does not exclude atonement; it presupposes and confirms it. Forgiveness is always an entirely voluntary and gracious act of God. It is based on the premise that God has the right to punish, and it consists in a remission of the penalty that upholds and acknowledges that right. To deprive God of the right to punish is to undermine the guilty and unholy nature of sin and to diminish the gracious and forgiving love of God, reducing it to a mere natural process. Scripture, however, teaches that Zion is redeemed by justice and that Christ, by His sacrifice, satisfied God’s justice and reconciled His displeasure with sin (Isa. 1:27; Rom. 5:9-10; 2 Cor. 5:18; Gal. 3:13).

From this objective reconciliation, which Christ accomplished for us with God, we must distinguish another aspect indicated in the New Testament by a distinct term. This term appears in Romans 5:10-11 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, and it originally means exchange, substitution, or settlement. In these passages, it refers to the new, gracious disposition God has assumed toward the world based on Christ's sacrifice. Because Christ, by His death, covered our sins and averted God's wrath, God establishes a different, reconciled relationship with the world and proclaims this to us in the Gospel, which is therefore called the word of reconciliation.

This reconciliation, too, is an objective reality; it is not something brought about by our faith and conversion, but it rests on the atonement made by Christ, consisting in the reconciled, gracious relationship of God to us. It is received and accepted by us through faith. As God has renounced His hostile disposition because of Christ's death, so we are exhorted to renounce our enmity, to be reconciled to God, and to enter into the new, reconciled relationship God has established with us. Everything has been accomplished; there is nothing left for us to do. We may rest with our whole soul and for all time in the perfect work of redemption that Christ has performed. By faith, we may accept that God has renounced His wrath and, in Christ, is a reconciled God and Father to guilty and unholy sinners.

Whoever believes this Gospel of reconciliation with all his heart immediately receives, in principle, all the other benefits acquired through Christ. For in the state of peace, in which God places Himself in relation to the world through Christ, all other goods of the covenant of grace are included. Christ is indivisible; the chain of

salvation is unbreakable: those whom God predestined, He also called; those He called, He also justified; those He justified, He also glorified (Rom. 8:30). All who are reconciled to God through the death of His Son receive the remission of sins, adoption as children, peace with God, the right to eternal life, and a heavenly inheritance (Rom. 5:1; 8:17; Gal. 4:5). They have fellowship with Christ, having been crucified, buried, resurrected, and seated in the heavens with Him, and are becoming more and more conformed to His image (Rom. 6:3ff; 8:29; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 4:22-24). They receive the Holy Spirit, who renews them, leads them into all truth, testifies to their adoption, and seals them until the day of redemption (John 3:6; 16:13; Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 4:30). In this fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, believers are free from the law (Rom. 7:1ff; Gal. 2:19; 3:13, 25; 4:5; 5:1) and are exalted above all powers of the world, death, hell, and Satan (John 16:33; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:55; 1 John 3:8; Rev. 12:10). God is for them; who can be against them? (Rom. 8:31).

The perfect sacrifice Christ offered on the cross is of infinite power and dignity, abundantly sufficient for the atonement of the sins of the whole world. Scripture consistently connects the entire world with redemption and re-creation. The world has been the object of God's love (John 3:16); Christ came not to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17; 4:42; 6:33, 51; 12:47); in Him, God has reconciled the world, all things in heaven and on earth, to Himself (John 1:29; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). As the world was created by the Son, it is also destined for the Son as its heir (Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 11:15). It is the Father's will that in the fullness of time, all things should be united in Christ, both in heaven and on earth (Eph. 1:10). Times of restoration are coming; according to God's promise, we await new

heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells (Acts 3:21; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1).

Because of the abundant sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for the whole world, the Gospel of reconciliation must be preached to all creatures. The promise of the Gospel is that everyone who believes in the crucified Christ shall not perish but have eternal life; this promise must be preached and presented indiscriminately to all peoples and individuals to whom God sends His Gospel according to His will, with the command of repentance and faith (Canons of Dordt II.5). Scripture leaves no room for doubt in this regard. Even in the Old Testament, it is stated that the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but desires their repentance and life (Ezek. 18:23; 33:11) and that all nations will one day share in Israel's blessings (Gen. 9:27; 12:3; Deut. 32:21; Isa. 42:1). The missionary idea is already embedded in the promise of the Old Testament covenant of grace. It is clearly and unequivocally expressed when Christ Himself appears on earth and completes His work. For He is the light of the world, the Savior who gives life to the world (John 3:19; 4:42; 6:33, 51; 8:12), who has other sheep besides Israel that He must bring (John 10:16), and who foretells and commands that His Gospel shall be preached to the whole world (Matt. 24:14; 28:19; Mark 16:15).

When the apostles, from the day of Pentecost onwards, bring this Gospel to Jews and Gentiles and establish congregations worldwide, it may well be said that their voice has gone out to all the earth and their words to the ends of the world (Rom. 10:18), that the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men (Titus 2:11). Even prayers and intercessions for all people, especially for kings and those in authority, are pleasing to God, who desires all people to be

saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4). The delay in Christ's return is a testament to God's patience, as He does not wish for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

This general proclamation of the Gospel holds immense advantages for the world at large, including those who may never believe in Christ as their Savior. Through His incarnation, Christ bestowed honor upon the entire human race, becoming a brother to all men according to the flesh. The light shines in the darkness, and His coming into the world illuminates everyone; the world was made through Him and remains His creation, even though it has not recognized Him (John 1:3-5). By issuing a call to faith and repentance to all who live under the Gospel, Christ bestows numerous external blessings in family and society, in church and state, which are also enjoyed by those who do not respond with faith. They are influenced by the Word, shielded from grievous sins, and, unlike heathen nations, share in many external privileges. It must also be remembered that Christ, through His suffering and death, has secured the liberation of mankind from the bondage of decay, the renewal of heaven and earth, and the reconciliation of all things, including angels and men. In Christ, the organism of the human race, the world as God's creation, is preserved and restored (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20).

However, while this universal proclamation of the Gospel and the offer of grace must be firmly upheld, it must not be inferred that the benefits of Christ are acquired and intended for every individual, head by head. This is conclusively refuted by the fact that in the days of the Old Testament, God allowed the Gentiles to walk in their own

ways and chose only the people of Israel for Himself. Furthermore, in the fullness of time, despite the fundamental universality of the Gospel proclamation, God limited the promises of His grace to a small portion of humanity throughout all ages.

The general statements occasionally found in Scripture, such as Romans 10:18, 1 Timothy 2:4, Titus 2:11, and 2 Peter 3:9, cannot be understood in an absolute sense but must be interpreted relatively. These passages were written under the profound awareness of the transition between the Old and New Covenants. The apostles, who had been raised within the confines of Judaism, deeply felt the significant change Christ brought about in the relationship between nations. They repeatedly spoke of this as a great mystery, hidden for ages but now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ. The middle wall of separation has been broken down; the blood of the cross has made peace; in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, barbarian nor Scythian; all distinctions of nation, language, descent, and color, of age and sex, of time and place, have been abolished. In Christ, there is a new creation; the church is gathered from all tribes, languages, peoples, and nations (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 1:10; 3:3-9; Col. 1:26-27; 2 Tim. 1:10-11; Rev. 5:9).

But as soon as Scripture addresses the question of for whom Christ acquired His benefits, to whom He bestows and applies them, and who therefore actually partakes in them, it always directs His work towards the Church. Just as there was a distinct people in the Old Testament, chosen by God as His inheritance, this concept of a special people of God continues in the New Testament. Certainly,

this people no longer coincides with the fleshly descendants of Abraham; rather, it is now called and gathered from Jews and Gentiles, from all nations and from all peoples. This congregation is the true assembly of God's people (Matt. 16:18; 18:20), the New Testament Israel (2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 6:16), the true seed of Abraham (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 4:29). For this people, Christ shed His blood and secured salvation. He came to save His people (Matt. 1:21), to give life to His sheep (John 10:11), to gather all God's children into one (John 11:52), to give life to all those given to Him by the Father and to raise them up on the last day (John 6:39; 17:2), to purchase the Church of God with His blood and to cleanse it with the washing of water by the word (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25-26). As High Priest, Christ does not even pray for the world but for those whom the Father has given Him and who will believe in Him through the word of the apostles (John 17:9, 20).

There is, thus, the most perfect harmony between the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As many as were chosen by the Father are redeemed by the Son, and reborn and renewed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Scriptures explicitly tell us that these are many, very many (Isa. 53:11-12; Matt. 20:28; 26:28; Rom. 5:15, 19; Heb. 2:10; 9:28). And it teaches us all this, not so that we might limit and shrink this number according to our imperfect understanding and arbitrary measure, but so that in the midst of all the strife and waste, we might be firmly assured that the work of salvation is God's work from beginning to end, and therefore, in spite of all opposition, it continues and will be completed. The pleasure of the Lord prospers in the hand of His servant (Isa. 53:10).

Since the work of salvation is God's work and His alone, the benefits of Christ could not be ours if He had not been raised from the dead and exalted at God's right hand. A dead Jesus would suffice for us if Christianity were nothing more, and needed to be nothing more for our salvation, than a doctrine to be instilled in our minds, or a moral precept and example to follow. But the Christian faith is something else and much more than that; it is the complete redemption of all mankind, of all the organs of humanity, and of the whole world. Christ came to earth to save the world in this fullest sense. He did not come merely to secure the possibility of salvation for us, leaving it to our free will whether we should avail ourselves of that possibility. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, to make us truly, perfectly, and eternally blessed.

That is why His work did not conclude with His death and burial. Indeed, in His high priestly prayer, He declared that He had finished the work the Father had given Him to do (John 17:4), and on the Cross, He proclaimed, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Yet, these statements pertain to the work He was tasked to accomplish on earth, specifically His work of humiliation, the procurement of our salvation. This work is indeed complete, finished, and perfect; salvation has been so fully obtained through His suffering and death that no creature can or needs to add anything. However, the application and distribution of this salvation are distinct from its acquisition. This latter part is no less crucial than the former. What benefit would there be in a treasure that remains out of reach and never becomes our possession? What profit is there in a Christ who died for our sins but was not raised for our justification? What use is a Lord who died but was not exalted to the right hand of the Father?

But now, as Christians, we confess and glorify a crucified and risen Savior, a humbled and exalted Savior, a King who is the first and the last, who was dead but now lives forever and holds the keys of hell and death (Rev. 1:18). In His exaltation, He raises and completes the edifice whose foundation He laid in His crucifixion. He is exalted far above all rule, authority, and power, given to the Church as its head, that He might fill all in all (Eph. 1:20-23). He was made Lord and Christ, Prince and Savior by the resurrection, to grant repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel and to place all His enemies under His feet (Acts 2:36; 5:31; 1 Cor. 15:25). He is exalted by God and given a name above all names, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

The exaltation of Christ is therefore not an incidental appendage or arbitrary addition to His humiliation in the days of His flesh. Rather, it is, like His humiliation, an indispensable part of the work of redemption that He must accomplish; in His exaltation, His humiliation receives its seal and crown. The same Christ who descended to the lowest parts of the earth has also ascended above all heavens, that He might fulfill all things (Eph. 4:9-10). He must do it; it is His work; no one else can accomplish it. The Father exalted Him precisely because He humbled Himself so profoundly (Phil. 2:9). He has given all judgment to the Son because He desired to become the Son of Man (John 5:22). The Son is exalted and continues His work in exaltation to demonstrate that He is the perfect, true, and almighty Savior. He will not rest until He can hand over the kingdom to God the Father, complete and perfect, and present the Church to Him as His bride, without spot or wrinkle (1

Cor. 15:24; Eph. 5:25-27). The honor of Christ Himself depends on the completion of this work of salvation; His own name and fame are at stake. He exalts His own and brings them to where He is, that they may behold His glory (John 17:24). He will return at the end of the ages to be glorified in His saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed (2 Thess. 1:10).

The exaltation of Christ began, according to the Reformed confession, with His resurrection, but according to many other traditions, even earlier, with His descent into hell. However, this is interpreted in various ways. The Greek Church understands it as Christ descending into the underworld with His divine nature and human soul to liberate the souls of the holy patriarchs and bring them, along with the penitent thief on the cross, to paradise.

According to the Roman Church, Christ indeed descended into the underworld with His soul and remained there as long as His body rested in the tomb, in order to liberate the souls of the pious who had remained there painlessly until salvation was attained, from the state of death, bringing them to heaven to share in the beatific vision of God. The Lutheran Church differentiates between the actual resurrection of Christ and His rising from the grave, teaching that Christ, during this brief interval, went specifically to hell with both soul and body, to proclaim His victory to the devils and the damned. Many theologians, especially in recent times, interpret the Article as meaning that Christ descended to the underworld before His resurrection, either with the soul or the body, to preach the Gospel to those who had died in their sins, giving them an opportunity for repentance and faith.

The great diversity of interpretations indicates that the original meaning of the phrase "descended into hell" has been lost. We do not know the origin of the article, nor what was precisely meant by it. Furthermore, Scripture does not support a literal, real, or local descent of Christ into hell. In Acts 2:27, Peter applies the words of Psalm 16 to Christ: "You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your Holy One to see corruption." However, the annotation rightly notes that "Hades" should be understood as "grave"; while Christ was in paradise in soul, He was in the grave in body, and between His death and resurrection, He was in the state of death. In Ephesians 4:9, Paul states that the One who ascended first descended to the lower parts of the earth; this does not refer to a descent into hell but either to the incarnation of Christ on earth or His death, in which He descended into the grave. In 1 Peter 3:19-21, the Apostle speaks not of what Christ did between His death and resurrection, but either of what He did before His incarnation by His Spirit in the days of Noah or of what He did after His resurrection, being alive in the Spirit. There is no scriptural basis for the doctrine of a local descent of Christ into the underworld or hell.

The Reformed Church has thus abandoned this interpretation of the Article, either understanding it to mean the infernal anguish and pain Christ suffered before His death in Gethsemane and on Golgotha, or the state of death in which Christ found Himself while He lay in the grave. Both interpretations find unity in the scriptural notion that Christ's surrender in death was the hour of His enemies and the power of darkness (Luke 22:53). Christ knew this hour would come and voluntarily surrendered to it (John 8:20, 12:23, 27, 13:1, 17:1). In that hour, when He manifested the highest spiritual power of His love and obedience (John 10:17-18), He appeared

utterly powerless; His enemies did with Him as they pleased; darkness seemed to triumph over Him; indeed, not in a local sense, but in a spiritual sense, He descended into hell.

Yet, the power of darkness was not autonomous; it was permitted by the Father (John 19:11). Christ's enemies did not comprehend that they were merely instruments, unknowingly and unwillingly fulfilling what God's hand and counsel had predetermined (Acts 2:23; 4:28). Even in His humiliation, Christ was the mighty One who voluntarily gave up His life and offered His soul as a ransom for many. The hour of the power of darkness was His own (John 7:30, 8:20); in His death, He conquered death through the power of His love, His complete self-denial, and His absolute obedience to the Father's will. Therefore, it was not possible that He, the Holy One, should be held by death or abandoned by God to decay (Acts 2:25, 27). On the contrary, the Father raised Him up (Acts 2:24, 3:26, 5:30, 13:37; Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:14, etc.), and Christ Himself rose by His own right and power (John 11:25; Acts 2:31; Rom. 1:4, 14:9; 1 Cor. 15:21; 1 Thess. 4:14, etc.). He is the Son of God. The pangs of death were, as it were, the birth pangs of His new life (Acts 2:24); Christ is the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18).

This resurrection entailed the quickening of His dead body and His rising from the grave. The adversaries of the resurrection are confronted with no small dilemma concerning this event. In former times, they attempted to explain away this narrative by asserting that Jesus had merely appeared to be dead, or that His body had been stolen by His disciples, or that the disciples were deluded, imagining they saw Him. Yet, these hypotheses have been successively abandoned, and presently many turn to spiritism, deeming it a

convenient explanation for Christ's resurrection. They claim that something objective indeed transpired; the disciples saw something —an apparition of the deceased Christ, who, though dead in body, lived on in spirit. They propose that the spirit of Christ manifested itself to the disciples, revealing His continued existence. Some even assert that God Himself caused Christ's spirit to appear to the disciples to lift them from their sorrow and to make them aware of victory over death and the immortality of life. These appearances of Christ, they say, were akin to a "telegram from heaven," a divine message of Christ's spiritual power.

However, this entire spiritist explanation is unworthy of the Scriptures and directly contradicts their testimony. According to all the Evangelists, the tomb was found empty on the third day, and the first appearance occurred that very day (Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:3; John 20:2; 1 Cor. 15:4-5). The Evangelists and Paul, without providing a systematic or exhaustive list, recount that Jesus appeared to the women, particularly Mary Magdalene, to Peter, to the disciples with and without Thomas, and to many others, including over five hundred brethren at once. These appearances happened first in and around Jerusalem, and later in Galilee, where, as Mark explicitly notes, He went ahead of them (Mark 16:7). All accounts agree that Jesus appeared in the same body that had been laid in the tomb. It was a body of flesh and bones, not merely a spirit, as Luke attests (Luke 24:39); it could be touched (John 20:27) and could consume food (Luke 24:41; John 21:10).

Nonetheless, Jesus made an entirely different impression after His resurrection compared to before His death; those who saw Him were terrified and awestruck, fell before Him, and worshipped Him (Matt.

28:9-10; Luke 24:37). He appeared in a different form than previously shown (Mark 16:12) and was sometimes not immediately recognized (Luke 24:16, 31). There is a significant difference between the resurrection of Lazarus and that of Jesus; Lazarus returned to his former, earthly life, whereas Jesus did not return but continued on the path from resurrection to ascension. When Mary thought she had regained her Master and Lord from the dead and sought to renew her previous relationship with Him, Jesus declined and said, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father; but go to my brethren and say to them: I ascend to my Father and your Father, and my God and your God" (John 20:17). After His resurrection, Christ no longer belonged to the earth but to heaven. Hence, His form had changed, even though He had taken on the same body that had been laid in the tomb. Paul encapsulates this by stating that a natural body is sown at death, but a spiritual body is raised at the resurrection (both of Christ and the faithful) (1 Cor. 15:44). In both instances, it is a body, for “spiritual” is not opposed to “material” but to “natural.” In the natural (psychic) body received by the first man, there exists a large sphere of life that operates independently of the spirit’s dominion; in the spiritual body, however, stomach and food are no longer necessary (1 Cor. 6:13), and all material aspects are entirely subject to and serve the spirit.

The bodily resurrection of Christ is not an isolated historical fact but is inexhaustibly rich in meaning and of the greatest significance for Christ Himself, for His congregation, and for the entire world. It fundamentally embodies the victory over death. Death entered the world through a human being; the transgression of God's commandment opened the door for death to enter the realm of humanity, for death is the wages of sin (Romans 5:12, 6:23; 1

Corinthians 15:21). Even if an angel or the Son of the Father had descended into the realm of the dead and then returned to heaven, it would be of no benefit to us. But Christ was not only the Father's only begotten, but also truly and fully human, God's and man's Son. As a man, He suffered, died, and was buried, but also as a man, He rose again and returned from the realm of the dead. The resurrection of Christ proved that there was a man who could not be held by death, whom Satan, who wielded the power of death, could not control, who was stronger than the grave, death, and hell. Indeed, in principle, Satan no longer possesses the power and dominion of death; Christ conquered him through death (Hebrews 2:14). The gates of the kingdom of the dead, which had closed behind Him, had to be opened at His command. The ruler of the world had nothing on Him (John 14:30).

If this is so, it is evident that the resurrection of Christ pertains to the physical resurrection. A spiritual resurrection would not have sufficed; it would have been incomplete and, in fact, not a victory at all but a defeat. Then, not the whole man, not man in both soul and body, would have been freed from the dominion of death; Satan would have remained victorious in a significant domain. To demonstrate His power over death, He had to return physically from the realm of the dead, thereby revealing His spiritual power in the world of matter. In His bodily resurrection, it was first shown that by His obedience unto death and the grave, He had completely conquered sin with all its consequences, including death, casting it out of the world of men and bringing to light a new life in immortality. Thus, through a man, death entered the world, and through a man, the resurrection of the dead is assured (1 Corinthians 15:21). Christ Himself is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

This general significance of Christ's resurrection is already profound, but its implications can be further detailed. Firstly, for Christ Himself. If death on the cross had been the end of Jesus' life and not followed by resurrection, the Jews would have been justified in their condemnation. Deuteronomy 21:23 states that a hanged man is accursed by God, which is cited as the reason why the corpse of a criminal must not remain hanging on the wood after death but must be buried the same day, lest it defile the land God has given His people. Although the Mosaic law does not include crucifixion as a penalty, Jesus, delivered to the Gentiles (Matthew 20:19) and crucified by the unrighteous (Acts 2:23), was, before and in His death, an example of the law's unyielding severity and a curse before God. To the Jews, who knew the law, crucifixion was not only a painful and shameful punishment but also proof that the crucified one bore God's wrath and curse. Jesus, the hanged man on the tree, was a scandal and anathema in the eyes of the Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23, 12:3).

But the resurrection reverses all judgment. He who was made sin for us knew no sin. He who became a curse for us is the blessed One of the Father. The one abandoned by God on the cross is the Son in whom the Father delights. The one cast out from the earth is crowned in heaven. The resurrection is thus the proof of Christ's Sonship; He, who was of the seed of David according to the flesh, was declared the Son of God with power by the Spirit of holiness (Romans 1:3-4). Christ spoke the truth and made the right confession before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate when He testified to being the Son of God. It was not the Jews and Romans who were justified in their judgment and sentence, but Christ is the Righteous One, crucified and slain by the hands of the unrighteous. The

resurrection is the divine revision of the judgment the world passed on Jesus.

In this demonstration of His Sonship and Messianic nature, the resurrection is not an end but the gateway for Christ into a wholly new state of existence, marking the commencement of His ever-increasing exaltation. Not only in eternity (Hebrews 1:5) and at His ordination to the priesthood (Hebrews 5:5), but also at His resurrection (Acts 13:33), did God declare to Him: "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee." The resurrection is the day of Christ's coronation; He was already Son and Messiah before He became man; He remained so even in His humiliation, though His true nature was veiled under the guise of a servant. Now, however, He is openly proclaimed by God as Lord and Christ, Sovereign and Savior (Acts 2:36, 5:31, Philippians 2:9). He now reassumes the glory He had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5), adopting a different form, a new stature, and a transformed way of being (Mark 16:12). He is the Prince of life, the source of salvation, and the appointed judge of the living and the dead (Acts 3:15, 4:12, 10:42).

Moreover, the resurrection of Christ serves as a fountain of salvation for His congregation and for the entire world. It is the Father's "Amen" to the Son's accomplishment. Indeed, Christ was delivered up for our transgressions and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25). Just as our sins are intimately linked with Christ's death, so too is there a profound connection between Christ's resurrection and our justification. Our sins necessitated His death, and so our justification necessitated His resurrection. He did not obtain our justification by His resurrection, but by His death (Romans 5:9, 19), for that death was a sacrifice that fully atoned for our sins and

provided eternal righteousness. But because He had secured complete atonement and forgiveness of all our sins through His suffering and death, He arose and had to rise. In the resurrection, He Himself and we with Him were justified; His resurrection from the dead is the public proclamation of our acquittal. Furthermore, Christ was raised for our justification in the sense that He might personally appropriate the acquittal contained in His resurrection. Without the resurrection, the reconciliation effected by His death would have remained without effect and application; it would have been like a dead capital. But now Christ, exalted by His resurrection as Lord, Prince, and Savior, can make the acquired reconciliation part of us through faith. His resurrection is both the proof and the source of our justification.

If Christ rose to personally appropriate the acquired reconciliation and forgiveness for us, then another benefit is inherently included. Just as there is no forgiveness without prior reconciliation, there is no forgiveness without subsequent sanctification and glorification. The objective basis for this inseparable connection of justification and sanctification lies in Christ Himself. For He has not only died but also been raised; and what He died to, He died once for sin (to atone for it and to remove it), so that what He lives, He lives to God (Romans 6:10). Therefore, when Christ grants man the fruits of His death in faith—namely, atonement and forgiveness of sin—He also grants him new life at that same moment. He cannot divide Himself, cannot separate His death from His resurrection; indeed, He can only divide and apply the fruits of His death because He Himself was raised; as the Prince of Life, He alone dispenses the benefits of His death. Therefore, as He died once for sin, that henceforth He might live for God alone, so He died for all, that those who live (by dying

and rising with Christ) might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again for them (2 Corinthians 5:15, Galatians 2:20).

Similarly, from the subjective side, there is an indissoluble connection between the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life. For he who accepts the forgiveness of sins with a believing heart has, at that same moment, like Christ in His death, broken off all relation to sin. He has ceased to have any fellowship with it, for sin that has been forgiven, and whose forgiveness has been accepted in faith with great joy, cannot but be hated; he has, as Paul says, died to sin (Romans 6:2) and therefore can live in it no longer. He has entered the fellowship of Christ through faith and through baptism as its sign and seal, having been crucified, died, and buried with Him, that he might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

To this sanctification is further linked glorification. Indeed, through the resurrection of Christ, the faithful have been born again into a living hope (1 Peter 1:3). Through this, they have received the irrefutable assurance that the work of salvation has not only been initiated and sustained but will be brought to completion. In heaven, an immortal, incorruptible, and undefilable inheritance is preserved for them, and on earth, they are kept by faith through the power of God for the salvation that will be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:4-5). How could it be otherwise? God has confirmed His love for us in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more, then, having been justified by the blood of Christ, we shall be saved from God's wrath, especially that wrath which will be manifest in the last judgment.

For those who are in Christ, there is no wrath and no condemnation, but only peace with God and the hope of His glory. In the past, when they were still His enemies and subject to His wrath, God reconciled Himself to them through the death of His Son. Now that God has renounced His wrath against them and bestowed His peace and love upon them, they will be much more saved through the life that Christ now shares through His resurrection and in which He acts as their intercessor with the Father. The resurrection of Christ thus continues for all eternity; in due time, it brings with it the resurrection of the faithful, the renewal of heaven and earth, and the victory of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:2, Romans 6:5, 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:12ff).

Only when we understand the rich, eternal significance of the resurrection of Christ can we comprehend why the apostles, particularly Paul, emphasize its historical character so strongly. All the apostles are witnesses to the resurrection (Acts 1:21, 2:32). Paul argues that without the resurrection, the preaching of the apostles is vain and false; the forgiveness of sins, based on the atonement and accepted in faith, has not occurred; and the hope of a blessed resurrection is groundless. With the resurrection, the divine Sonship and the Messianic dignity of Christ stand affirmed, and all that is left of Him is not merely a teacher of virtue but the Redeemer of sins, the Prince of Life, and the Savior of the world.

The resurrection is the beginning of Jesus' exaltation, followed forty days later by the Ascension. Its event is recounted briefly in Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51, and Acts 1:1-12. But it was foretold by Christ (Matthew 26:64, John 6:62, 13:3, 14:28, 16:5, 10, 17, 28) and forms a core component of apostolic preaching (Acts 2:33, 3:21, 5:31, 7:55-56, Ephesians 4:10, Philippians 2:9, 3:20, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 4:14-

16, 1 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 3:22, Hebrews 4:14, 6:20, 9:24, Revelation 1:13, etc.). Everywhere, the apostles start from the idea that Christ is now in heaven according to His human nature, both in body and soul. In fact, the forty days Christ spent on earth after His resurrection were already a preparation and transition to His ascension. Everything showed that He no longer belonged to the earth. His appearance was different from before His death. He appeared and disappeared mysteriously. The disciples felt that their relationship with Him was very different from their previous one. His life no longer belonged to the earth but to heaven.

In the Ascension, therefore, He does not become invisible through a process of spiritualization or deification, but changes place. He was on earth and went to heaven. He ascended from a specific place, the Mount of Olives, a quarter-hour from Jerusalem in the direction of Bethany (Luke 24:50, Acts 1:12). Before He separated from His disciples, He blessed them. Blessing, He left the earth, and blessing, He ascended into heaven. That is how He came, lived, and went again. He is Himself the embodiment of all God's blessings, the acquirer, possessor, and distributor of them (Ephesians 1:3).

His ascension was therefore also His own act; He possessed both the right and the power to accomplish it, ascending by His own might, as attested in John 3:13, 20:17, Ephesians 4:8-10, and 1 Peter 3:22. In this event, He triumphed over the whole earth, over all the laws of nature, and over the entire gravity of matter. Furthermore, His ascension represents a triumph over all hostile, demonic, and human powers, which God, in the Cross of Christ, stripped of their armor, exhibited in their powerlessness, and bound to Christ's chariot, as noted in Colossians 2:15. These powers are now carried off by Christ

Himself as captives, Ephesians 4:8. Peter articulates the same idea by declaring that Christ, after His resurrection, ascended in spirit to heaven, proclaimed His victory to the spirits in prison, and took His seat at God's right hand, while angels, powers, and forces were made subservient to Him.

The ascension, Christ's own act, is also a divine taking up into heaven, as recorded in Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51, Acts 1:2, 9, 11, 22, and 1 Timothy 3:16. Having fully accomplished the Father's work, He is not only raised by the Father but also admitted into His immediate presence. The heavens are opened to Him, the angels meet and lead Him in (Acts 2:10). He has passed through the heavens and ascended far above them all (Hebrews 4:14, 7:26, Ephesians 4:10) to sit at God's right hand on the throne of His majesty. The highest place next to God belongs to Christ.

Just as the resurrection prepares the ascension, so it leads to the seating at the right hand of God. The Old Testament promises this place to the Messiah (Psalm 110:1). Jesus repeatedly foretold that He would soon be seated on the throne of His glory (Matthew 19:28, 25:31, 26:64), and after His ascension, He took possession of that place (Mark 16:19). In apostolic preaching, this sitting at the right hand of God is frequently mentioned and shown to be of great significance (Acts 2:34, Romans 8:34, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1, Hebrews 1:3, 13, 8:1, 10:12, 1 Peter 3:22, Revelation 3:21, etc.).

The Scriptures use various expressions at this stage of Jesus' exaltation. Sometimes it is said that Christ Himself has sat down (Hebrews 1:3, 8:1), sometimes that the Father has said to Him, "Sit

at My right hand" (Acts 2:34, Hebrews 1:13), or has placed Him there (Ephesians 1:20). The act of sitting down is emphasized (Mark 16:19), as well as the state of being seated (Matthew 26:64, Colossians 3:1). The place where Christ is seated is described as at the right hand of power (Matthew 26:64), at the right hand of the power of God (Luke 22:69), at the right hand of the majesty in the highest heavens (Hebrews 1:3), or at the right hand of the throne of majesty in the heavens (Hebrews 8:1), or at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2). Though He is usually said to be seated, He is also sometimes standing (Acts 7:55-56) or walking among the seven golden lampstands (Revelation 2:1). Always, the idea is the same: Christ, after His resurrection and ascension, holds the highest place next to God in the entire universe.

This idea, however, is expressed in the form of an image derived from earthly relations; we can only speak of heavenly things in human terms, through parables. Just as Solomon honored his mother Bathsheba by placing her at his right hand (1 Kings 2:19), the sitting at the right hand of God indicates that Christ, by virtue of His perfect obedience, has been exalted to the highest sovereignty, majesty, dignity, honor, and glory. He not only received back the glory He had with the Father before the world existed (John 17:5), but we now see Him crowned with honor and glory according to His humanity (Hebrews 2:9, Philippians 2:9-11). All things are subject to His feet, except Him who has subjected all things to Him (1 Corinthians 15:27). Although we do not yet see all things subject to Him, He will reign as King until He has put all enemies under His feet (Hebrews 2:8, 1 Corinthians 15:25). His sitting at the right hand of God and His entire exaltation culminate in His Second Coming in judgment (Matthew 25:31-32).

In this state of exaltation, Christ perpetuates the work He initiated on earth. Undoubtedly, there exists a profound distinction between the work Christ executed in His humiliation and that which He performs in His exaltation. As His person now manifests in a different semblance, so too does His work assume a new form and character. Following His resurrection, He is no longer the suffering servant, but the exalted Lord and Prince. Consequently, His work is no longer the sacrificial obedience perfected on the Cross, yet the Mediatorial role of Christ continues, albeit in a transformed manner. At His ascension, He did not enter into a state of inactivity— for the Son, like the Father, always works (John 5:17)—but He now applies the full measure of His acquired benefits to His congregation. Just as Christ, through His suffering and death, was exalted in the resurrection and ascension to the headship of the congregation, so must that congregation now be fashioned into the body of Christ and be filled with the fullness of God. The mediatorial work is one grand, divine endeavor, commencing in eternity and enduring until eternity. At the moment of the resurrection, this work was divided into two phases: prior to that moment, Christ's humiliation; following that moment, His exaltation. Both phases are equally indispensable to the work of salvation.

Thus, in the state of His exaltation, Christ continued His roles as prophet, priest, and king. From eternity, He had been anointed to these offices; He exercised these ministries during His humiliation; and in a glorified sense, He continues them in heaven.

That He remained a prophet even after His resurrection is immediately evident from the teachings He imparted to His disciples until His ascension. The forty days that Jesus remained on earth

after His resurrection constitute a crucial part of His life and doctrine. These days often receive insufficient attention. However, upon closer examination of Jesus' activities and teachings during this period, it becomes clear that they shed a new and profound light on His person and mission. Though we cannot grasp this as deeply as the apostles, who experienced these events firsthand and whose hope was revived after losing it at His death, the transformation they underwent during this time demonstrates a deeper understanding of Jesus' identity and work.

The resurrection itself cast a radiant light on Christ's death and His prior life. The salvific event did not stand alone; just as it had been foreshadowed, it was accompanied and followed by the word of salvation. Angels at the tomb announced to the women seeking Jesus that He was not there but had risen, as He had foretold (Matthew 28:5-6). Jesus Himself elucidated to the disciples at Emmaus that the Christ had to suffer and thereby enter His glory, explaining this through all the Scriptures concerning Him (Luke 24:26-27, 44-47).

The disciples now perceived Him in a different form than before. No longer the humble Son of Man who came to serve and give His life as a ransom for many, He now appeared in glory and power, having laid aside the form of a servant. He belonged to another realm, preparing to ascend to His Father while the disciples remained on earth with a mission to fulfill. The former intimate relationship they had with Him in His earthly ministry was transformed. Yet, soon they would experience an even more profound fellowship through the Spirit, a relationship entirely different from what they had known. Post-Resurrection, Jesus revealed Himself with such splendor and

wisdom that Thomas made a confession unprecedented among the disciples, acknowledging Jesus as his Lord and his God.

During these forty days, Jesus not only illuminated His own person and work, but He also elucidated in greater detail the role and task of His disciples. When Jesus was buried and all seemed lost, the disciples might have intended to return quietly to Galilee and resume their previous vocations. However, on the third day, reports of His appearances began to emerge—to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matthew 28:1, 9; John 20:14ff), to Peter (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5), and to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13ff). Consequently, they stayed in Jerusalem for a time. On the evening of that same day, Jesus appeared to the disciples, except Thomas, and eight days later, He appeared to them again, this time with Thomas present. Subsequently, they followed Jesus to Galilee, where more appearances occurred (Matthew 28:10; Luke 24:44ff; John 21). Yet, He commanded them to return to Jerusalem to witness His ascension.

In all these appearances, Jesus revealed to the disciples their future calling. They were not to return to their former occupations but to serve as His witnesses, preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8). The apostles received various commands (Acts 1:2), were instructed about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3), had their authority delineated (John 20:21-23; 21:15-17), and were focused on preaching the gospel to all creatures. They now knew their mission: first, to remain in Jerusalem until they were endowed with power from on high (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5, 8), and then to act

as His witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

All the teachings from these forty days are encapsulated in the final words Jesus spoke to His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). Though He had previously received authority (Matthew 11:27), He now claims it based on His merits and employs it to distribute the benefits He acquired to the congregation, which He purchased with His blood. By virtue of this fulfillment of power, He instructs His apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that He commanded. Because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, Jesus claims the discipleship of all peoples. He acknowledges as His disciples those who, through baptism, have entered into fellowship with the God who, in His complete revelation, has made Himself known as Father, Son, and Spirit, and who now walk in His commandments. To encourage them, He finally adds that He will be with them always, to the end of the age. Physically He leaves them, but spiritually He remains with them, ensuring that it is He, not they, who gathers, rules, and protects His congregation through their words.

Thus, even after His ascension, Christ continues His prophetic work. The apostles' preaching, both oral and written in their epistles, aligns with the teachings of Jesus—not only those given before His death but also those imparted during the forty days between His resurrection and ascension.

This final point must not be overlooked. It is precisely this understanding that explains how all the apostles were from the

outset convinced that Christ had not only died but had also been raised by God and exalted at His right hand as Lord and Christ, Prince and Savior. They were assured that in the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, all salvation for the sinner is contained.

The Apostles' preaching not only aligns with Jesus' teaching but also serves as its elucidation and expansion. Jesus Himself continued His prophetic activity through His Spirit within the hearts of the apostles. By the Spirit of truth, He led them into all truth, for that Spirit did not speak on His own but testified of Christ, reminding them of His words and revealing things to come (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13). Thus, the apostles were enabled to compose the New Testament Scriptures, which, in conjunction with the Old Covenant books, serve as a guiding light for the church across all ages. Christ Himself gave this Word to His congregation, and through it, He perpetually executes His prophetic ministry on earth. He preserves and propagates it, clarifies and explains it; that Word is the means by which He disciples the nations, drawing them into the fellowship of the triune God and guiding them in His commandments. Through His Word and Spirit, Christ remains with us until the end of the age.

What applies to Christ's prophetic office also pertains to His priestly office. He did not receive it for a time but exercises it eternally. In the Old Testament, the eternal nature of the priesthood was foreshadowed by the consecration of the house of Aaron and the tribe of Levi for temple service. Though the specific individuals performing this service died, they were immediately replaced by others; the priesthood itself endured. The future Messiah, however, would not be an ordinary priest serving for a time and then replaced,

but a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4). Unlike the descendants of Aaron and Levi, who became many priests because death prevented them from continuing, Hebrews 7:24, Melchizedek, in his mysterious persona, typifies the eternal duration of Christ's high priesthood. He is a king of righteousness and peace, standing alone in the history of revelation without mention of his lineage, birth, or death; typologically, he was made like the Son of God and remains a priest forever (Hebrews 7:3).

But what Melchizedek was in type, Christ is in reality. Christ could be an eternal High Priest in the fullest sense because He is the Son of God, existing from eternity (Hebrews 1:2, 3). Although He sacrificed Himself on earth and within time, He was from above, belonging in His essence to eternity, and thus could offer Himself through the eternal Spirit (Hebrews 9:14). Since Christ, as the Son of God, was prepared from eternity to come into the world and fulfill God's will (Hebrews 10:5-9), He was already a priest from eternity. In the light of accomplishing God's will in His earthly life, it can be said that Christ's priesthood began on earth (Hebrews 2:17, 5:10, 6:20, 7:26-28). This earthly priesthood was the means by which Christ became High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary through His resurrection and ascension, remaining so eternally. It is a distinctive concept from the letter to the Hebrews that Christ's life and work on earth are not seen as an end but as preparation for His eternal priestly service in heaven.

Some have inferred from this that, according to the letter, Christ was not a priest on earth at all but assumed His priesthood only upon ascending to heaven and entering the inner sanctuary. They argue that Christ was not a priest on earth because the law required priests

from the tribe of Levi to offer sacrifices according to the law, whereas Christ was from Judah and never offered sacrifices as a priest in the Jerusalem temple (Hebrews 7:14, 8:4). Therefore, if Christ was a priest, He could only be one in heaven, and He must have something to offer there (Hebrews 8:3). And what He offered there was His own blood, with which He entered the heavenly sanctuary (Hebrews 9:11, 12).

However, this inference is undoubtedly false. For like all other apostolic writings, this letter to the Hebrews places the utmost emphasis on the fact that Christ sacrificed Himself once, namely on the cross, thereby securing eternal salvation (Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 26, 28, 10:10-14). The forgiveness of sins, the great benefit of the New Covenant, was fully obtained by that sacrifice, and the New Testament, founded in His blood, brought the Old Covenant to an end (Hebrews 4:16, 8:6-13, 9:14-22). Sin, death, and the devil were vanquished by His sacrifice (Hebrews 2:14, 7:27, 9:26, 28), and by His blood, He sanctified and perfected all who obey Him (Hebrews 10:10, 14, 13:12). Precisely because Christ offered this one perfect sacrifice on the cross, He can sit as High Priest at God's right hand (Hebrews 8:1). There He suffers and dies no longer but sits as a victor on the throne (Hebrews 1:3, 13, 2:8, 9, 10:12). A main point in the apostle's discourse is that we have such a high priest, seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven (Hebrews 8:1). There can be no question of a sacrifice in heaven, as Christ accomplished on earth.

Yet Christ is and remains the High Priest in heaven; as such, He has been placed by God at His right hand. Indeed, one can say, as the Epistle to the Hebrews suggests, that He first fully embraced His

High Priesthood there, in the order of Melchizedek, and accepted His eternal priestly office (Hebrews 2:17, 5:10, 6:20). He was the Son and had to be so to become our High Priest (Hebrews 1:3, 3:6, 5:5), but that alone was not sufficient; although He was the Son, He had to learn obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5:8). The obedience He possessed as the Son (Hebrews 10:5-7), He had to demonstrate here on earth in His human suffering to become our High Priest (Hebrews 2:10ff, 4:15, 5:7-10, 7:28). All the suffering Christ endured, the temptations He faced, the death He submitted to—everything served in God's hand to sanctify Christ and perfect Him for the priestly service He now performs in heaven. This sanctification and perfection of Christ are not to be understood in a moral sense, as if He gradually became obedient through struggle, but the Apostle is referring to sanctification in a strict, ministerial sense. Christ had to maintain His obedience as the Son in the face of all temptations and simultaneously equip Himself fully for His eternal high priesthood in heaven.

Through obedience, Christ fully attained this high priesthood at God's right hand on the throne of majesty. Based on His suffering and death, based on the one perfect sacrifice, He is now seated at the right hand of His Majesty in the highest heavens. He entered—not with, but by—His own blood, once into the sanctuary (Hebrews 9:12), and is now there, in the true tabernacle built by God Himself, ministering as a liturgist (Hebrews 8:2). Now He is fully and eternally a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:10, 6:20). Just as the high priest in the Old Testament entered the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement with the blood of the goat slaughtered for himself and the blood of the goat slaughtered for the people, to sprinkle it on and before the mercy

seat, so Christ, through the blood of His sacrifice on the cross, opened the way to the true sanctuary in heaven (Hebrews 9:12). He does not take the blood He shed on Calvary to heaven in a literal sense, nor does He offer and sprinkle it there in an actual sense, but through His own blood, He enters the true tabernacle; He returns to heaven as the Christ who died and was raised, as the Christ who was dead but is now alive for all eternity (Revelation 1:18), and stands as the slaughtered Lamb in the midst of the throne (Revelation 5:6); He is now, in His person, the means of atonement for our sins and for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

Thus, His high priestly service in heaven consists in appearing before the face of God for our sake (Hebrews 9:24). In all that God does to atone for the sins of the people, Christ shows Himself to be a merciful and faithful High Priest (Hebrews 2:17), coming to the aid of those who are tempted (Hebrews 2:18, 4:15), and leading His children to glory (Hebrews 2:10). Through His obedience, He has become the guide for all who approach God through Him. He is the author of their faith, for He Himself exercised faith and can thus bring others to that faith and preserve it to the end (Hebrews 12:2). He is the author of their life (Acts 3:15—the same word in Greek translated as 'author' in Hebrews), for He first acquired that life through His death, and now He can bestow it upon others. He is the author of their salvation (Hebrews 2:10) because He paved the way of salvation Himself, and therefore, can lead others there and bring them into the sanctuary (Hebrews 10:20).

Thus, Christ is ever and always our intercessor with the Father. Just as He prayed on earth for His disciples (Luke 22:32), and for His enemies (Luke 23:34), and in His high priestly prayer commended

His entire congregation to the Father (John 17), so He continues this intercession in heaven for all His own. We must not interpret this as if Christ in heaven were on His knees before the Father, pleading for mercy, for the Father Himself loves us and gave His Son as proof of this love. Rather, this love of the Father is always given to us in the Son, who became obedient unto death on the cross. Christ's intercession is not a plea for mercy, but the expression of a powerful will (John 17:24), the Son's demand that the nations be given to Him for His inheritance and the ends of the earth for His possession (Psalm 2:8). It is the crucified and glorified Christ, the Father's own Son, who was obedient and is now exalted on the throne of majesty; it is the merciful and faithful High Priest, sanctified and perfected for this service in heaven, through whom intercession to the Father is made.

In the face of all the accusations that the law, Satan, and our own hearts can make against us, He takes up our defense (Hebrews 7:25, 1 John 2:2). He aids us in all our temptations, has compassion on all our weaknesses, cleanses our consciences, sanctifies, and completes all those who come to God through Him. He prepares a place for them in the Father's house, where there are many mansions and therefore room for many (John 14:2-3), and preserves for them the heavenly inheritance (1 Peter 1:4). Thus, believers have nothing to fear. They may boldly approach the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16, 10:22), having received from Christ in heaven the Spirit of adoption, which cries out within them, "Abba, Father," and pours out God's love in their hearts (Romans 5:5, 8:15). As Christ intercedes with the Father in heaven, so the Holy Spirit intercedes in their hearts (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). A cornerstone of our Christian confession is that we have such a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the

throne of majesty in the heavens (Hebrews 8:1); thus, a priest, an offering, an altar, and a temple are no longer needed on earth.

Christ also continues to exercise His royal office in the heavens after His resurrection. There can be no dispute about this, as Christ, by His resurrection and ascension, has been exalted to the position of Lord and Christ, as Prince and Savior, set by the Father at His right hand on the throne, and given a name above all names (Acts 2:36, 5:31; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 1:3-4). The kingship of Christ shines forth more clearly in His exaltation than in His humiliation.

In this kingship, Scripture makes a clear distinction. There is a kingship of Christ over Zion, over His people, over the church (Psalm 2:6, 72:2-7; Isaiah 9:6, 11:1-5; Luke 1:33; John 18:33), and there is also a kingship He exercises over all His enemies (Psalm 2:8-9, 72:8, 110:1-2; Matthew 28:18; 1 Corinthians 15:25-27; Revelation 1:5, 17:14). The former is a kingship of grace, and the latter is a kingship of power.

Regarding the church, the title of King often alternates with that of Head in the New Testament. Christ stands in such a close relationship to the church, which He purchased with His blood, that one single title is not enough to convey its fullness. Thus, Scripture employs various images to illustrate what Christ is to His congregation. What the bridegroom is to the bride (John 3:29, Revelation 21:2), the husband to the wife (Ephesians 5:25, Revelation 21:9), the firstborn to His brethren (Romans 8:29, Hebrews 2:11), the cornerstone to the building (Matthew 21:42, Acts 4:11, 1 Peter 2:4-8), the vine to the branches (John 15:1-2), the head to the body—all these and more is Christ to His congregation.

Particularly, the image of Christ as the cornerstone is recurrent in Scripture. In Matthew 21:42, Jesus Himself declares that the prophecy of Psalm 118:22 has been fulfilled in Him: the stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Just as a cornerstone unites and stabilizes the structure of a building, so Christ, though rejected by the Jews, has been appointed by God as the cornerstone to complete the theocracy, God's governance over His people. The apostle Peter reiterates this in Acts 4:11 and further elaborates in his first epistle, connecting it not only to Psalm 118:22 but also to Isaiah 28:16. He portrays Christ as the living stone, set by God in Zion, to which believers are added as living stones (1 Peter 2:4-6). Paul develops this metaphor by describing the church as built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets in their proclamation of the Gospel, with Christ Himself being the cornerstone of this edifice (Ephesians 2:20). Elsewhere, Paul identifies Christ as the foundation of the church (1 Corinthians 3:10), but here in Ephesians, he emphasizes Christ as the cornerstone, signifying that the church's strength lies solely in the living Christ.

Yet, the image of a building, despite depicting Christ as the cornerstone, falls short of expressing the profound union between Christ and His congregation. The connection between a cornerstone and the walls of a building is merely structural, whereas the bond between Christ and His church is one of life. Therefore, Jesus not only describes Himself as the stone set by God as the cornerstone, but also as the vine that brings forth branches and nourishes them with His life (John 15:1-2). Peter speaks of living stones, and Paul frequently employs the metaphor of a body to describe the church, with Christ as the head of this body (Ephesians 2:21, 4:12). Each local congregation is a body of Christ, and its members are

interconnected, needing and serving one another (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Collectively, the whole congregation of Christ is His body, over which He has been exalted as head through His resurrection and ascension (Ephesians 1:22-23, 4:15-16, 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 2:19). As the head, He is the life-giving principle of the church; He initiates its life, sustains, nurtures, and protects it. He fosters growth and maturity in each member, uniting them to work for each other's benefit, ultimately filling the church with the fullness of God.

In Paul's time, some erroneous teachers claimed that various spiritual beings emanated from the depths of the divine being in a descending order, collectively forming its fullness (pleroma). Paul counters this by asserting that the entire fullness of God dwells exclusively in Christ and in Him bodily (Colossians 1:19, 2:9, cf. John 1:14, 16). This fullness, in turn, dwells in the church, His body, which is the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:23). Every gift, power, office, ministry, faith, hope, love, salvation, and blessedness in the church originates from Christ. This process of filling continues until the church, in its entirety and all its members, is filled to the fullness of God (John 1:16; Ephesians 3:19, 4:13), culminating in the complete formation of the church and God being all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Christ is also termed "head" in another sense. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul states that Christ is the head of every man. In Colossians 2:10, he describes Christ as the head of all principalities and powers, that is, of all angels, because He is the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15). In Ephesians 1:10, Paul speaks of God's purpose to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth, in the fullness

of time. Here, the term "head" differs from when Christ is called the head of His congregation. In the latter case, Paul refers primarily to the organic, life-giving relationship between Christ and His church. However, when Christ is called the head of man, of angels, or of the world, the emphasis is on His sovereignty and kingship. All creatures are subject to Christ, just as He, as Mediator, is subject to the Father (1 Corinthians 11:3). While He exercises the kingship of grace over His church and is often called its head, He holds a kingship of power over all creatures and is frequently referred to as King and Lord. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the Chief of all earthly kings, and will reign until all enemies are placed under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 1:5, 17:14, 19:16).

This kingship of power should not be conflated with the absolute power Christ shares with the Father and the Spirit according to His divine nature. The omnipotence that the Son possesses from eternity differs from the authority granted to Him as Mediator according to both His divine and human natures (Matthew 28:18). As Mediator, Christ must gather, govern, and protect His church; to do so, He must be more powerful than all His and her enemies. But this is not the sole reason for Christ's kingship of power. He must also vanquish all His enemies. He does not confront or defeat them by divine omnipotence alone; rather, He demonstrates the power He acquired through His suffering and death. The battle between God and His creatures is a battle of righteousness and justice. Just as the church is redeemed through justice, so Christ's enemies will be judged through justice. God will triumph over them through the Cross (Colossians 2:15), not by sheer omnipotence. If God pursued His enemies with omnipotence alone, they could not endure for a moment. Yet, He grants them life, generation after generation, bestows His benefits

upon them, and endows them with all the gifts they possess in body and soul, which they misuse against His name. God can do all this because Christ is Mediator; even though not all things are presently subject to Him, He is crowned with honor and glory, and He will reign as King until all enemies submit to Him. Ultimately, at the end of time, as individuals reflect on their lives and the world's history, recognizing all the material and spiritual gifts granted for the sake of the Mediator, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Christ will pronounce the final judgment as the Son of Man, judging none except those condemned by the Holy Spirit in their own conscience (John 3:18, 16:8-11).

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the exaltation of Christ complete and crown His work of humiliation?

- Reflect on the significance of Christ's resurrection, ascension, and seating at the right hand of God in fulfilling His mission of redemption.

2. What are the key benefits secured by Christ through His exaltation, and how do they impact believers?

- Consider the various benefits such as reconciliation, forgiveness, and adoption as children of God that are made available through Christ's exaltation.

3. How does the concept of reconciliation in the New Testament highlight both the removal of God's wrath and the establishment of a new relationship with Him?

- Discuss the dual aspects of reconciliation: the covering of sin and the transformation of God's disposition towards humanity.

4. Why is the resurrection of Christ described as the foundation of our justification and new life in Him?

- Reflect on the importance of Christ's resurrection for believers' justification, sanctification, and hope of eternal life.

5. In what ways does Christ's ascension and seating at the right hand of God affirm His authority and ongoing work as our High Priest and

King?

- Consider the significance of Christ's position in heaven and how it ensures His continual intercession and reign over all creation.

6. How does the resurrection of Christ serve as the ultimate proof of His divine Sonship and victory over sin and death?

- Reflect on the implications of the resurrection for understanding Jesus' identity and the validation of His redemptive work.

7. What is the role of Christ's intercession in heaven, and how does it provide assurance and comfort to believers?

- Discuss the nature of Christ's intercession and how it supports believers in their spiritual journey and struggles.

8. How does the concept of Christ as the head of the Church illustrate the intimate and life-giving relationship between Him and His people?

- Reflect on the metaphor of Christ as the head and the Church as His body, and the implications for unity, growth, and service within the Church.

9. What is the significance of the universal proclamation of the Gospel in light of Christ's work of reconciliation and exaltation?

- Consider the mandate to preach the Gospel to all nations and the promise of salvation to all who believe in Christ.

10. How does the exaltation of Christ ensure the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan for the renewal of creation and the final victory over all powers of evil?

- Reflect on the future hope of new heavens and a new earth and the consummation of Christ's reign over all things.

19. The Gift of the Holy Spirit

The first act of Christ following His exaltation at the right hand of the Father is the sending of the Holy Spirit. In this exaltation, He received from His Father the Holy Spirit promised in the Old Testament, and thus, according to His own promise, He now bestows Him upon His disciples on earth (Acts 2:33). The Spirit, whom He grants, proceeds from the Father, is received by Him from the Father, and is then distributed by Him to His congregation (Luke 24:49, John 15:26). It is the Father Himself who sends the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name (John 14:26).

This sending of the Holy Spirit, which occurred on the day of Pentecost, is a singular event in the history of Christ's church; akin to the creation and incarnation, it transpired but once; it was not preceded by any manifestation of the Spirit comparable in significance, nor can it ever be repeated. Just as Christ in His conception took on human nature, never to be separated from it again, so on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit consecrated the

congregation as His dwelling and temple, never to be parted from it again. Scripture distinctly underscores this unique significance of Pentecost, referring to it as the outpouring or pouring out of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17, 18, 33; 10:45; Titus 3:6).

However, this does not preclude the Holy Spirit's activity and gifting before Pentecost. We have previously noted (pages 156 and 157) that, together with the Father and the Son, He is the Creator of all things and, within the sphere of re-creation, the Source of all life and salvation, of all gifts and abilities. Yet, there exists a significant and essential distinction between the Holy Spirit's activity and manifestation in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. This is evident, first, in the fact that the old dispensation still anticipated the coming of the Lord's Servant, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest in all His fullness, as the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:2). Secondly, the Old Testament foretells that, though there was already some participation and activity of the Holy Spirit, He would not be poured out on all flesh—on sons and daughters, old and young, servants and maids—until the last days (Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28).

Both promises find their fulfillment in the New Testament. Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God. He not only received the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb and was anointed with that Spirit without measure at His baptism, but He also lived and worked continually by that Spirit. By that Spirit He was led into the wilderness (Luke 4:1), returned to Galilee (Luke 4:14), preached the gospel, healed the sick, cast out demons (Matthew 12:28; Luke 4:18-19), gave Himself up to death (Hebrews 9:14), was raised up, and revealed as the Son of God

in power (Romans 1:3). During the forty days between His resurrection and ascension, He gave instructions to His disciples through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:3). At the ascension, having subdued all enemies and made all angels, powers, and forces subject to Himself (Ephesians 4:8; 1 Peter 3:22), He became a full partaker of the Holy Spirit with all His gifts. Ascending into the heavens, He took captivity captive, gave gifts to men, and was exalted above all heavens, that He might fill all things (Ephesians 4:8-10).

This appropriation of the Holy Spirit by Christ is so complete that the Apostle Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians 3:17, "The Lord is the Spirit." This does not blur the distinction between Christ and the Spirit, as Paul immediately refers to "the Spirit of the Lord" in the following verse. However, the Holy Spirit has become the possession of Christ, integrated into His being. Through His resurrection and ascension, Christ became the life-giving Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). He now holds the seven Spirits of God—the Spirit in His fullness—as He holds the seven stars (Revelation 3:1). The Spirit of God the Father has become the Spirit of the Son, emanating from both the Father and the Son, both in divine essence and in the economy of salvation, and is sent by the Son as well as the Father (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7).

By virtue of His perfect obedience, Christ received full and free disposal of the Holy Spirit and all His gifts and powers. He now distributes the Spirit as He wills, not in contradiction but in complete harmony with the will of the Father and the Spirit Himself. The Son sends the Spirit from the Father (John 15:26); the Father sends Him in the name of Christ (John 14:26); and the Spirit does not speak on His own, but speaks what He hears. As Christ glorified the Father on

earth, so the Spirit will glorify Christ, taking from Him and declaring it to His disciples (John 16:13-14).

Christ does not rule by force or violence in the kingdom given to Him by the Father. He did not do so during His humiliation, nor does He do so in His exaltation. His entire prophetic, priestly, and royal activity continues to be performed from heaven in a spiritual manner; He fights only with spiritual weapons. He is a King of grace and power, but in both senses, He carries out His reign through the Holy Spirit, who uses the Word as a means of grace. By that Spirit, He teaches, comforts, leads, and indwells His congregation; and by that same Spirit, He convinces the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). The final victory Christ will achieve over all His enemies will be a triumph of the Holy Spirit.

After Christ has been exalted to the right hand of God, the second promise of the Old Testament can be fulfilled, which speaks of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. Christ must first fully possess and make His own the Spirit before He can bestow Him upon His congregation. Before that time, that is, before the ascension, the Holy Spirit was not yet given in the same manner, since Christ had not yet been glorified (John 7:39). This does not imply that the Holy Spirit did not exist before Christ's glorification, as the Holy Spirit is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, and the Gospels record that John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15), that Simeon was led by the Spirit to the temple (Luke 2:26-27), and that Jesus was conceived and anointed by the Spirit. Nor does it mean that the disciples were unaware of the Holy Spirit's existence before Pentecost. They had been taught about the Spirit by the Old Testament and by Jesus Himself. Even the disciples

of John, who told Paul at Ephesus that they had not received the Holy Spirit at their baptism and had not heard that there was a Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2), did not mean to express ignorance of the Spirit's existence. They were unaware of the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurred at Pentecost. They knew John as a prophet empowered by God's Spirit but had not joined Jesus and thus lived outside the community that received the Spirit on Pentecost. On that day, there was an outpouring of the Spirit unprecedented in its magnitude.

The Old Testament already heralded this promise, and Jesus reiterated it often in His teachings. John the Baptist declared that the Messiah, unlike himself who baptized with water, would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (a purifying and consuming fire of the Holy Spirit), Matthew 3:11 and John 3:11. This delineates two distinct operations of the Holy Spirit. The first is that the Holy Spirit, poured into the hearts of the disciples, comforts them, leads them into all truth, and abides with them forever (John 14:16, 15:26, 16:7). This Spirit of comfort and guidance is bestowed solely upon Jesus' disciples; the world cannot receive Him, for it neither sees nor knows Him (John 14:17). Conversely, the Holy Spirit’s other operation in the world is to dwell in the Church and, from there, convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, thereby ruling over it (John 16:8-11).

Jesus fulfilled this promise to His disciples in a specific sense, to the Apostles, even before His ascension. On the evening of His resurrection, He appeared to His disciples, formally initiating them into their apostolic mission. He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you

retain anyone's sins, they are retained" (John 20:22-23). For the apostolic office they would soon assume, they needed a special gift and power of the Holy Spirit, which Christ Himself conferred before His ascension, distinct from the gift they would receive at Pentecost along with all believers.

The actual outpouring occurred forty days later during the Jewish feast of Pentecost, commemorating the completed harvest and the giving of the Law on Sinai. The disciples remained in Jerusalem, awaiting the fulfillment of Jesus' promise, constantly in the temple, praising and thanking God (Luke 24:49, 53). They were not alone but persisted in prayer with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, His brethren, and many others, numbering about one hundred and twenty persons (Acts 1:14-15, 2:1). As they were gathered, a sudden and unexpected sound from heaven, like a rushing mighty wind, filled the entire house where they were sitting. Tongues of flame appeared and settled on each of them. Under these signs, symbolizing the cleansing and illuminating work of the Holy Spirit, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4).

The phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit" had been used earlier (Exod. 31:3, Micah 3:8, Luke 1:41), yet the distinction is clear. Previously, the Holy Spirit was given to select individuals for specific purposes; now He descended upon all members of the congregation, dwelling and working in them perpetually. Just as the Son of God had appeared on earth in the Old Testament but took on human nature permanently in Mary’s womb, so the Holy Spirit had been active in various ways before, but on Pentecost, He made the congregation His temple, which He continually sanctifies and builds up, never departing. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit grants the Church of

Christ an independent existence, no longer confined to the nation of Israel or the borders of Palestine, but living through the Spirit dwelling within it, extending throughout the whole earth. From the temple on Zion, God now dwells in the body of the Church of Christ through His Spirit, birthing the Church as a missionary and a universal entity. The ascension of Christ finds its inevitable proof and consequence in the descent of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit first sanctified and perfected Christ through suffering and raised Him to the highest glory, so now, in like manner and by the same means, He must shape the body of Christ until it reaches full maturity, constituting the fulfillment, the pleroma, of Him who fills all in all.

In the nascent days of Christ's disciples, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit manifested in extraordinary powers and effects. Upon being filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, they commenced speaking in diverse tongues, as the Spirit granted them utterance (Acts 2:4). According to Luke's account, this was not a hearing miracle but rather a speaking miracle. Luke, a close companion and co-laborer of Paul, was well acquainted with the phenomenon of speaking in tongues (glossolalia), which was evident in places like Corinth; he references it in Acts 10:46-47 and 19:6. Undoubtedly, the event at Pentecost was related to this speaking in tongues, for Peter later affirmed that Cornelius and his household had received the Holy Spirit as they had, (Acts 10:47, cf. 11:17, 15:8). Yet, there was a distinction. In 1 Corinthians 14, as well as in Acts 10:46 and 19:6, speaking in tongues is mentioned without the qualifier "foreign"; however, in Acts 2:4, it explicitly refers to "other languages."

When the members of the Corinthian congregation spoke in tongues, they were not understood unless there was subsequent interpretation (1 Cor. 14:2f); but in Jerusalem, the disciples spoke in other languages before the crowd gathered and heard them, excluding the possibility of a hearing miracle (Acts 2:4). When the multitude heard them, they comprehended what was spoken; each one heard them in their native language (Acts 2:6, 8). The "other languages" in verse 4 are undoubtedly the same as the "own languages" of the hearers in verse 6, further identified as the languages in which they were born in verse 8. Thus, the disciples did not utter unintelligible sounds but spoke in other, new languages, as Mark 16:17 denotes, which the untrained Galileans were not expected to speak (Acts 2:7). In these languages, they proclaimed the mighty works of God, particularly those manifested in the recent resurrection and exaltation of Christ (Acts 2:4 and 14ff).

Luke's account should not be construed to suggest that Jesus' disciples spoke all the languages of the earth at that time or that each disciple spoke all foreign languages. Nor was the purpose of this linguistic miracle to enable the disciples to preach the Gospel to foreigners in their own tongue, as these foreigners, having come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, would have understood Aramaic or Greek. The fifteen names listed in verses 9-11 denote the regions from which these foreigners came, not distinct languages. Therefore, equipping the apostles with the gift of foreign languages was unnecessary. This specific gift of foreign languages is not mentioned again in the New Testament; Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, never refers to it; Aramaic and Greek sufficed for communication throughout the known world.

The speaking in foreign languages at Pentecost was a unique event, connected to glossolalia but distinct and superior. While glossolalia represents a diminished form of prophecy, which Paul regarded as inferior to prophecy, the speaking in foreign languages at Jerusalem combined glossolalia and prophecy, being an intelligible proclamation of God's mighty works in foreign tongues. The power of the newly poured-out Spirit was so overwhelming that it dominated the disciples' consciousness, compelling them to speak in articulate sounds recognized by listeners as their native languages. The purpose of this linguistic miracle was not to endow the disciples with knowledge of foreign tongues but to impress upon them the significance of the event that had transpired. What better way to manifest this than through the nascent, universal Church proclaiming God’s mighty works in various tongues? At creation, the morning stars sang and all God's children shouted for joy; at Christ's birth, a multitude of the heavenly host sang of God's goodwill; on the Church's birth, they themselves sang the mighty works of God in many tongues.

On the day of Pentecost, though speaking in tongues held a distinct place, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit manifested itself in numerous extraordinary powers and effects. The gift of the Spirit was often bestowed upon coming to faith, sometimes at baptism (Acts 2:38), or through the laying on of hands, whether before baptism (Acts 9:17) or after baptism (Acts 8:17, 19:6). Regularly, this gift comprised a special empowerment. Thus, we read that through the Spirit, the disciples were endowed with boldness to proclaim the word (Acts 4:8, 31), a robust strength of faith (6:5, 11:24), comfort and joy (9:31, 13:52), wisdom (6:3, 10), speaking in tongues (10:46, 15:8, 19:6), prophecy (11:28, 20:23, 21:11), visions and revelations

(7:55, 8:39, 10:19, 13:2, 15:28, 16:6, 20:22), and miraculous healings (3:6, 5:5, 12, 15, 16, 8:7, 13). These extraordinary powers, akin to the works of Jesus, elicited awe and amazement (Acts 2:7, 37, 43; 3:10; 4:13; 5:5, 11, 13, 24). They stirred opposition and incited hatred and persecution from enemies, but they also prepared the ground for the Gospel's reception. Initially, they were indispensable for granting the Christian confession access and stability in the world.

Throughout the apostolic era, these extraordinary workings of the Spirit persisted. This is especially evident in the testimony of the Apostle Paul. Paul himself was richly endowed with these special gifts of the Spirit. In an extraordinary manner, through a revelation from Jesus Christ, he was converted on the road to Damascus and called to apostleship (Acts 9:3f). Subsequent revelations continued to come to him (Acts 16:6-7, 9; 2 Cor. 12:1-7; Gal. 2:2). He possessed the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, teaching, and speaking in tongues (1 Cor. 14:6, 18). Signs, wonders, and mighty works accompanied him, serving as proofs of his apostleship (2 Cor. 12:12). He preached in demonstration of the Spirit and power (1 Cor. 2:4); Christ Himself worked through him to bring about the obedience of the Gentiles, through words and deeds, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God (Rom. 15:18-19).

Despite Paul's keen awareness of his apostolic dignity and his firm maintenance of it, the gifts of the Spirit were not exclusive to him but were granted to all believers. In 1 Cor. 12:8-10, cf. Romans 12:6-8, he enumerates various gifts, noting that they are distributed by the Spirit in varying degrees according to His will. Paul esteemed these gifts highly; they were not merited by the believers, for they had nothing that they had not received, and thus lacked any reason for

pride or contempt towards others (1 Cor. 4:6-7). All these gifts and powers are wrought by one and the same Spirit, fulfilling the Old Testament promise (Gal. 3:14) and serving as firstfruits, guaranteeing a great harvest and pledging the heavenly inheritance to come (Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5; Eph. 1:14, 4:30).

Nevertheless, the apostle's judgment concerning these extraordinary gifts differed significantly from that of many congregation members. In Corinth, some prided themselves on the spiritual gifts they had received, looking down upon those less fortunate and using these gifts not for the benefit of others but for personal glorification. They placed undue importance on the mysterious and unintelligible speech of tongues. Paul, however, taught them differently (1 Cor. 12-14). He first established the criterion by which all spiritual gifts must be judged: the confession of Jesus as Lord. One who speaks through the Spirit of God cannot curse Jesus; only those who confess Jesus as Lord prove by this that they speak through the Holy Spirit. The hallmark of the Spirit and all His gifts and workings is their alignment with the confession of Jesus as the Christ (1 Cor. 12:3).

He goes on to elucidate that the gifts of the Spirit, though all conforming to the same divine standard, are distinct and uniquely bestowed upon each individual, not according to merit or worthiness, but according to the free will of the Spirit, as stated in 1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

Hence, these gifts should not be a cause for self-exaltation or contempt for others but ought to be applied wholeheartedly and willingly for the benefit of one another, for all believers are members of one body and need each other, as described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-

30. If the gifts are meant for this purpose, for the common good, as stated in 1 Corinthians 12:7, then there is also a hierarchy among the gifts themselves, for some are more conducive to edification than others. Thus, there are good, better, and best gifts. Therefore, in the final verse of 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle advises believers to earnestly desire the best gifts.

Love is the most excellent way to pursue the best gifts. For without it, the greatest gifts are worthless, as noted in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3; love surpasses them all in virtue, as detailed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; and it surpasses them all in duration, for all gifts will cease, but love is eternal; among the three virtues—faith, hope, and love—love is the highest in value, as emphasized in 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Therefore, love must be pursued above all, even though the pursuit of spiritual gifts is not to be rejected, as stated in 1 Corinthians 14:1. However, in this pursuit, attention should be directed primarily to those gifts that serve to edify the congregation and thus most effectively put love into action. Viewed from this perspective, prophecy is much higher than speaking in tongues. For he who speaks in tongues is not understood, speaks mysteries that are incomprehensible to the hearers, speaks into the air, leaves his mind unengaged, does not bring unbelievers to faith, but rather gives the impression of madness. If there are members of the congregation who possess this gift, they must use it sparingly and preferably with interpretation; if this cannot be provided, let them remain silent in the church. On the other hand, he who prophesies, who proclaims the Word of God through revelation of the Spirit, speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort; he builds up the church and brings unbelievers to faith. Whatever gift one has received, its measure is the confession of Jesus

as Lord, and its goal is the edification of the church. God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as affirmed in 1 Corinthians 14.

This profound treatise on spiritual gifts did not only bear fruit for the church in Corinth but continues to hold significance for the church throughout the ages. Again and again, individuals and groups have placed greater value on extraordinary phenomena, on revelations and miracles, rather than on the Spirit's work in rebirth, conversion, and the renewal of life. The abnormal draws attention, while the normal remains unnoticed; people revel in apparitions, ecstatic experiences, and sensational excesses, turning a blind eye to the slow and steady growth of the Kingdom of God. But Paul had a different view; no matter how much he valued the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, he admonished the brothers in Corinth: do not be children in your thinking, but be infants in evil, and in your thinking be mature.

In this manner, the Apostle redirects our attention from the transient manifestations of the Spirit to His enduring and essential work in the life of the congregation. This perspective was already taking shape in the Old Testament era. While various extraordinary gifts and powers were attributed to the Holy Spirit, the prophets and psalmists, growing increasingly aware of Israel's waywardness and the deceitfulness of the human heart, proclaimed with even greater force and clarity that true renewal through the Holy Spirit was necessary for Israel to become a people of God in the fullest sense. As Jeremiah notes, a Moor cannot change his skin, nor a leopard his spots; similarly, those trained in evil cannot do good (Jer. 13:23). It is God who must transform the heart by His Spirit for His people to walk in His ways and keep His statutes. The Spirit of the Lord alone is the

master of true, spiritual, and moral life, as affirmed in Psalms 51:13-14, Isaiah 32:15, and Ezekiel 36:27.

This message is echoed in the Gospel of John. In His conversation with Nicodemus, Christ explains that entrance into and participation in the kingdom of heaven are only possible through rebirth by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3, 5). In His farewell discourses (John 14-16), He elaborates that the Spirit, whom He will send from the Father after His glorification, will take His place among the disciples. It is thus beneficial for them that Christ departs, for only then will the Comforter come to them. Once Christ goes to the Father, it signifies that He has fully accomplished His earthly mission. In heaven, He stands at the right hand of the Father as High Priest and Advocate for His congregation on earth, interceding for all their needs. He particularly asks the Father for the Holy Spirit in all His fullness to be sent to His disciples. This Spirit will then take Christ's place among them as Comforter, Guide, Intercessor, and Guardian.

In this, the disciples will not suffer loss. While Christ walked the earth and associated with His disciples, there remained a degree of distance and misunderstanding. However, the Spirit who comes to them will dwell within them, not remaining external or distant. Christ's earthly presence was temporary, but the Spirit He sends will remain with them eternally. Indeed, Christ Himself will come to them through the Spirit; He will not leave them as orphans but will come to them, uniting Himself with them in an unprecedented manner. They will see Him again, live because He lives, and understand that Christ is in the Father, they in Him, and He in them. Through the Spirit, both the Father and the Son will come to the disciples and make their abode with them. This is the primary work

of the Holy Spirit: to create a profound communion between the Father, the Son, and the disciples, surpassing anything previously known.

When the disciples partake in this fellowship and live by it, when they are united to Christ as branches to the vine, no longer servants but friends, the Spirit of truth will guide them into all truth. He will remind them of Christ's teachings, continually testify about Christ, and declare to them things to come. The disciples will not only have communion with Christ and the Father but will also be conscious of it. The Holy Spirit will inform them about Christ, His unity with the Father, and their fellowship with both. The ultimate goal is that all believers be one, just as Christ and the Father are one, so that the world may know that the Father has sent the Son (John 17:21-23).

When the outpouring of the Holy Spirit transpired on the day of Pentecost, it was understandable that the extraordinary phenomena accompanying this rich spiritual effusion initially drew significant attention. However, we must not overlook the deeper and more significant reality: through the gift of the Spirit, the disciples were united in the formation of a singular, independent, holy congregation. They were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they held all things in common. For a brief period, the unity Christ spoke of was realized within the church at Jerusalem. As the fervor of their first love waned and a more tempered mindset emerged, as congregations were established in other places and among diverse peoples, and as divisions and schisms arose within the Christian church, the unity binding all believers took on a different form. Though it became less lively and deep, sometimes nearly imperceptible, we must remember

amidst all differences and strife, that this unity has persisted in essence to this day and will manifest more gloriously in the future than it did briefly in Jerusalem.

Among the Apostles, it is Paul who vividly presents this ideal of church unity, steadfastly adhering to it despite the divisions he witnessed in his time. The church is one body, wherein all members need and serve one another (Romans 12:4, 1 Corinthians 12:12ff). This unity is because it is the body of Christ (Romans 12:5, Ephesians 1:23, Colossians 1:24). The unity of the church is rooted in and springs from fellowship with Christ. He is the head of every believer, of every local church, and of the church as a whole. All believers are new creatures, created in Christ for good works, that they might walk in them (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10). Christ lives and dwells in them, and they live, move, and have their being in Him, He being their very life (Romans 6:11, 8:1, 10, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Galatians 2:20, Philippians 1:21, Colossians 3:4). The phrase "in Christ" (in the Lord, in Him) appears more than one hundred and fifty times in the New Testament, indicating that Christ is not only the constant source of spiritual life but also directly and immediately lives in the believer. The unity is as intimate as that between the cornerstone and the temple, man and woman, head and body, vine and branch. The faithful are in Christ, just as all things are in God by virtue of their creation and maintenance, just as the fish lives in the water, the bird in the sky, the man in his work, and the scholar in his study. They have been crucified with Him, died, buried, raised up, seated at God’s right hand, and glorified with Him (Romans 6:4ff, Galatians 2:20, 6:14, Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 2:12, 20, 3:3). They have put on Christ, take on His form, reveal in their bodies both His suffering and life, and are made perfect in Him; in a word, Christ is all and in

all (Romans 13:14, 2 Corinthians 4:11, Galatians 4:19, Colossians 1:24, 2:10, 3:11).

This intimate fellowship is possible because Christ communicates Himself to the believers through His Spirit. Since Christ, through His suffering and death, has wholly acquired the Spirit with all His gifts and powers as His possession, He can be called the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17). He has acquired the right to distribute this Spirit to whomever He wills. The Spirit of God has become the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Son, the Spirit of the Lord (Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 2:16, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Galatians 4:6, Philippians 1:19). Receiving the Spirit is synonymous with having Christ within, for whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him and is not His (Romans 8:9-10). The faithful are one Spirit with Him (1 Corinthians 6:17), they are temples of the Holy Spirit, through whom God Himself dwells in them (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 6:19). They are continually led by the Spirit and sealed until the day of redemption (Romans 8:15-16, 2 Corinthians 1:22, Ephesians 1:13, 4:30). By the same Spirit, they all have access to the Father and are built together on the foundation of the apostles and prophets into a dwelling place of God (Ephesians 2:18, 22).

Thus, the Holy Scriptures describe the profound union between Christ and His congregation, later termed unio mystica (mystical union; mysterious, hidden union). This union, in its depth and intimacy, surpasses our understanding. It is distinct in nature and character from the union within the divine being of the three persons, for while all three share the same divine essence, Christ and the faithful remain distinct in essence. The union between Christ and the church is often compared to the union between Him and the

Father (John 10:38, 14:11, 20, 17:21-23). Yet, Christ speaks not as the only begotten Son but as the Mediator, exalted at God's right hand, through whom the Father accomplishes His will. Just as the Father chose His own in Christ before the world's foundation (Ephesians 1:3) and has blessed and redeemed them in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6-7, Acts 20:28), so He gathers them all into one in Christ (Ephesians 1:10).

But as close and indissoluble as the union between the Father and the Mediator is, so is the union between Christ and the believers. This union surpasses in its inner strength any other union found among creatures, and even that which exists between God and His creation. While it is distinct from all pantheistic associations, it far transcends all deistic separations and contractual relationships. Scripture reveals something of its essence by comparing it to the relationship between vine and branches, head and members, husband and wife. It is a union that binds the entirety of Christ with the entirety of His congregation and each of its members in the depth of their being, at the core of their personality, fully and forever. It began in eternity when the Son of God declared Himself ready for the mediatorship; it acquired its objective substance in the fullness of time when Christ assumed human nature, entered into the fellowship of His people, and gave Himself up to death for their sake; and it is realized personally in each believer when the Holy Spirit descends into them, incorporates them into Christ, and they, in turn, acknowledge and declare this union with Christ in faith.

This fellowship with the person of Christ also entails fellowship in all His goods and benefits. There is no participation in the benefits of Christ without sharing in His person, for the benefits are inseparable

from His person. This would be conceivable, at least to some extent, if the goods that Christ gives were of a material nature; for one can give us their money and possessions without giving themselves to us. But the goods that Christ gives are of a spiritual nature; they consist, first and foremost, in His favor, in His mercy, in His love, and these are thoroughly personal and cannot be separated from Christ. The "treasure of merit" is therefore not deposited anywhere on earth by Christ in the hands of pope or priest, in church or sacrament; rather, the treasure of merit resides solely with and in Christ Himself. He is that treasure; in Him, the Father turns His kind, benevolent face toward us, and that is all our salvation.

Conversely, there can be no communion with the person of Christ without simultaneously sharing in all His treasures and goods. The relationship between the Father and Christ serves as the foundation and example for the relationship between Christ and His congregation. The Father has given Himself to the Son, and specifically to the Son as the Mediator of God and man; He has retained nothing for Himself but has given everything to Christ. All things have been given to Him by the Father (Matthew 11:27, John 3:35); whatever the Father has is His (John 16:15, 17:10); the Father and Christ are one, the Father is in Him, and He is in the Father (John 10:38, 14:11, 20, 17:21-23). In turn, Christ communicates Himself and all He possesses to the congregation through the Holy Spirit (John 16:13-15). He reserves nothing for Himself. As the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily (Colossians 1:19, 2:9), so He fills the congregation until it reaches the measure of His fullness and is filled to the fullness of God (Ephesians 1:23, 3:19, 4:13, 16); He is all in all (Colossians 3:11).

It is a fullness that we receive from Christ, a divine fullness, a fullness of grace and truth, a fullness that never runs dry, giving grace upon grace (John 1:14, 16). This fullness dwells in Christ Himself, in His person, in His divine and human nature, during His state of humiliation and exaltation. There is a fullness of grace in His incarnation, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). There is a fullness of grace in His life and death, for in the days of His flesh He learned obedience through what He suffered, and being perfected, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Hebrews 5:7-9). There is a fullness of grace in His resurrection, for by it He was declared to be the Son of God in power, and He has regenerated us into a living hope (Romans 1:3, 1 Peter 1:3). There is a fullness of grace in His ascension into heaven, for by it He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men (Ephesians 4:8). There is a fullness of grace in His intercession, for through it He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him (Hebrews 7:25). It is a long, broad, deep stream of grace, carrying believers from beginning to end and into eternity. It is a fullness that gives grace for grace, grace upon grace, replacing one grace with another, flowing continuously without delay or interruption. It is all grace, pure grace, flowing from Christ to the church.

The benefits which Christ bestows upon His people in communion with Him can be comprehensively summed up under the singular name of grace. This term, however, encompasses a fullness, an incalculable wealth of blessings. The reconciliation wrought by Christ through His sufficient sacrifice, establishing peace with the Father, is but the beginning. In Christ, God has renounced His wrath and

established a relationship of peace with the world (2 Cor. 5:19). The Holy Scriptures enumerate these blessings abundantly: vocation, regeneration, faith, conversion, justification, remission of sins, adoption as children, redemption from the law, religious freedom, hope, love, peace, joy, consolation, sanctification, preservation, perseverance, glorification, and more. These blessings encompass all that the congregation collectively, and every believer individually, has received, is receiving, and will receive from the fullness of Christ through all ages, in all circumstances, in prosperity and adversity, in life and death, on this side of the grave and in the hereafter for all eternity.

Given this multitude and wealth, it is impossible to fully develop each benefit; it is exceedingly difficult to obtain a comprehensive overview of them. Even categorizing them in a systematic order and assigning each its rightful place in relation to the whole presents numerous challenges. Different theologians rank them variably. However, three main groups of benefits can be distinctly identified. First, there are benefits that prepare humanity and introduce them to the covenant of grace, enabling them to receive and accept the blessings of that covenant with willing hearts: vocation, regeneration (in the narrow sense), faith, and conversion. Second, there are blessings that alter a person's standing before God, freeing them from guilt and renewing their conscience: justification, forgiveness of sins, adoption as children, the testimony of the Holy Spirit with our spirit, deliverance from the law, spiritual freedom, peace, and joy. Third, there are benefits that transform a person's state, freeing them from the stain of sin and renewing them in the image of God: rebirth (in the broader sense), dying and rising with Christ, ongoing conversion, walking in the Spirit, and perseverance to the end. These

acts of grace are perfected and completed in the heavenly glory and bliss which God is preparing for His own, and which will be discussed in a separate paragraph at the end of this teaching of the Christian religion.

Before focusing on these three groups of benefits, it is crucial to note that both they and Christ Himself are given to us solely by the Holy Spirit. We have seen that the Father is in Christ, that only in Christ does He show us His favorable countenance, and that only in and through Him does He make His dwelling with us. Similarly, Christ is in the Holy Spirit, and He cannot and will not come to us except through that Spirit. Through the Spirit, Christ shares Himself and communicates His benefits to us. The Spirit is called the Holy Spirit because He stands in a special relationship to the Father and to Christ, thereby placing us in a special relationship to both. Therefore, we must not think that we can ever have fellowship with the Father and Christ in any way other than through the Holy Spirit. Everyone who names the name of Christ must depart from iniquity (2 Tim 2:19).

According to Scripture, the Holy Spirit is the agent of regeneration and faith (John 3:5, 1 Cor. 12:3). He is the Spirit of truth, leading us into all truth and making known to us the things given to us by God (John 16:13, 1 Cor. 2:12). He justifies our conscience and testifies of our adoption as children (Rom. 8:15, 1 Cor. 6:11, Gal. 4:6). He pours out God's love in our hearts, gives peace and joy, and frees us from the law, flesh, sin, and death (Rom. 5:5, 8:2, 14:17). He is the Comforter, the Intercessor, who defends our interests, protects and supports us, and does not leave us like Christ did according to His human nature but remains with us always, comforting us and

praying within us (John 14:16, Acts 9:31, Rom. 8:26). The spiritual life is not only awakened by Him but also constantly maintained and guided by Him; He is the law and rule of it all (Rom. 8:2, 14, Gal. 5:18). He renews and sanctifies that life, makes it bear fruit, and makes it pleasing to God (Rom. 15:13, 16, Gal. 5:22, 2 Thess. 2:13, Tit. 3:5, 1 Peter 1:2). The Christian's whole life is a walk in the Spirit (Rom. 8:4ff, Gal. 5:16, 25). He unites all believers into one body and builds them up into one temple, the dwelling place of God (Eph. 2:18-22, 4:3, 4). He guarantees their heavenly inheritance (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Eph. 1:13, 4:30), and also brings about their resurrection and exaltation (Rom. 8:11, 1 Cor. 15:44).

In a word, Christ and all His benefits, the love of the Father and the grace of the Son, become our portion only in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. What is the significance of Christ sending the Holy Spirit after His exaltation, and how does this fulfill Old Testament promises?

- Reflect on how the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost completes Christ's work and fulfills the promises made in the Old Testament.

2. How does the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers and the Church differ from His activity in the Old Testament?

- Consider the unique and permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament compared to His selective presence

in the Old Testament.

3. What roles does the Holy Spirit play in the life and ministry of Jesus, according to the chapter?

- Reflect on the various ways the Holy Spirit empowered and guided Jesus throughout His earthly ministry and beyond.

4. How does the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost mark a new era in the history of redemption?

- Discuss the significance of Pentecost as a singular event in the life of the Church and its implications for the ongoing work of the Spirit.

5. In what ways does the Holy Spirit continue the work of Christ in His absence?

- Reflect on how the Holy Spirit teaches, comforts, leads, and indwells believers, continuing the mission of Christ in a spiritual manner.

6. How does the Holy Spirit's presence and work in the Church serve as evidence of Christ's ascension and ongoing reign?

- Consider the relationship between Christ's ascension, the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the manifestation of the Spirit's power in the Church.

7. What are the two distinct operations of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the chapter, and how do they manifest in the life of the Church and the world?

- Discuss the Holy Spirit's work in comforting and guiding believers versus His role in convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment.

8. How does the unity of the Church, as described in the chapter, reflect the work of the Holy Spirit?

- Reflect on how the Holy Spirit creates and sustains the unity and fellowship of the Church, making it one body in Christ.

9. What is the importance of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit in the early Church, and how do they differ from His ongoing work today?

- Consider the role of miraculous gifts in the early Church and how the Spirit's work continues in different forms in the present day.

10. How does the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence guarantee the believers' future inheritance and resurrection?

- Reflect on the Holy Spirit as a seal and guarantee of the believers' future hope, including their resurrection and eternal life with God.

20. The Calling.

To make us partakers of this communion with His person and His benefits, Christ employs not only the Spirit, whom He poured out upon the congregation, but also the Word, which He gave to instruct and guide it. He has linked the two in such a manner that together they serve in the exercise of His prophetic, priestly, and royal office. Yet, comprehending this relationship and defining it clearly has always posed a challenge; various views about the relationship between the Word and the Spirit have existed through the ages and persist to this day.

On one side are those who regard the preaching of the Word as sufficient, disregarding the necessity of the Spirit's work. Followers of Pelagius, both in ancient times and in later periods, have been guilty of this error. They perceive Christianity solely as a doctrine, view Jesus merely as an exalted example, and reduce the Gospel to a new law. Believing that man, though weakened by sin, has not died spiritually and retains the freedom of will, they argue that the Gospel's preaching alone suffices to lead man to repentance if he so chooses and to guide him in following Jesus' example. They feel no need for the regenerating action of the Holy Spirit; they deny and contest His personality and divinity. At best, they consider the Holy Spirit merely as a force emanating from God, or more precisely, from the person of Jesus, fostering a moral disposition and an ideal will within the congregation.

Conversely, there are those known as "spiritists" (antinomians, enthusiasts, mystics) who emphasize the Spirit's work while underestimating the Word's role in converting people. To them, the Word (Scripture, the Gospel's preaching) is not the spiritual reality itself but merely a sign and symbol of it; by itself, it is a dead letter

that cannot penetrate the human heart and implant the principle of new life. At most, it has an instructive effect but lacks the power to transform the heart. This transformation occurs solely through the Holy Spirit, who directly from God penetrates the innermost being of man, making him partakers of the spiritual reality signified by the Word. Thus, the spiritual man is born of God and taught by God, alone understands the Scriptures, transcends their letter to grasp their heart and essence, and uses them as a standard and guide temporarily. However, the Scriptures are not truly the source of his religious knowledge, for he is internally taught by the Spirit of God and gradually grows beyond the Scriptures.

As the Spirit's workings within the heart become increasingly independent of Scripture, they also detach from the person of Christ and historical Christianity as a whole. Mysticism then evolves into rationalism. When the inner working of the Spirit is separated from the Word of Scripture, it loses its distinctive character and can no longer be distinguished from God's ordinary working in human reason and conscience. God's Spirit naturally dwells in each person; the inner word is inscribed in each heart from birth, and Christ merely articulated it. Something is not true because it is in the Bible; it is in the Bible because it is true. Christianity is thus the original, natural religion, as old as the world, fundamentally underlying all historical religions. Mysticism always tends toward rationalism, just as rationalism continually reverts to mysticism. Here the extremes converge and clasp hands.

The Christian Church has always endeavored to avoid these errors and to harmonize the Word and the Spirit. However, in doing so, it has diverged in different directions within its various confessions.

The Roman Church, for instance, does not regard Holy Scripture and Church Tradition as actual means of grace but merely as sources of truth. Intellectual assent to that truth is termed faith; yet, since this faith is merely assent, it is insufficient for salvation and hence possesses only a preparatory significance. True salvation is communicated first through the sacrament, leading Rome to see the Holy Spirit's work primarily in the foundation and maintenance of the church with its teaching, pastoral, and priestly functions, and then in the supernatural grace, virtues, and gifts imparted to the faithful through the sacrament.

The Reformation vehemently opposed the notion of severing the salvific work of the Spirit from the Word and binding it solely to the sacrament. It not only reinstated Scripture as the singular, clear, and sufficient source of truth, excluding Tradition, but also honored it as the means for the faithful, restoring the primacy of the Word before the Sacrament. This necessitated a profound contemplation on the relationship between Word and Spirit. The Reformation was compelled to address this, particularly because ancient errors resurfaced with robust advocates. While the Socinians revived the teachings of Arius and Pelagius, viewing the Gospel as a new law and dismissing the need for the Holy Spirit’s special work, the Anabaptists veered into mysticism, extolling the inner word and denouncing the Holy Scriptures as a dead letter and an empty symbol.

The journey to discern the correct path was arduous, and soon Lutherans and Reformed theologians diverged on this issue as well. The Lutherans bound Word and Spirit so tightly that the distinction between the two was often obscured. They confined the Spirit’s

salvific work to the Word, asserting that man could enter salvation only through the Word. Since the Holy Scriptures were created by the Holy Spirit, they were imbued with His power for conversion. Thus, just as bread possesses an inherent power to nourish, so the Scriptures, through the Holy Spirit, carried an internal, sanctifying power; the Holy Spirit, they asserted, never worked apart from it.

The Reformed tradition could not assent to this view, as they maintained that the finite could never fully absorb and contain the infinite. While Word and Spirit were closely related, they remained distinct. The Spirit could work, and sometimes did, without the Word; when He chose to work through the Word, it was of His own free volition. Generally, He operated in conjunction with the Word, particularly within the covenant community and the Church. Yet, He did not dwell in the Scriptures or the preached Word, but within the congregation, the living body of Christ. The Spirit did not utilize the Word merely as a vehicle of His power; rather, He personally penetrated the heart of man, renewing it unto eternal life.

To rightly understand the relationship between Word and Spirit, we must recognize that God employs the Word as a means in all His external works, not only in presenting Christ and His benefits. In Scripture, the Word is never a mere empty sound or sign but is imbued with power and life, conveying something of the speaker’s personality and soul, thereby effecting change.

This is particularly true of God; when He speaks, something happens, as the psalmist declares, "For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9). God’s Word never returns empty but accomplishes His will and prospers in the task for

which He sends it (Isa. 55:11). This Word has creative and sustaining power because God speaks it through the Son (John 1:3; Col. 1:15) and through the Spirit (Ps. 33:6; 104:30), thus communicating it to His creatures. There is a divine discourse embedded in all creation; all creatures are founded upon thoughts spoken by Him, owing their existence and essence to God's Word.

However, these divine thoughts are comprehended not by all creatures but by rational beings, particularly humanity. Created in God's image, man can think and speak, internalizing God's thoughts laid out in creation, making them his own, and articulating them. From the moment man emerged perfectly from his Creator's hand, he could understand God's internal moral law inscribed on his heart and the external commandment added to it. Unlike any other creature, God entered into a covenant with man, incorporating him into His community and commanding him to walk in His ways willingly and knowingly. The moral law was both the content and the proclamation, the rule and the standard of that original covenant established between God and the newly created man.

Through his willful disobedience, man did indeed break the covenant and deprive himself of the spiritual power to keep God's law and thus to attain eternal life. Nevertheless, God, in His infinite mercy, has not withdrawn from creation nor abandoned humanity altogether. Though it is said of the Gentiles that God allowed them to walk in their own ways, distinct from Israel, He continues to manifest His eternal power and divine nature to them. He does not leave them untouched but appoints their times and the boundaries of their dwelling places so that they might seek Him and perhaps find Him (Acts 14:17, 17:26-27, Romans 1:20).

Thus, God continues to speak to every human being. The Reformed theologians have always acknowledged this by referring to a “general calling,” which extends beyond the bounds of Christendom and is a privilege for all peoples and nations. While the Gentiles do not partake in the calling of the Gospel, they are by no means devoid of a divine summons. God still speaks to them through nature (Romans 1:20), through history (Acts 17:26), through reason (John 1:9), and through conscience (Romans 2:14-15). Although this calling is insufficient for salvation—since it lacks the knowledge of Christ, the only way to the Father and the sole name under heaven given for salvation (John 14:6, Acts 4:12)—it remains of immense value and significance.

This general call, which God in His common grace extends to all men, may not be the proclamation of the Gospel, but it is still a proclamation of the Law. Despite man’s darkened understanding, which often leads to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and misapplications, its substance remains the same moral law that God originally inscribed upon the human heart. It still demands love for God above all and love for one's neighbor as oneself. Although the Gentiles do not possess the law in its perfect form as given to Israel, they act according to its principles, guided by moral rules in their thoughts and actions. This behavior demonstrates that the law is written in their hearts, their consciences bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing and at other times defending them (Romans 2:14-15).

Therefore, the bond between God and man is not entirely severed by sin. God does not abandon man, and man, in turn, cannot completely let go of God. Humanity remains under the influence of His

revelation and the authority of His law. God continues to speak to mankind through nature and history, through reason and conscience, through blessings and judgments, and through life experiences and soul-searching. Through this profound and powerful discourse, God sustains in man the consciousness of his dependence on God and his sense of responsibility. He urges humanity toward a religious and moral life, and when man transgresses, his own conscience accuses and condemns him. This bond is not an external compulsion but an internal, moral tie that connects man to God and His revelation. It is a testimony of God's Spirit that still echoes within fallen man, urging him to do good. For as much as there is a general revelation of God and an illumination by the Logos within man, there is also a general working of God's Spirit. By that Spirit, God dwells in all creatures, and we live, move, and have our being in Him (Acts 17:28). This general, "material" calling is not only external and objective, revealing God's law through nature, history, reason, and conscience, but also internal and subjective, morally binding each individual to God's revelation and compelling him in his own conscience to observe God's law.

It is true that through this preaching of the law, God does not renew or sanctify man, for the law is powerless to do so because of the flesh (Romans 8:3). Yet, He does restrain sin, curb passions, and hold back the tide of iniquity. This restraint makes human society and civil righteousness possible, paving the way for higher civilization, richer culture, and the flourishing of arts and sciences. Indeed, the earth is still full of God's goodness. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. He does not cease to do good, giving rain from heaven and fruitful

seasons, filling hearts with food and gladness (Psalm 104:24, 145:7, Matthew 5:45, Acts 14:17).

Distinct from this general revelation of God, which reaches us through nature and conscience, is the special calling contained in the Word of the Gospel. This special calling is addressed to all who live within the bounds of Christianity. The general revelation is not nullified or abolished by this special preaching but rather included and strengthened. This is evident from the fact that Holy Scripture, which is the Word of special revelation, acknowledges and confirms general revelation in nature and history, purifying it from all false admixtures. The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork (Ps. 19:1). The invisible things of God have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made (Rom. 1:20), and the work of the law is written on the hearts of men (Rom. 2:15). A Christian, taught by the Scriptures, comprehends these truths far better than one who relies solely on reason.

Moreover, the moral law, only dimly and imperfectly known to the Gentiles, was perfectly and purely proclaimed by God on Sinai and given to His people Israel as a rule of life. When Christ came to earth, He did not abolish this law but fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17), both in His own person and in the lives of those who follow Him and walk by the Spirit (Rom. 3:31; 8:3-4; Gal. 5:14).

Law and Gospel are thus the two components of the Word of God. They are distinct yet inseparable, accompanying each other throughout Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. The distinction between Law and Gospel is not the same as that between the Old and New Testaments. Those who see the Law as an imperfect Gospel and

the Gospel as a perfect Law confuse these distinctions. The terms Old and New Testament refer to two successive dispensations within one covenant of grace and to the two groups of Bible books that contain these dispensations. In contrast, the distinction between Law and Gospel points to two entirely different covenants. The Law belongs to the covenant of works, established with the first man, promising eternal life through perfect obedience. The Gospel, however, proclaims the covenant of grace, revealed after the fall, offering eternal life by grace through faith in Christ.

The covenant of grace does not abolish or nullify the covenant of works but fulfills it. Christ meets the demands of the covenant of works on our behalf (cf. p. 308). Hence, the covenant of grace, though purely gracious, employs the law of the covenant of works, binds it to itself, and fulfills it in believers through the Spirit of Christ. The law retains its place in the covenant of grace, not for earning eternal life by its observance—since it is powerless to do so due to the flesh (Rom. 8:3)—but first, to reveal our sin, guilt, and misery, leading us to seek God's grace in Christ (Rom. 7:7; Gal. 3:24), and second, to guide us in walking in newness of life, fulfilling the law through our union with Christ (Rom. 6:4; 8:4).

There is no room for antinomianism, which despises and violates the law, within Christianity. Law and Gospel must be linked together in Scripture, preaching, teaching, doctrine, and life; both are indispensable and essential constituents of the complete Word of God. Identifying them as one or separating them entirely is erroneous. Transforming the Gospel into a new law (nominalism) is as mistaken as antinomianism. Law and Gospel differ not in degree but in essence—like demand and gift, command and promise,

requirement and provision. While the law is holy, wise, good, and spiritual (Rom. 7:12, 14), it is rendered powerless by sin and brings about not justification but the increase of sin, wrath, condemnation, and death (Rom. 3:20; 4:15; 5:20; 7:5, 9, 13; 2 Cor. 3:6-7; Gal. 3:10, 13, 19). In contrast, the Gospel, centered on Christ (Rom. 1:3; Eph. 3:6), brings grace, reconciliation, forgiveness, righteousness, peace, and eternal life (Acts 2:38; 20:24; Rom. 3:21-26; 4:3-8; 5:1-2, etc.). What the law demands, the Gospel freely gives.

When Law and Gospel are distinguished in this manner, it follows that the general calling, which comes to all men by nature and conscience, and the special calling, which reaches those who live under Christianity, differ not only in degree but also in essence. The difference lies not merely in the fact that Christianity presents a more perfect law than that known to the Gentiles, but chiefly in the fact that Christianity brings something new—the Gospel, which introduces us to the person of Christ. The distinction between Paganism and Christianity, between general and special revelation, between the universal calling and the calling specific to Christians, lies primarily in the Gospel of the grace of God.

Historically, these two vocations have been distinguished as a "material" and a "worldly" calling. The general calling, addressed to all people, is not contained in a clear and distinct Word of God but is intricately embedded in the revelation given to the Gentiles through the works of His hands, as well as in their own reason and conscience, and must be deduced through their own investigation and reflection. However, when they attempted this, they became lost in both religion and morality. Without special revelation, humanity, although knowing God, did not glorify Him or give Him thanks, but

became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened, falling into idolatry and immorality (Rom. 1:21).

Revelation in nature and the calling through reason and conscience proved wholly inadequate. Therefore, in special revelation, God no longer speaks to man through nature alone but uses the actual, literal word, which man himself employs as the highest expression of his thoughts. This use of the word in special revelation was necessary for another reason: Nature, both external and internal to humanity, remains constant. The heavens declare God's glory just as they did thousands of years ago; and despite all progress and civilization, humanity today remains essentially and naturally the same as their oldest forefathers.

Special revelation, however, is not inherent in nature; it developed historically over centuries and is centered on the historical person of Christ. No aspect of nature can save us; only a person can heal us. Historical facts and persons, unlike the constant nature, come and go. According to God's order, we can only know them through words —spoken or written. The nature of special, historical revelation necessitates the use of the word to transmit itself across generations and locations. General calling is mediated through nature, whereas special calling utilizes the word; the former is primarily the Law, while the latter is primarily the Gospel.

The Gospel word began its course in paradise. God Himself first revealed it in paradise, had it proclaimed by the holy patriarchs and prophets, and exemplified by sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, finally fulfilling it through His only begotten Son. It did not cease there. He also had the Gospel word written down in the books

of the Old and New Testaments and entrusted its preservation, proclamation, interpretation, defense, and propagation to the church, that it might be known to all creatures.

On the same day the church received this task from Christ and began its execution, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred. Conversely, the moment the Holy Spirit made the church His dwelling place marked the birth of the church as an independent community of believers, the bearer of the Gospel, the pillar, and the anchor of truth. Though united in preparation earlier, on the Day of Pentecost, the Word and the Spirit definitively joined forces. They work together in the service of Christ, the King of the Church and the Lord of the Spirit, presented to us in the Word and communicated to us by the Spirit. Truth and grace go hand in hand, for Christ is full of both (John 1:14).

The calling by the Word far exceeds the calling by nature. While the latter only brings man to hear the voice of the law, demanding, “Do this and you shall live,” the vocation by the Word proceeds from Christ, presenting the substance of God’s grace and offering man the richest benefits—namely, forgiveness of sins and eternal life—freely, through faith and conversion. Considering the content of this call, one might expect that upon hearing it, all people would joyfully and readily accept it. For what objection could a sinner, facing perdition, have against a gospel that assures him of God’s grace and offers perfect salvation without any work on his part, but only the acceptance of this glad tidings with childlike faith?

Yet, reality teaches us quite differently. Throughout the ages, there has been a continual separation between those who serve the Lord

and those who do not. From the family of Adam, where Abel and Cain were divided, to the lineage of Seth and Cain before the Flood, and continuing after the Flood with Shem and his brothers, this separation has persisted. The patriarchal families saw contrasts between Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and later between Israel and the nations. Not all descended from Abraham were truly Israel; rather, the children of the promise were counted as the seed (Romans 9:6-8). This reality continued in the New Testament era, where many are called, but few are chosen (Matthew 22:14). There is a stark contrast between the church and the world, and even within the church, many are hearers but not doers of the Word (James 1:22). Rejecting Christianity does not eliminate this contrast, for there will always be good and bad, righteous and unrighteous. Among men, there is a deep religious and moral difference, far more profound than differences in rank, station, gift, power, wealth, and honor.

This moral inequality is so evident and significant that everyone must reckon with it. However, many have attempted to explain this moral inequality, along with other differences among people, by invoking the free will given to humanity. They argue that man's will, despite sin, remains free and retains the power to do good, or that, though weakened by sin, it has been strengthened by the general enlightenment of the Word (the Logos, John 1:9) or by the grace of the Holy Spirit given before or in baptism, thus gaining sufficient power to heed the Gospel's call.

Apart from the teaching of Holy Scripture, such an explanation is implausible. According to this view, it is man, not God, who makes the ultimate distinction among themselves. But if God is truly God,

His counsel must prevail over all things; He is the Creator of heaven and earth, and He maintains and governs all creatures by His providence. It is inconceivable that He would govern all nature, regulate all things, even in the smallest details, and yet exclude from His counsel and providence the significant and eternal fact of spiritual disparity among mankind, leaving it to human decision. Holding such a view essentially nullifies God's counsel and providence, removes the world's history from His hands, renders its outcome unpredictable, robs it of purpose and goal, and ascribes to God an attitude contrary to His nature and works.

Spiritual difference is the most significant, but not the only disparity among mankind. People also differ in rank, station, sex, age, gifts of the soul, and powers of the body. They are born within or outside the confines of Christianity and may or may not hear the Gospel. These differences cannot be explained solely by human will and conduct, as they precede them and often influence them. If one refuses to rest in the good pleasure of God and seeks explanations in human behavior, one must resort to improbable hypotheses. For instance, some Lutherans rejected the idea of God's free will in determining who was born under the Gospel's light and who was not, arguing instead that the Gospel was known to all peoples in the times of Adam, Noah, and the Apostles (citing Romans 10:18 and Colossians 1:23) but was lost through their own fault. Similarly, the notion, mentioned by Origen and shared by many today, that human souls were originally created equally by God but received different bodies and fates based on their pre-existence behavior, aligns with this line of reasoning.

All such assumptions merely complicate the matter at hand and fail to provide any substantive explanation. Here, too, man will find no

rest until he rests in the fatherly heart of God, recognizing His free and incomprehensible will as the deepest reason for the inequality among creatures. The distinction between the general and special callings is not rooted in the worthiness of one people over another or in a better use of the light of nature, but in the entirely free will and undeserved love of God (Dordrecht Canons III/IV, 7). The same applies to the spiritual inequality between those who accept the call of the Gospel with a believing heart and those who reject it and choose their own way. It is not man, but God, who makes the distinction. The call itself differs in its approach to different individuals. Within the calling by the Word, as rooted in Scripture, a distinction can be made between an external and an internal calling.

However, before defending this distinction, it must be firmly stated that it in no way diminishes the power or value of the so-called external calling.

Firstly, this call from God remains serious and well-intended. All who are called by the Gospel are called seriously. For God earnestly and genuinely shows in His Word what pleases Him—namely, that the called should come to Him. He also earnestly promises rest for the soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe. Those who accept the distinction between outward and inward calling still attribute the same power and significance to the former as the opponents of this distinction believe to be true of all calling. This distinction does not place mankind in a more unfavorable condition than they are according to their opponents. The word of the Gospel, which brings this outward calling, is not a dead letter but a power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16), living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword (Hebrews 4:12),

and the means of regeneration (1 Peter 1:23). It is the same word used by God in the inner calling, and it is not devoid of the Spirit's effect. The Holy Spirit not only testifies in the hearts of believers that they are God's children (Romans 8:16) but also convicts the consciences of those He convinces of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). Hence, Calvin rightly spoke of a lower working of the Spirit accompanying the outward calling.

Secondly, rejecting this calling never occurs without guilt. Those who reject the Gospel cannot claim powerlessness as an excuse; for they do not reject it because they are powerless. If they felt powerless, they would plead for the grace offered in the Gospel. Instead, they reject it because they feel strong and believe they can save themselves without God's grace. The failure of many to come and convert despite being called by the Gospel is not due to any fault in the Gospel, nor in Christ, who is offered in the Gospel, nor in God, who calls through the Gospel. It is due to the fault of those who are called. Some, being careless, do not accept the word of life; others accept it superficially and, after a momentary joy of temporary faith, fall away; others are choked by the cares and lusts of the world and bear no fruit, as taught by our Savior in the parable of the sower (Dordrecht Canons III/IV, 9).

Thirdly, the external calling is not without fruit. In general, it can be said that God achieves His intention with it. His word, even in this external calling, does not return empty but accomplishes what pleases Him and prospers in what He sends it to do (Isaiah 55:11). Furthermore, it is significant how people respond to this external calling. Among pagans, there is a considerable difference in their response to the call of nature; Socrates and Plato cannot be equated

with Caligula and Nero. Similarly, it is not the same whether the Gospel is mocked and blasphemed or accepted with historical or temporary faith. Though there is an essential difference between these types of faith and the saving faith of the heart, they are not equivalent to utter unbelief. They are fruits of God's common grace and bring many temporal blessings. They bind men to the truth, keep them from many grievous sins, lead them to modest and honorable lives, and contribute greatly to the formation of Christian society, which is of utmost importance to the life of mankind and to the influence of the church.

Foremost, it merits attention that this external vocation often serves as a means in God's hand to prepare the work of grace in the hearts of His elect. There is no preparatory grace in the sense that the external calling progresses without a leap to the internal, nor that the natural man gradually grows into a child of God. For, just as in nature, there is no gradual transition from death to life or from darkness to light in grace. However, there is a preparatory grace if it is understood that God, who is the Master of all grace and the Creator of nature, establishes and maintains a link between the two. In executing His counsel of redemption, He follows the path He Himself laid in creation and providence. As He stirred in Zacchaeus a desire to see Jesus (Luke 19:3) and brought about conviction among those who heard Peter (Acts 2:37), so He also governs His elect before the hour of their conversion, leading them toward that hour with His almighty hand.

Despite the significant power and value of this external calling, it remains insufficient by itself to transform a man's heart and induce him to accept the Gospel faithfully. This insufficiency of the external

calling must be clearly understood. The Gospel it proclaims is not inadequate, for it contains the full counsel of salvation, presenting Christ with all His benefits before our eyes and needing no further supplement. It is not a dead letter needing the Spirit's quickening, nor an empty sound or vain sign devoid of essential connection with the matter it designates. Paul declares that the ministers are nothing (1 Cor. 3:7) because they can be replaced or even dispensed with. On the contrary, the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16, 1 Cor. 15:2), not the word of man but the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13), living and powerful (John 6:63, Heb. 5:12, 1 Pet. 1:25), and efficacious in some sense; if not the fragrance of life unto life, it is the fragrance of death unto death (2 Cor. 2:16). Christ, who is the substance of the Gospel, leaves no one neutral; He brings crisis, judgment, and separation into the world (John 3:19, 9:39) and reveals the inclinations and thoughts of the heart by His word, which penetrates the innermost being of man (Luke 2:35, Hebrews 4:12). He becomes a stone of stumbling to those who reject Him as a rock of salvation, foolishness to those who reject Him as wisdom, and a downfall to those for whom He is not a resurrection (Luke 2:34, 1 Cor. 1:18, 1 Pet. 2:7).

This twofold working of the Gospel word proves that the difference in result among those who accept it and those who reject it cannot be explained solely by the word itself or the outward calling. The Gospel, brought by whoever and to whoever, is always the living and powerful word of God. Yet, the term "word of God" in Scripture does not always have the same meaning. Sometimes it signifies the power of God by which He creates and sustains the world (Genesis 1:3, Ps. 33:6, Matthew 4:4, Heb. 1:3); other times, it refers to the special revelation given to the prophets (Jer. 1:2, 4, 2:1, etc.). The word of

God remains a living and powerful word according to its content, yet as a human word, it shares the characteristics of all human words and, as such, can only have a moral effect. This moral effect is not to be underestimated; it is much stronger than mere rational instruction, as the word of the Gospel is a means of grace.

However, a rational and religious-moral working of the Gospel is insufficient. It would be sufficient if man had not fallen or lost his spiritual freedom due to the fall. Scripture testifies, and daily experience confirms, that man is darkened in his understanding (Ephesians 4:18, 5:8), bound in his will by sin (John 8:34, Romans 6:20), and dead in sins and trespasses (Ephesians 2:2-3). Thus, he cannot see the kingdom of God (John 8:3), grasp the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14), submit to the law of God (Rom. 8:7), nor think or do anything good of himself (John 15:5, 2 Cor. 3:5). The Gospel may be for man, but it is not according to man, not in accordance with his wishes and thoughts (Gal. 1:11); and therefore, if left to himself, it is always rejected and opposed by him.

Herein lies the richness of God's grace: despite human frailty, He conjoins the external calling of His Word with the internal working of His Spirit in those predestined for eternal life. Even in the Old Testament, the Spirit of the Lord was the Sovereign and Guide of the spiritual life (Psalm 51:12, 143:10), yet He was especially promised to teach all, to impart a new heart, and to inscribe the Law of God within that heart in the New Covenant (Isaiah 32:15, Jeremiah 31:33, 32:39, Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26, Joel 2:28). This purpose was fulfilled at Pentecost when He was poured out. The Spirit's role was to testify of Christ alongside the apostles and thereafter to dwell within the Church, regenerating it (John 3:5), leading it to confess Jesus as

Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3), comforting it, guiding it, and remaining with it forever (John 14:16, Romans 8:14, Ephesians 4:30), and likewise penetrating the world from within the Church to convict it of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11).

Redemption is entirely the work of God, both objectively and subjectively. It is not of him who wills or of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy (Romans 9:16). There is an external call that reaches many (Matthew 22:14), but there is also an internal, effectual call that results from election (Romans 8:28-30). God not only gives the Gospel but also preaches it in power and in the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6), and it is He who grants the increase (1 Corinthians 3:6-9). He opens the heart (Acts 16:14), enlightens the mind (Ephesians 1:18, Colossians 1:9-11), bends the will (Acts 9:6), and works both to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13).

Thus, those who are called in this manner come to Christ and are converted not due to their own free will distinguishing them from others, but due to God, who elected His own from eternity in Christ and effectually calls them in time. He endows them with faith and conversion, delivering them from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of His beloved Son, so that they may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light and thereby boast not in themselves, but in the Lord, as the apostolic writings frequently affirm.

The nature of this internal calling is elucidated in various ways throughout Scripture. Though it does not always employ the term, it often directs our attention to the concept it signifies. Nature itself

provides an analogy for what transpires in grace; creation elucidates re-creation. Jesus illuminated the nature, characteristics, and laws of the kingdom of heaven through parables, drawing material from nature and daily life. In the parable of the Sower, He particularly highlighted the varied effects the Gospel word has in the hearts of men.

The natural law dictates that a certain relationship is necessary for perception and knowledge between man and the object he seeks to perceive and understand. To see, one needs not only an object but also an open eye and light to illuminate both. To hear, not only are air vibrations and sounds required, but man also needs an open ear to capture these sounds. Beyond these senses, a heart is necessary to comprehend the meaning of the objects seen and sounds heard. We must be attuned to what we perceive to truly internalize it and make it our spiritual possession. A blind man cannot see, a deaf man cannot hear, an indifferent man cannot understand, an unmusical man cannot grasp the world of tones, and a man lacking any sense of beauty cannot take pleasure in poetry or painting. A certain relationship, a harmonious connection, is required between man and the world for perception and knowledge to occur.

In the natural realm, this connection has largely persisted. It is true that sin has had its effect here as well, often severing it almost entirely in the case of the blind, the deaf, the mentally deranged, and many other unfortunate individuals. It is also more or less weakened and disturbed in all people to varying degrees. But generally, one can assert that God has preserved this connection in the natural sphere; man can still see and hear, perceive and think, learn and know.

However, on the spiritual level, sin has utterly severed that connection. The inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth (Genesis 8:21). An ox knows its owner, and a donkey its master's manger, but Israel does not know, and God's people do not understand (Isaiah 1:3). Humanity is like children sitting in the marketplaces, calling out to their companions, saying: We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn (Matthew 11:16-17). They have eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear, hearts but do not understand (Isaiah 6:9, Matthew 13:14-15). And when He reveals Himself to them in the Gospel, they do not understand the things of the Spirit of God, are offended by the foolishness of the cross, and kick against the goads (Acts 9:5, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 2:14). By nature, man is dead to God, to His revelation, and to all spiritual and heavenly things; he has no interest in them, is indifferent to them, thinks only of earthly matters, and has no desire to know the ways of the Lord. The bond between God and man is broken; there is no longer any spiritual kinship or fellowship between them.

Therefore, internal calling generally consists of restoring that broken bond and making mankind spiritually related to God again, so that he will hear God's word once more and be able to understand it. Scripture even refers to this working of the Holy Spirit in internal calling as revelation. When Simon Peter, in the region of Caesarea Philippi, confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Savior said to him: Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 16:17). Similarly, the apostle Paul testifies that at his conversion it pleased God to reveal His Son in him (Galatians 1:16). This revelation is not to be understood as the actual appearance of

Christ, for when Peter confessed Him as the Christ, the Savior had already lived and worked on earth for years; He had also made Himself known as the Messiah several times (Matthew 11:5ff), and had already been recognized as such by others (Matthew 8:29, 14:33). But as clearly and decisively as Peter now confessed Him, Jesus had never before been acknowledged as the Messiah and Son of God, and therefore He says that only a subjective revelation in the heart and consciousness of Peter could bring him to such a firm and clear confession. God Himself enlightened the apostle internally so that he now saw in Christ what he had never before seen so clearly in Him.

In other words, the revelation referred to here consists of an internal illumination. In the natural world, our eye is enlightened by the sun, which in turn enlightens the whole body, just as a lamp enlightens a house (Matthew 6:22). Man's mind and reason are enlightened by the Word that was with God, that made all things, that was the light of men, and still enlightens every man coming into the world (John 1:1-9); and by that enlightenment of his consciousness, man can perceive, investigate, and know the world; the wisdom of a man brightens his face (Ecclesiastes 8:1). Already in the Old Testament, the psalmist prayed for this, saying: Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law (Psalm 119:18). God, who is the creator of light, has also shone in our hearts, so that as an apostle, one might make the glory of God shine before others in the preaching of Christ and thus lead them to its knowledge (2 Corinthians 4:6, cf. Ephesians 3:9).

Elsewhere, the activity of the Holy Spirit in the internal calling is described as an opening of the heart by the Lord Christ, as seen in

Acts 16:14, or of the mind, as noted in Luke 24:45, so that the Word of God is understood and accepted in its true sense. It is also presented as the growth that God grants to the word preached by the apostles, 1 Corinthians 3:5-9. For the apostles are but servants, fellow workers of God, instruments in His hand, so that it is not actually they who labor, but the grace of God which is with them, 1 Corinthians 15:10. Indeed, they are nothing, but God is everything, for He gives the seed of the word its growth, and the church is therefore entirely His work and building. Such power as is necessary to bring a dead sinner to life is in the hand of no creature, whether angel or apostle. It requires nothing less than divine, omnipotent power, the same power that raised Christ from the dead.

For the believers in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul prays that God may continually give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, that they may know Him and have the eyes of their hearts enlightened, so that they may know the hope to which He has called them, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe. This power is according to the working of His great might, which He exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named (Ephesians 1:17-21). The same power of God is manifested in the calling, regeneration, rebirth, and glorification of believers as in the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ.

In full agreement with the Holy Scriptures, the Reformed Church therefore confesses that when God works His good pleasure in the elect and effectuates true conversion in them, He not only externally

preaches the Gospel to them and powerfully enlightens their minds through the Holy Spirit so that they may rightly understand and discern the things that are of the Spirit of God, but also reaches into the innermost parts of man with the powerful working of the same regenerating Spirit. This working, according to the same confession, is wholly supernatural, a very powerful and at the same time very sweet, wonderful, hidden, and inexpressible working, which, according to the testimony of the Scriptures (which are inspired by the author of this working), is in its power no less than the creation or the raising of the dead (Canons of Dort, III-IV, 11-12).

The change wrought in man by this working of the Holy Spirit is called rebirth. The term is not unique to Scripture, nor does it appear there for the first time. It has been used from ancient times in the religion of the Indians to denote the transformation that every soul undergoes at death. According to the Indians, the soul does not remain in a state of separation after death, but immediately passes into another body, whether human, animal, or plant, according to how it behaved in its previous body. Every birth leads to death, but every death also leads to a new birth; every human being is subjected to a centuries-long series of "rebirths," that is, of the indwelling of his soul in ever other bodies. According to Buddhism, salvation from this terrible law and from all the suffering in the world is only possible when man knows how to quench his thirst for existence within himself and works on his own destruction, or at least on the numbing of his consciousness, through all kinds of abstinence. This doctrine of "rebirths" was transmitted from India to Europe in ancient times and again in the last century; and today there are not a few who see in it the essence of all wisdom.

But Scripture speaks of rebirth in an entirely different sense. It employs this term sparingly; once in Matthew 19:28, where Jesus envisions regeneration as the renewal of the world preceding the kingdom of glory, and another time in Titus 3:5, where Paul states that God saved us, not by works of righteousness that we have done, but according to His mercy, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. It is debated whether Paul refers to baptism as the sign and seal of rebirth or whether he depicts the acts of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit themselves as a bath in which believers have descended. However, the mention of the renewal of the Holy Spirit suggests a spiritual, moral transformation that occurs in believers during their conversion. The context confirms this view, for previously, those who are now believers were once foolish, disobedient, and led astray (Titus 3:3), but now they are saved, reborn, and renewed, becoming heirs of eternal life in hope (verses 4-7), and are thus exhorted to engage in good works (verse 8), for which they have received the ability and desire through rebirth and renewal.

Although the noun "rebirth" appears only twice in Scripture, the concept itself is often mentioned through other terms and metaphors. Already in the Old Testament, the people of Israel are admonished not to boast in the external sign of circumcision but to circumcise the foreskin of their hearts and be no longer stiff-necked (Deuteronomy 10:16). Moreover, it promises that the Lord Himself will circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants, so they may love Him with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 30:6). This promise finds fulfillment in the history of Israel among the pious and will be abundantly realized in the future when God makes a new covenant with His people, pours out His Spirit upon them,

gives them a new heart of flesh, and writes His law upon their hearts (Jeremiah 24:7, 31:31-34, 32:39; Ezekiel 11:19, 36:26-28; Joel 2:28 ff.).

When that future was imminent and the kingdom of heaven had drawn near, John the Baptist appeared, demanding repentance as a condition for entrance into the kingdom. The people of Israel, despite their outward privileges, were corrupt to the core; they needed, in spite of their circumcision, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, in which a person is completely immersed to rise as a new man into a new life (Matthew 3:2 f.). Jesus takes up the same message of repentance and faith, undergoes baptism Himself, and administers it to all who desire to be His disciples (Mark 1:14-15; John 4:1-2). Anyone wishing to enter the kingdom must break from his entire former life, lose his soul (Matthew 10:39, 16:25), forsake everything (Luke 14:33), take up his cross and follow Him (Matthew 10:38), become like a child (Matthew 18:3), return to the Father with a confession of guilt (Luke 15:18), pass through the narrow gate and tread the narrow way to eternal life (Matthew 7:14). An evil tree cannot produce good fruit (Matthew 7:17 f.); hence, if there is to be good fruit, the tree must first be made good, and this is something only God can do (Matthew 19:26). Children of God and citizens of the kingdom of heaven are those planted by the heavenly Father (Matthew 15:13), to whom the Sovereign Lord has given His blessing, to whom the Son has revealed the Father and the Father the Son (Matthew 11:27, 13:11, 16:17); once spiritually dead, they are now partakers of true life and anticipate eternal life (Matthew 8:22; Luke 15:24, 18:30).

In all this teaching of Christ, as the first three Gospels recount, the word "rebirth" does not occur, but the concept is clearly presented. Thus, when Jesus, in His conversation with Nicodemus, declares that no one can see the kingdom of God or enter it unless he is born again (from above), of water and the Spirit (John 3:3-8), He is not contradicting the teaching in the other Gospels but summarizing concisely to Nicodemus what He has explained more extensively elsewhere. Nicodemus, a prominent man, a teacher of Israel, a member of the Sanhedrin, had heard of Jesus' miracles and considered Him a teacher sent by God. However, he was still undecided, still in doubt, and, to avoid arousing the suspicion and hostility of the Jews, came to Jesus by night for a confidential conversation to determine whether He was indeed the Messiah. Nicodemus began by acknowledging that he believed Jesus to be a teacher from God, seemingly about to inquire what one must do to enter the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus preempts his question, asserting: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." With this, He cuts off all human effort and Pharisaic law-keeping as the way to the kingdom.

That is why Jesus does not speak literally of being born again, but of being born from above. The emphasis is not merely on the necessity of a second birth for entrance into the kingdom (although rebirth can indeed be termed such), but Jesus seeks to convey to Nicodemus that only a birth from above, a birth from water and the Spirit, opens the entrance to the kingdom. This birth is contrasted with that of the flesh, for what is born of the flesh is flesh; it is not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:13). Thus, it is as mysterious and incomprehensible in its origin and direction as the wind, yet it is possible, for it is a birth of the Spirit.

Jesus first refers generally to a birth of water and Spirit, then specifically speaks of the Spirit, indicating that the Spirit of God alone can effect this great work of rebirth from above. With the mention of water, Jesus does not refer to baptism but describes the nature of the birth from above; it is a birth characterized by renewal and purification, symbolized by water, bringing forth new spiritual life.

Other passages in the New Testament expand upon this foundational teaching of Christ. Rebirth is a divine work; it is God who brings believers to new birth, who calls them effectually, brings them to life from the dead, and bestows upon them new life. But He grants this benefit only in fellowship with Christ, to whom He has given the gift of the Holy Spirit, in whom He draws them, incorporates them, and by the Holy Spirit who penetrates the heart and becomes the principle of new life. By virtue of this birth from God, believers are His workmanship, created in Christ, His field, and building, a new creation. Regeneration is not a work of human strength, nor the product of a gradual development of natural life, but a decisive break with the old existence and the beginning of a new, spiritual life; the death of the old and the resurrection of the new man (Romans 6:3ff).

Yet, on the other hand, it is not a second creation entirely from nothing but a re-creation of man, who received existence through birth from his parents. At the time of rebirth, he remains essentially the same person, the same 'I,' the same personality. Paul declares of himself that he has been crucified with Christ and therefore no longer lives, but Christ lives in him; yet he continues, "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God" (Galatians 2:20). His self has been crucified with Christ and died, but it has also arisen

immediately with Christ; it has not been destroyed and replaced by another but has been reborn and renewed. Likewise, he says of some believers in Corinth that they were formerly fornicators and idolaters and adulterers, but they have been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:10-11).

This transformation is spiritual; what is born of the Spirit is spirit, lives, and walks according to the Spirit. Rebirth instills a principle of new life, created by the Holy Spirit in connection with the resurrection of Christ, from whom He takes everything. It plants a seed in the heart, from which a whole new man arises. It begins mysteriously and hiddenly, centered in the core of man's personality, in his very being, but from there it extends to all faculties of man: to his intellect, heart, will, affections, mind, soul, and body, desiring to walk in newness of the Spirit.

They no longer bear the image of the earthly man, of the first Adam, but reflect the image of the second man, the Lord from heaven. They have been crucified to the world and no longer live for themselves but live for Him who died and rose again for them. They have received a new center for all their thoughts and actions, for they live, move, and have their being in Christ, having put on Him as a garment in baptism, displaying His form, and being transformed ever more into His image from glory to glory, as from the Lord's Spirit. In this communion with Christ, they are children of the heavenly Father, who love God and the brethren, and will one day be like God, for they will see Him as He is.

Holy Scripture speaks richly and gloriously about rebirth, not merely to inform us doctrinally but to ensure that we personally partake of this great grace and walk as God's children in a wicked world. What power it would be for the church if it not only described the image of Christ in its confession but also displayed it in the practice of life to all those around it.

This is certain: the tree is known by its fruits. A good tree brings forth good fruit, and a good man brings forth good things from the good treasure of his heart (Matt. 7:17, 12:33, 35). If regeneration implants a new principle of life in the heart, it must and will be manifested in the activities that proceed from that spiritual life. These activities are chiefly two: faith in the mind and conversion in the will.

Faith, in general, as we speak of it in our daily lives, is the acceptance of a testimony. We believe something when we have not seen or observed it ourselves, but are assured of it because reliable persons, orally or in writing, past or present, have informed us about it. This fundamental meaning of the word persists when it is applied to religion, and it must remain so because we know nothing of the entire content of the Gospel, of the person and work of Christ, except through the testimony of the Apostles. It is only through their word that we can believe in Christ (John 17:20), and through fellowship with the Apostles that we come to fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3).

Nevertheless, when faith is transferred to the religious sphere, and especially when it is presented in Scripture as the way to the kingdom of heaven, it is significantly altered in accordance with this

particular use. One may indeed accept the Gospel in the same manner as one believes testimony concerning a historical person or event, but such belief is not true faith if the Gospel is not received as the Evangel. The experience of all preachers, prophets, apostles, and ministers in both the church and the gentile world, even the experience of Jesus Himself, has always been that the word did not find acceptance or effect with many who heard it. “Who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Isa. 53:1). People who hear the Gospel come with very different states of mind and attitudes toward it.

Jesus illustrated these situations in the parable of the Sower. With some, the seed of the word falls along the path that borders the field, and the birds come and eat it up; these are the indifferent, the insensitive, the vapid, who hear the word but consider it irrelevant to themselves. The word does not enter their hearts but falls on the hard, well-trodden path; it is not even remembered but goes in one ear and out the other. After a few moments, it is as if they had not heard it at all; the birds, representing all kinds of contrary thoughts, contempt, disbelief, and slander, driven by the Evil One, remove the word from their consciousness. They hear it, but they do not understand it (Matt. 13:4, 19).

With others, the seed of the word falls into rocky places where it has little soil. It springs up quickly because the soil is shallow, but when the sun rises, it scorches the plants, and they wither because they have no root. These are the superficial, shallow minds; they hear the word and receive it with joy. The Gospel appeals to them because of its beauty, loftiness, simplicity, or loveliness, and it makes some impression on them. They are moved and stirred by it, taste a certain

strength from it, and form good intentions. But they do not allow the truth to penetrate deeply and take root. They give it a place in their memory, imagination, reason, and intelligence, but they do not open the depths of their soul to it.

There is a thin layer of soil on the surface where the word penetrates, but below that, everything is cold, dead, and hard as a rock. That is why they cannot endure oppression, persecution, trial, and temptation. As soon as these come, they are vexed and fall away; they last only a short time (Matt. 13:5-6, 20-21).

There are also others with whom the seed of the word falls among thorns. The thorns grow up and choke the plants, so they do not bear grain. These are the worldly-minded hearers, whose hearts are full of thorns, full of the cares of the world or the deceitfulness of wealth. They are completely absorbed by the cares or the temptations of earthly life. They hear the word and even accept it; sometimes it penetrates their hearts amidst all the worldly cares and pleasures. They occasionally consider that it would be better to break with the world and seek the kingdom of God. The fear of judgment sometimes seizes their minds. But when the seed of the word is about to germinate, the thorns, the worldly worries, and desires choke it. They cannot bring themselves to forsake all, take up their cross, and follow Jesus; the power of the world is too strong for them.

Thus, there exists a consent and acceptance of the Gospel that is not genuine. Indeed, there are indifferent souls, like Pilate, who turn away from the Gospel with a haughty and contemptuous smile (John 18:38). There are also those, like the proud Pharisees and the wise Greeks, who perceive the Cross of Christ as a stumbling block and

foolishness, and erupt in wild enmity and hatred against it (Matt. 12:24, John 8:22, 1 Cor. 1:23). Yet there are others who believe but do not confess, who love the honor of men more than the honor of God (John 12:42-43); who remain hearers of the word all their lives, until they die, but never become doers of the word (Matt. 7:26, John 13:17, Rom. 2:13, James 1:23); who, like Simon of Samaria, accept the Gospel because of the signs and great powers it produces (Acts 8:13ff). There are all kinds of faith—historical, temporal, miraculous—which bear the name but lack the substance; they exhibit a form of godliness but deny its power (2 Tim. 3:5).

The genuine, beatific faith differs from all these forms of faith in three respects. First, it has a different origin. Historical, temporal, and miraculous faith are not inherently wrong; they are better than outright unbelief and enmity; they even serve a temporary purpose; but they are only gifts of God's common grace and are also given to natural men. However, saving faith is a gift of God, like all salvation (Eph. 2:8), a gift of God's special grace (Phil. 1:29), a consequence of election (Acts 13:48, Rom. 8:30, Eph. 1:5), a work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3), a fruit of regeneration (John 1:12-13).

Those who have only a natural birth belong to the world, are from below, prefer darkness to light, do not know God, and do not understand His word (John 1:11, 3:3, 19, 20, 6:44, 8:47, Rom. 8:7, 1 Cor. 2:14). But those who are born of God, who are of the truth, are led by the Father to Christ, hear His voice, understand His word, and follow Him (John 3:3, 5, 6:44, 8:47, 10:5, 27). And the Holy Spirit, of whom they are born, testifies with their spirit that they are the children of God (Rom. 8:16) and puts on their lips the confession that Christ is their Lord (1 Cor. 12:3).

By virtue of this origin, true, beatific faith is also distinguished in essence from all other faiths. It unquestionably includes an element of knowing, for it relates to a testimony concerning unseen, eternal things, which we ourselves have not perceived and cannot perceive. It cannot construct the truth from the born-again life, nor from religious experience and mental experience. For although the faithful have received the anointing of the Holy Spirit (i.e., Chris) and know all things (1 John 2:20), they owe this Spirit precisely to Christ, remain bound by the word of truth which they heard from the beginning (1 John 2:21-24), and with the whole church are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20).

However, the knowledge inherent to saving faith is of a special kind. It is not merely a theoretical knowledge, absorbed by the mind and memory and leaving mankind cold. It is not akin to that gained in science through research and reflection, nor is it like accepting a historical report about something that happened in the past. The knowledge of faith is a practical knowledge, a knowledge of the heart more than of the head, a knowledge with a personal, deep, soul-searching interest, for it concerns a matter in which I am personally involved at the core of my being, in which my existence, my life, my soul, my salvation is at stake. Faith, then, is an assent and acceptance, a knowing and awareness of a testimony that comes to me; but it is an acceptance of that testimony with application to myself, a reception of the word of God's preaching, not as the word of man, but as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13), a "ministering" of the Gospel as a message sent to me personally by God.

Thus, we see that saving faith differs from all other faiths in its object. For historical faith clings to the message and does not

penetrate deeper; temporal faith sees some beauty in the message and rejoices in it, but ignores its actual content; and belief in miracles attaches itself to the signs and wonders but is indifferent to Him who works them. However, if we accept the Gospel with a true heart, as a word that God brings to us personally, then this beatific faith cannot leave us empty and unfruitful. Just as no one who learns that his family is in great danger can calmly continue his journey, no one who truly believes the Gospel, with application to himself, and knows from it that he is guilty and lost and that there is only salvation in Christ Jesus, can remain cold and unconcerned. On the contrary, true faith is immediately active in those who have received it; it leaves them no rest and drives them to Christ. It does not remain with the testimony as a historical message but penetrates to the person of whom that testimony speaks.

It was already thus in the Old Testament. The pious, who stand before us there, are always engaged with God Himself. At times this is expressed by believing (Gen. 15:6, Exod. 14:31, 2 Chron. 20:20, Isa. 28:16, Hab. 2:4), yet this belief is not a mere rational conviction of God's existence, but a wholehearted reliance on God and standing upon His word. Thus, believing alternates with various other terms. It is frequently noted of the pious that they trust in God, take refuge in Him, hope in Him, fear Him, expect all from Him, lean on Him, follow Him, and so forth. Their life is a continual walking, communing, and practicing fellowship with God. Similarly, this is found in the New Testament. The apostles who recount these matters to us are not mere historians in the usual sense, but they bear witness to what they have seen, heard, and touched of the Word of Life. They dwell in communion with Christ and speak from that fellowship. Believing is receiving Christ, not merely assenting to the

testimony given by the apostles concerning Him, but receiving Christ Himself (John 1:12); it involves putting on Christ as a garment (Gal. 3:27), dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:4), living in His communion (Gal. 2:20), abiding in Him as the vine (John 15:4), and so on. Through and in Christ, God is their God, their Father, and they are His sons and daughters (2 Cor. 6:18).

In sum, the faith that saves is not only a certain knowledge, a firm conviction, an unquestionable certainty about the prophetic and apostolic testimony as the Word of God, but it is also a steadfast trust from person to person in Christ Himself as the fullness of grace and truth revealed by God. The one is inseparably linked to the other. Without knowledge, trust is impossible, for how can we trust someone we do not know? Conversely, if knowledge does not lead to trust, it has not been the right kind of knowledge; those who know the name of the Lord trust in Him (Ps. 9:10), but those who do not trust Him have not yet learned to know Him as He truly is from His word. Whoever seeks Christ apart from His Word, through the Spirit alone, loses the touchstone for testing spirits and gradually comes to confuse his own spirit with the Spirit of Christ.

Therefore, Christ has given both His Word and His Spirit; it is the Spirit of Christ who bears the same testimony in the Scriptures and in the hearts of the faithful. In regeneration, He plants the Word in our hearts (James 1:18, 21; 1 Pet. 1:23, 25); and the spiritual life of the faithful, according to its nature, always returns to the Word to be nourished and strengthened. We never outgrow the Scriptures here on earth because the Scriptures are the sole means of bringing us into fellowship with the true Christ, who was crucified but now sits at the right hand of the power of God. Christianity is a religion of

history, yet it is also a religion of the present; it possesses a Word that portrays the image of Christ before our eyes and a Spirit through whom the living Christ Himself dwells in our hearts. Faith, therefore, is knowledge and trust simultaneously; it is an acceptance of Christ Himself in the garment of the Holy Scriptures.

Just as faith is the fruit of regeneration on the part of the conscious mind, so the new life manifests itself in the will through conversion. This is repeatedly mentioned in the books of the Old Testament. Israel, after being delivered from Egypt, was led by the Lord to Sinai and there accepted into His covenant. As God's people, they were to keep that covenant and obey His voice, becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:5-6). Yet, already in the wilderness, they were repeatedly guilty of infidelity and disobedience. In Canaan, this apostasy increased amidst the heathen nations; when the first generation had died out and another arose that neither knew the Lord nor the work He had done for Israel, then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals (Judg. 2:10-11).

Hence, the preaching of repentance became necessary among Israel. In the early days, the Lord appointed Judges to deliver the people from the hand of their enemies and to lead them back to the service of the Lord. Later, from Samuel onward, prophets arose, admonishing Israel to turn from their evil ways and to keep God's commandments and statutes, as given to their fathers. Samuel initiated this call (1 Sam. 7:3), and all the prophets reiterated this message; they were preachers of repentance and conversion, and in doing so, they were also heralds of forgiveness of sins and complete redemption (Jer. 3:12, 14; 18:11; 25:5; Ezek. 14:6; 18:30-32; 33:11;

Hos. 12:7; 14:3; Joel 2:12, 13). At times, this preaching led to genuine conversion among the people; when subjugated and oppressed by their enemies, they cried out to the Lord (Judg. 3:9, 15; 4:3). Pious kings like Asa, Jehoshaphat, Josiah, and Hezekiah brought about smaller or larger reforms (1 Kings 15:11; 22:47; 2 Kings 23:15; 2 Chron. 30:6, 9). Jonah's preaching even led Nineveh to believe in God, proclaim a fast, don sackcloth, and repent of their evil ways (Jon. 3:5, 10). Ahab humbled himself before the Lord after Elijah's announcement of judgment (1 Kings 21:27, 29), and Manasseh sought the Lord's face and acknowledged Him at the end of his life (2 Chron. 33:12).

Although some conversions were genuine and heartfelt, for the majority of the people, it amounted to little more than an outward change; as Jeremiah lamented, they did not turn to the Lord with their whole heart, but in pretense (Jer. 3:10). Therefore, the prophets persisted in their call to repentance, urging not only the people collectively but also each individual to forsake their sinful ways and return to the Lord their God. When the people disregarded these exhortations, the prophets began to see their preaching as a harbinger of judgment upon the people (Isa. 6:10). Israel was likened to a wild vine (Jer. 2:21), and it was said that they could no more change their ways than a leopard could change its spots (Jer. 13:23). Thus, it was recognized that God must grant repentance and a new heart (Ps. 51:10; Jer. 31:18; Lam. 5:21). The prophets eagerly looked forward to the day when God would make a new covenant, circumcise the heart of the people, and write His law upon it (Deut. 30:6; Ps. 22:27; Hos. 3:5; Jer. 24:7; 32:33).

That day dawned with the proclamation of John the Baptist and Jesus that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Both declared that neither mere law-keeping nor self-righteousness would open the way to the kingdom, but only repentance and faith. To denote this conversion, the Greek New Testament uses two words: one indicating an internal, spiritual change in moral disposition (Matt. 3:2, 8, 11; 9:13; 11:20; Acts 2:38; 2 Cor. 7:9, 10), and the other indicating an external change in the direction of life (Matt. 13:16; Luke 1:16, 17; 22:32; Acts 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20). Acts 3:19 and 26:20 link both concepts: "Repent and turn back," implying a change of mind and a change of life.

When the Gospel was preached to Jews and Gentiles in the Apostolic age and accepted by them, it necessitated a visible change. Jews had to abandon their observance of the Mosaic law, including circumcision and the sacrificial system, while Gentiles had to forsake idolatry and their religious practices. Embracing Christianity required great self-denial and courage, typically done with heartfelt conviction, as there was no worldly honor or gain in it. Thus, the internal and external aspects of conversion were closely intertwined; a genuine internal change led to an evident external transformation.

This profound change, both internal and external, found its sign and seal in holy baptism (Acts 2:38). Those baptized renounced their past, severed ties with their former associations, were crucified to the world, and through baptism, died and were buried with Christ. At the same time, they rose with Christ to a new life, donned Him as a new garment, and became His disciples, followers, servants, soldiers, members of His body, and temples of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:3ff; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:11, 12). As the Christian church spread among Jews

and Gentiles, conversion entailed not only an internal change but also an external renunciation of idolatry (1 Cor. 12:2; 1 Thess. 1:9), of the weak and beggarly elements of religion (Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20), of dead works (Heb. 9:14; 1 Thess. 1:9), and of public sins and crimes (1 Cor. 6:10; Eph. 2:2, 3; Col. 3:5, 7; Tit. 3:3). Henceforth, they were to serve the living and true God (Heb. 9:14; 1 Thess. 1:9) and cleave to the Lord (1 Cor. 6:15-20).

When the missionary period came to an end, and the Church began to perpetuate itself through generations, passing from parents to children, the essence of conversion did not change, though its external manifestation did. From birth, children were included in the covenant; they received Holy Baptism as its sign and seal, and were thereby visibly incorporated into the Church of Christ, even before their consciousness and consent. Naturally, it often occurred that church members, whether baptized as children or later, fell into various sins. Sects such as the Montanists and Novatians held that grievous sins could not be forgiven by the Church. However, the Church itself adopted a different stance, welcoming back the erring and the fallen into its fellowship upon their repentance, confession of sins, and submission to ecclesiastical discipline.

Gradually, the sacrament of penance emerged, whereby the faithful, having committed sins, confessed these in the priest's confessional, exhibiting either perfect contrition (sorrow for sin because it offends God) or imperfect contrition (sorrow for sin out of fear of punishment), and performing the prescribed penances. Thus, conversion in the Roman Church gradually became externalized; the emphasis shifted from internal change of heart to confession and satisfaction, with imperfect contrition deemed sufficient for

forgiveness, and even the temporal penalties could be remitted through indulgences.

This understanding of conversion is what Luther challenged at the dawn of the Reformation. Through reading the New Testament, he recognized that true conversion, as depicted in Scripture, was vastly different from the penance practiced by Rome. Nevertheless, Luther initially made too sharp a distinction between repentance and faith, having experienced the torment of the law in his conscience and finding solace in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Thus, he viewed repentance—comprising sorrow, penance, and suffering—as a work of the law, while faith was the fruit of the Gospel. Calvin later refined this understanding, aligning more closely with Scripture. He distinguished between false and true conversion (Jer. 3:10), worldly sorrow and godly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10), regret for specific sinful acts, and heartfelt sorrow for having offended God. Worldly sorrow, arising from the unforeseen consequences of sin, leads to death, as seen in Cain (Gen. 4:13), Esau (Heb. 12:17), and Judas (Matt. 27:3); it does not lead to true conversion but to despair, bitterness, and hardness of heart.

True conversion, however, involves an inner breaking of the heart (Ps. 51:17; Acts 2:37), genuine sorrow for sin because it opposes God's will and incurs His wrath, and a heartfelt detestation and forsaking of sin. This godly sorrow, as God wills and works it, leads directly to God and results in a repentance that brings salvation without regret (2 Cor. 7:10). When the prodigal son resolves to return, he says, "I will arise and go to my Father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you'" (Luke 15:18). Even while still far from home, he calls on his Father, trusting

in His mercy and forgiveness. True conversion is thus inseparably linked with genuine saving faith.

Therefore, the comprehensive treatment of conversion does not belong to the doctrine of misery and salvation, but to that of gratitude (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33). Sometimes, conversion is understood in a broader sense, encompassing the entire transformation required to become a child of God and a citizen of His kingdom. Just as Jesus speaks only of regeneration in John 3 and solely of faith in Mark 16:16, He also speaks of conversion in Matthew 4:17. One benefit cannot exist without the other; in the new life of regeneration, faith and conversion are inherently present and necessarily emerge. Though they cannot be separated, they can be distinguished: conversion is a fruit of regeneration, presupposing faith. Conversion, too, is a gift and work of God, both at its inception and throughout its progress (Jer. 31:18; Lam. 5:21; Acts 5:31; 11:18). Yet, by virtue of the new life imparted, it is also an act of man (Acts 2:38; 11:21; Rev. 2:5, 16), continuing throughout one's life.

While conversion remains one in essence, it varies in form according to individuals and circumstances. It is a singular path walked by all God's children, yet each is led differently, experiencing diverse spiritual journeys. Consider the varied divine guidance given to the patriarchs, the distinct conversions of Manasseh, Paul, and Timothy, and the differences between David and Solomon, John and James. This same diversity is evident beyond Scripture in the lives of Church Fathers, Reformers, and all the pious. Recognizing this wealth of spiritual life prevents us from judging others by our narrow standards. Some people recognize only one method of conversion, expecting others to share their experiences. However, Scripture is far

richer and broader than such narrow perspectives. As it is written: there is diversity of gifts, but the same Spirit; diversity of ministries, but the same Lord; diversity of activities, but the same God who works all in all (1 Cor. 12:4-6). True conversion is defined not by human expectations but by divine declaration; in all its varied expressions, it must manifest the death of the old man and the resurrection of the new.

What signifies the death of the old man? It is a profound sorrow that we have provoked God's wrath through our sins, accompanied by an earnest hatred of sin and a fervent resolve to flee from it more and more.

And what signifies the resurrection of the new man? It is a deep-seated joy in God through Christ, coupled with a sincere desire and fervent love to live according to God's will, manifesting in all good works.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How do the Word and the Spirit work together in the calling of believers, according to the chapter?

- Reflect on the importance of both the preaching of the Word and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in bringing people to faith.

2. What are the dangers of relying solely on the preaching of the Word without acknowledging the necessity of the Spirit's work?

- Consider the errors of Pelagianism and its modern counterparts, and how they misunderstand the need for the Holy Spirit in conversion.

3. In what ways do spiritists or mystics undervalue the role of Scripture in the conversion process?

- Reflect on the potential pitfalls of emphasizing an inner, subjective experience of the Spirit while neglecting the objective truth of God's Word.

4. How does the chapter describe the correct relationship between the Word and the Spirit in the work of salvation?

- Consider how Reformed theology maintains a balance between the Word and the Spirit, ensuring that both are seen as essential in the process of salvation.

5. What is the significance of general revelation, and how does it differ from special revelation in leading people to God?

- Reflect on the role of general revelation through nature, history, reason, and conscience, and its limitations compared to the special revelation of the Gospel.

6. How does the chapter explain the concept of "general calling" and its purpose?

- Discuss the value of the general calling that extends to all humanity and how it differs from the special calling of the Gospel.

7. What are the distinct roles of Law and Gospel in the calling of individuals to faith, as outlined in the chapter?

- Reflect on the relationship between the Law, which reveals sin and guilt, and the Gospel, which offers grace and salvation through Christ.

8. How does the chapter address the issue of free will in relation to the effectual calling of God?

- Consider the Reformed perspective on God's sovereignty in salvation and how it reconciles human responsibility with divine election.

9. What are the practical implications of understanding the difference between external and internal calling?

- Reflect on how this distinction affects our approach to evangelism, discipleship, and personal assurance of salvation.

10. In what ways does the chapter emphasize the necessity of both faith and repentance in the response to God's calling?

- Discuss how true conversion involves both a change of mind (repentance) and a trust in Christ (faith), and how this dual response is essential for salvation.

21. Justification.

Regeneration, manifest in the fruits of faith and repentance, grants entry into the kingdom of God. Once a citizen of this divine kingdom, one immediately partakes of its manifold blessings, which can be encapsulated under three principal headings: righteousness, holiness, and salvation. We shall now consider the first of these glorious benefits.

Justice is commonly defined as that steadfast and enduring will of a rational being that renders to each their due. It entails, first, a moral disposition inherent in the individual and, second, an attitude and conduct towards others that springs from this disposition, recognizing their rights. Though Scripture presents a unique perspective on righteousness, it fundamentally stems from this basic concept. Righteousness, therefore, involves both personal integrity and equitable treatment of others.

In this vein, the Old Testament ascribes righteousness to God. He is the Rock, whose works are perfect, and all His ways are just. God is truth and without iniquity; He is just and right, Deut. 32:4. This righteousness is not derived from abstract contemplation of the Divine nature, but from God's self-revelation to His people. He did not speak in secret or say to the seed of Jacob, "Seek me in vain." He is the Lord who speaks righteousness and declares what is just. While the heathen worshiped gods that could not save, He revealed Himself to Israel as Jehovah, a just God and a Savior, Isa. 45:19-21. As the righteous Lord, He dwells in the midst of Israel, doing no wrong, and every morning He brings His justice to light, Zeph. 3:5.

This divine righteousness was first expressed through the laws He gave to His people. For us, righteousness consists in our conformity

to a law in our being and actions; but for God, there is no law above Him to which He must conform. His righteousness is His perfect consistency with Himself. Conversely, all rights and laws originate in Him, and these laws are just because they reflect His own being and will. "What great nation is there," Moses once asked, "that has statutes and righteous judgments as are in this law?" Deut. 4:8. The pious responded, "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. They are more to be desired than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb," Ps. 19:7-10, 119.

Furthermore, God's righteousness is demonstrated in His adherence to these laws and His demand that His people live according to them. From the beginning, He laid down His commandment to man, Genesis 2:16; and even after the fall, He maintained His rightful demands upon all creatures. His judgments, such as the flood and the confusion of tongues, testify to this, and He binds all Gentiles in their conscience to His law, Romans 1:20, 32 and 2:15. Particularly, He chose Israel as His treasured possession out of sheer love, requiring them to keep His covenant, obey His voice, and walk in His ways, Exod. 19:5. The Lord's demands of His people were just, for He had done all that was required for His vineyard, expecting it to produce good grapes, Isa. 5:4. He had shown them what is good and required of them only to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God, Mic. 6:8, Am. 5:14-15, Is. 1:16-17.

Finally, His righteousness shines forth in His judgment of all peoples, including His own people Israel, strictly according to His law. God is the lawgiver, king, and judge, Isa 33:22, the judge of all the earth, who cannot do anything but justice, Gen 18:25. At times, before the murmuring people who question His justice, Job 40:3, the absolute sovereignty of His actions is upheld, emphasizing that all the inhabitants of the earth are as nothing before Him. God does according to His will with the hosts of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth, and none can stay His hand or say to Him, "What are You doing?" Dan. 4:35. He is the Creator of all, and no creature can contend with Him, Isa. 45:9; He is the potter, and Israel is as clay in His hands, Jer. 18:6, Isa. 10:15. His ways and thoughts are far above ours, Isa. 55:8-9. He is a fearful majesty and awesome in power, yet He does not scorn humanity but regards and deals with man according to His law, Job 36:5, 37:23.

This He can do because He is omniscient and perfectly just. Earthly judges often falter, hence the Old Testament admonitions to them: not to show partiality in judgment, Deut. 1:17, Lev. 19:15, Prov. 24:23, not to accept bribes, Deut. 16:19, Ex. 23:8, Isa. 5:23, not to oppress the poor, the stranger, the orphan, or the widow, Ex. 23:6, 9, Ps. 82:2-4, Isa. 1:12, to judge righteously, Deut. 16:19, 25:1. "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord," Prov. 17:15, 26, 18:5, 24:24. But the Lord is the righteous judge; He loves justice, Ps. 11:7, 33:5, 99:4, Jer. 9:23, His right hand is full of righteousness, Ps. 48:11, righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne, Ps. 89:14, 97:2. He is impartial, knows no respect of persons, and receives no bribe, Deut. 10:17, 2 Chron. 19:7, for the rich and the poor alike are His handiwork, Job 34:19. He does not judge by outward appearance

but looks at the heart, 1 Sam. 16:7, 1 Chron. 28:9, He tests the hearts and minds, Ps. 7:9, Jer. 11:20, 20:12, and will one day judge the world in righteousness and the nations in justice, Ps. 9:8, 96:13, 98:9. He will be exalted in justice and sanctified in righteousness, Isa. 5:16.

If, however, the righteousness of God consists in His strict adherence to the law and in judging all men by the standard of His holy law, how can any human being ever be acquitted of guilt before God and obtain the right to eternal life?

There is no doubt that all men, without exception, are guilty of transgressing God's law and deserving of the penalty He has set for that transgression. Since Adam's disobedience, iniquity has pervaded the human race. The inclination of man's heart is evil from youth, Gen. 6:5, 8:21; all are born unclean, Job 14:4, 25:4-6, Ps. 51:5, and all have turned aside; there is none who does good, not even one, Ps. 14:3. There is no one alive who does not sin, who can say, "I have purified my heart and am free from sin," 1 Kings 8:46. When God considers iniquities, no one can stand before Him, Ps. 130:3, 143:2. Given man's condition, how can there ever be talk of his justification before God?

And yet, the same Old Testament that so clearly speaks of the sinfulness and doom of the whole human race also speaks repeatedly of righteous and upright people existing in the midst of a world filled with wickedness. Thus, Noah is called a righteous and blameless man in his generation, Gen. 6:9, 7:1, and Job receives the testimony of God Himself that there was none like him on earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and shuns evil, Job 1:1, 7, 2:3. In the

Psalms, there is frequent mention of a remnant of righteous people who stand in contrast to the wicked and endure much oppression from them, Ps. 1:5, 14:5, 32:11, 33:1, 34:16, 20. The Proverbs often address this same distinction among people, Prov. 2:20-22, 3:33, 4:18, 10:3, 6. The prophets make the same distinction between a faithful remnant and the great mass who give themselves over to idolatry and unrighteousness, 1 Kings 19:18, Isa. 1:8-9, 4:3, 6:13. Ezekiel, in particular, sharply contrasts the righteous and the wicked, thinking not of groups within the people, but of individual persons, Ezek. 3:18ff, 18:5ff, 33:8ff.

But this is not the only striking feature in the Old Testament. Even more remarkable is the fact that these righteous individuals—those upright in heart, devout, or however they may be described—have absolutely no fear of God's justice and do not dread being crushed by His judgment. Indeed, for the wicked, God's justice will be terrifying, as Isaiah 59:16-18, Jeremiah 11:20, 20:12, and Psalms 7:12-13, 9:5-6, 28:4, and 129:4 affirm. But the godly appeal to this justice; they invoke it, praying for vindication and salvation because God is the God of righteousness (Psalm 4:1, 143:1). They expect that precisely because He is the righteous God who examines hearts and minds, He will confirm them (Psalm 7:10), save them (Psalm 31:2), acquit them (Psalm 34:23), execute justice (Psalm 35:23), forgive (Psalm 51:16), answer (Psalm 65:6), revive (Psalm 119:40), hear (Psalm 143:1), and deliver them from distress (Psalm 143:11).

This appeal of the pious to God's righteousness sometimes goes further, taking on a form so undeniable for our understanding that it seems God must hear them and save them according to their righteousness. Job, for instance, cannot admit guilt and is conscious

of his upright and pure walk (Job 29:12f, 31:1f), and is finally vindicated by the Lord before his friends (Job 42:7). In the Psalms, the plea is often heard: "Judge me, Lord, according to my righteousness and my integrity" (Psalm 7:9, 17:1-5, 18:20-25, 24:4-6, 26:1, 37:18-19). In Isaiah, the people complain, "My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God" (Isaiah 40:27). But the prophet is sent precisely to proclaim in the name of the Lord that this is not the case. For after discipline comes redemption. The warfare is accomplished, iniquity is pardoned (Isaiah 40:2), and the Lord brings His righteousness near and His salvation does not delay (Isaiah 46:13). Just as He intervenes in the life of the godly and upright in redemption, vindicating them before Him (Psalm 17:2), executing justice for the oppressed (Psalm 103:6, 140:13, 146:7), so He will ultimately settle the dispute of His people (Isaiah 49:25, 51:22, Jeremiah 50:34, 51:36, Micah 7:9). He will bare His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, sending forth a word of righteousness from His mouth, and vindicating His people by His righteousness (Isaiah 45:23, 51:5, 52:10, 54:15). In Him are righteousness and strength; from Him is their righteousness; in the Lord shall all the seed of Israel be justified and shall glory (Isaiah 45:24-25, 54:17).

It is thus evident from the Old Testament that not only are there righteous individuals among Israel, but these individuals also expect their salvation and well-being from the righteousness of God. This may seem strange to us because we often distinguish between God's justice and His mercy, presenting it as though we are condemned by His justice but saved by His mercy. However, the godly of the Old Covenant do not make such a distinction; they closely relate God's righteousness to His grace and mercy, to His goodness and truth, to His beneficence and faithfulness (Psalm 33:5, 40:11, 51:16, 89:15,

103:17, 143:11-12, 145:7, 17, Jeremiah 9:24, Hosea 2:18). The Lord is gracious and just (Psalm 112:4, 116:5); His deliverances are proofs of His righteousness (Judges 5:11, 1 Samuel 12:7, Micah 6:5). Thus, God's righteousness, no less than His mercy, is for the godly an object of continual praise and honor (Psalm 7:18, 22:32, 35:28, 40:10, 51:16, 71:15, 19).

But how is this possible? How can people, who are all sinners, ever stand righteous before God's holy face? How can they ever have the right on their side and be acquitted of their sins according to God's righteousness, and accepted into His blessed fellowship?

Is it perhaps due to this that Israel in the days of the Old Testament was the people of God, had the temple in their midst, and zealously offered sacrifices of swine and goats? Many among Israel put their trust in these and believed that evil would not touch them. However, the prophets, who acted in the name of the Lord, taught the people otherwise. When Israel relied on its outward privileges, they declared that these were unreliable supports that would pierce the hand of anyone leaning on them. "Are you not to me like the children of the Ethiopians, O children of Israel?" saith the Lord in Amos 9:7. "Have I not brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?" To those who trusted in false words, saying: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord," Jeremiah 7:4, He announced the judgment that He would do to that house, which is called by His name and in which they trusted, as He had done to Shiloh. The devout among Israel knew well that sacrifices in themselves could not be pleasing to the Lord. "I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats," Isaiah 1:11. "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," Hosea 6:6. "To

what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?" Isaiah 1:11, 66:2-3, Jeremiah 6:20, Amos 5:21, Micah 6:6-8, Proverbs 15:8, 21:27.

Is the basis for the expectation of salvation among the devout of the Old Testament perhaps their own righteousness? Do they have such good hope for the future because they believe their good works will enable them to stand in the judgment of God? This thought may occur to us when we see that they, like Job, are strongly convinced of their innocence (Job 29:12ff, 31:1ff), that they repeatedly appeal to their sincerity, faithfulness, and righteousness (Psalm 7:9, 18:21-22, 26:1, 11, 101:2), that they speak of their right (Job 27:2, Psalm 17:2, 26:1, 35:24, 43:1, Isaiah 40:27), and that the Lord Himself counts them as righteous (Genesis 7:1, Job 1:7, 2:3). Yet, as soon as we look deeper, this ground also falls away completely.

Indeed, this plea for their righteousness alternates with the most humble confession of their sins. Job does not only speak of the sins of his youth but at the end he abhors himself and repents in dust and ashes (Job 13:26, 42:6). David speaks in Psalm 7:9 of his righteousness, but elsewhere he casts away all his righteousness, confesses his transgressions before the Lord, and praises only the forgiveness of sins (Psalm 32, 51). Daniel, too, does not base his prayers on his own righteousness but on the mercies of the Lord (Daniel 9:18). Isaiah acknowledges that all their righteousnesses are as filthy rags and that they have all gone astray like sheep (Isaiah 53:4-6, 59:12, 64:6). In Psalm 130:3-4, the poet expresses that if the Lord marked iniquities, no one could stand before Him; but there is forgiveness with Him that He may be feared. All without exception acknowledge the right of God in punishing Israel; they and their

fathers have sinned and rebelled against His word (Amos 3:2, Lamentations 1:18, Ezra 9:6-7, Nehemiah 9:33, Daniel 9:14).

When the devout among Israel mention their righteousness, they certainly think of their upright walk before the Lord and even pray that the Lord, the knower of hearts, may test and examine them in this their uprightness, as we see in Psalms 7:9, 10, 17:3, and 18:21-25. Yet this righteousness is not the same as the righteousness of their hearts. It is not meant in the sense of moral perfection, as the Pharisees later conceived it; rather, it is a moral righteousness grounded in a religious righteousness, or, in other words, a righteousness of faith. This is evident from the fact that the righteous, often depicted as the poor, the wretched, the needy, the faithful, the humble, and the meek, are those who fear the Lord and have no other expectation but Him. These are the same people whom Jesus later called the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the weary and burdened, and the children (Matt. 5:3ff, 11:25, 28).

The characteristic of these people is not that they are free from sin, but that in the midst of all the pressure and persecution they endure from the world, they put their trust in the Lord and seek their salvation and blessing in Him alone. There is no salvation for them in themselves or in any creature, but only in the Lord their God. And God is indeed their God, their sun and shield, their refuge and high place, their rock and stronghold, their helper and redeemer, their glory and their strength, their all in all (Ps. 18:3, 73:25-26). They are His people, the sheep of His pasture, His servants, and His favored ones (Ps. 33:12, 95:7, 100:3). They hope for His salvation, hold fast to His word, delight in His law, and expect everything from Him

alone. Unlike the later Pharisees, they do not stand opposed to God asserting their demands and rights, but stand on God's side, allying themselves with Him against His and their enemies.

When these people in their prayer and supplication appeal to their own and the Lord's righteousness, they express that the Lord, by virtue of His covenant, is obligated to do justice to the people who are named after Him and who walk in His fear before His adversaries. The cause of God is their cause, and their cause is the cause of God Himself. He chose His people, not because of their multitude or their righteousness, but because He loved them freely and for the sake of the oath He had sworn to the fathers (Deut. 7:7-8, 9:5-6). The covenant with that people rests on His will alone. Yet through that covenant, He is also bound to that people, having taken upon Himself the obligation to maintain, preserve, and bestow upon them the entire salvation He promised, saying to Abraham: "I will establish My covenant between me and you, and your descendants after you, for an everlasting covenant, to be to you a God and your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7).

God's righteousness, which the pious Israel appeals to in their tribulation, is the virtue by which the Lord is bound by His covenant to deliver His people from all their enemies. It is not so much an obligation resting on God towards His people, for they have no right to anything, but an obligation resting on the Lord towards Himself. He has voluntarily bound Himself to His people and owes it to Himself, to His own covenant and oath, to His own word and promise, to remain the God of His people despite all their iniquities (Ps. 25:11, 31:4, 79:9, 106:8, 109:21, 143:11; Isa. 48:9,11; Jer. 14:7, 21; Ezek. 20:9, 14, 22, 44; Dan. 9:19). The righteousness of God, which

the pious Israel pleads for, is not opposed to His mercy and salvation but is closely connected with His truth and faithfulness; it binds God by His own word and promise and obliges Him to save His people, out of sheer mercy, from all their afflictions.

God has indeed behaved in this manner in the past, delivering Israel repeatedly from its enemies (Ex. 2:24; Judges 2:1; Isa. 37:20). He will reveal Himself even more abundantly in the future when He establishes His kingdom among them. By virtue of His own righteousness, as a God of righteousness, faithfulness, and truth, He will make a new covenant with them, forgive their sins, pour out the Spirit upon them, and cause them to walk in His ways (Jer. 31:31-34). But He does this not for their sake, but for His own, for His great name's sake: "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isa. 43:25). He Himself brings the righteousness Israel needs (Isa. 45:24-25, 46:13, 54:17); He creates new heavens and a new earth, where the former things will not be remembered (Isa. 65:17). In those days, Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; the Gentiles will see their righteousness and all kings their glory, and they will be called by a new name, which the Lord's own mouth will pronounce: "The Lord is our righteousness" (Isa. 62:2; Jer. 23:6, 33:16).

The concept that God Himself grants righteousness to His people and thereby justifies them is richly developed in the New Testament, where Christ, through His life and death, accomplishes all righteousness for His congregation.

Jesus proclaimed that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand (Mark 1:15). He meant not only that the kingdom would

soon come but also that it had already arrived in principle through His person and work; for He is the Messiah in whom the Old Testament prophecy concerning the Servant of the Lord is fulfilled (Luke 4:17-21), and He demonstrates this fulfillment by His works. When He heals the sick, raises the dead, casts out devils, preaches the Gospel to the poor, and forgives sins, it is undeniable proof that He is the promised one and that the kingdom of God has come to earth (Matt. 9:2, 6; 10:7-8; 11:5; 12:28). In the blessings Christ bestows—both spiritual and physical salvation—the treasures of the kingdom of heaven are revealed.

Among the treasures of that kingdom, Jesus specifically mentions righteousness. In Matthew 6:33, this is closely connected with the kingdom, as Jesus exhorts His disciples: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." According to another interpretation, "seek first His kingdom and righteousness," referring to the heavenly Father mentioned in verse 32. Like the kingdom, righteousness in that kingdom is the property and gift of God, which He bestows through Christ. Whoever seeks and receives the kingdom of God also receives the righteousness necessary for citizenship in that kingdom.

Therefore, Jesus states that possessing righteousness is a condition for entering the kingdom of God. "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20, 7:21; 1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 6:18-21; Eph. 5:5; Rev. 22:15). The righteousness Jesus demands of His disciples is entirely different from the external observance of the law that satisfied the Jews; it is a spiritual and perfect righteousness, a perfection akin to that of the Father. When Jesus speaks of such righteousness as necessary for entrance into the kingdom, He does not mean that man

must first achieve it through his own efforts; otherwise, He would not be a Messiah, and His Gospel would not be a message of joy. Rather, His intention is to illuminate the nature, the spiritual character, the perfection of God's kingdom; no one can enter it unless they are in perfect conformity with God's law and partake in perfect righteousness.

This righteousness, while a requirement and condition of the kingdom on one hand, is a gift of that kingdom on the other hand. It is Christ Himself who distributes all the goods of that kingdom, including its righteousness. It is a kingdom of God, and the righteousness is the righteousness of God (Matt. 6:33). As the Father has ordained the kingdom for Him, so He ordains it for His disciples (Luke 22:29, 12:32). "For the Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand" (Matt. 11:27; John 3:35, 13:3, 16:15). The Father has given Him all these things because He is the Son of Man (John 5:27), meaning that through obedience unto death, He might obtain them for Himself. He did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). In His death on the cross, He had His body broken and His blood shed, so that the new covenant might be established and all the sins of His people forgiven (Matt. 26:26-28).

Based on the Father's appointment and His own sacrifice, Christ dispensed all the kingdom's treasures to His disciples, both before and after His death. He not only healed the sick but also forgave sins and granted eternal life. These mercies were not bestowed upon the self-righteous Pharisees but rather upon tax collectors and sinners, the weary and burdened, the poor in spirit, and those hungering and thirsting for righteousness. He came not to call the righteous but

sinners to repentance (Matt. 9:13), to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). It is not self-righteousness but regeneration, faith, and repentance that open access to the kingdom and all its blessings; and regeneration itself is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5).

As soon as the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, the apostles began to proclaim Christ crucified as the Prince and Savior exalted by God, to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:36, 38; 5:30, 31). With redemption through Christ's death accomplished, its significance could be fully revealed by the apostles in the light of the resurrection and through the Spirit's guidance. None articulated this more profoundly and clearly than Paul, who was circumcised on the eighth day, of the lineage of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee according to the law, a persecutor of the church by zeal, and blameless according to the righteousness in the law—but who, for Christ's sake, considered all his gains as loss (Phil. 3:5-7).

Paul's testimony shows that he had long pursued the righteousness that comes from the law with great zeal. According to the law's righteousness, he was blameless in the eyes of men; no one could accuse him. Rather, he earned praise, esteem, and honor, and would have had a distinguished career among his people if he had continued on that path. But when it pleased God to reveal His Son in him, Paul regarded all his former gains as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. He viewed his previous righteousness as refuse, that he might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of his own from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil. 3:8-9).

Paul further explains why the righteousness from the works of the law is insufficient. The law is holy, righteous, spiritual, and good, but man is fleshly, sold as a slave to sin (Rom. 7:12, 14). The law cannot quicken or destroy sin, because it is powerless due to the flesh (Rom. 8:3, Gal. 3:21). It demands but gives nothing; it only says, "The man who does these things shall live by them" (Rom. 10:5, Gal. 3:12). Yet, it cannot give life because the flesh cannot and will not submit to God's law (Rom. 8:7). Instead of justifying and giving life, the law becomes the power of sin (1 Cor. 15:56). Without the law, there would be no sin and no transgression (Rom. 4:15, 7:8), but in the sinful state of man, the law awakens sin, stimulates desire, and makes man covet what is forbidden. Sin, dwelling in man, seizes the opportunity through the commandment to arouse all sorts of desires and to become exceedingly sinful (Rom. 5:20, 7:8, 11, 13, Gal. 3:19). The law works wrath (Rom. 4:15), brings a curse (Gal. 3:10), and from its works, no one can be justified (Acts 13:39, Rom. 3:20, 28, 8:3, Gal. 2:16, 3:11). Judged by the law, the whole world stands guilty before God and subject to His punishment (Rom. 3:19), for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom. 1:18, Eph. 5:6, Col. 3:6).

If such is the righteous judgment pronounced by God upon mankind according to the law, then who can be saved? Like our Lord in Matthew 19:26, Paul answers: with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. With God, even the impossible becomes possible: He justifies the ungodly while remaining completely just Himself (Romans 3:26, 4:5). What God, in His holy law, strictly condemns—namely, justifying the wicked (Deut. 25:1, Ps. 82:2, Prov. 17:15, Is. 5:23)—He accomplishes, but in such a way as to preserve His righteousness. This is the miracle of the Gospel.

For God has manifested His righteousness not only in the law but also in the Gospel. In the Gospel, His righteousness is revealed apart from the law, independent of it, and seemingly in opposition to it (Rom. 1:17, 3:20-21). Abraham was justified by it while still uncircumcised (Rom. 4:1ff); David pronounces blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works (Rom. 4:6), and Habakkuk declares that the righteous shall live by faith (Hab. 2:4, Gal. 3:11). But now, in this present time (Rom. 3:21, 26), the righteousness of God is more clearly manifested, for Christ has appeared and has become our righteousness from God (1 Cor. 1:30).

The law given to Israel served to fully reveal God's righteousness in the Gospel. By exposing sin and making it known as sin, by working wrath and bringing it under the curse, the law functioned as a tutor leading to Christ, so that those under its discipline might, in the fullness of time, come to Christ and be justified by faith (Gal. 3:22-25). Thus, the law prepared men for the Gospel's advent; likewise, God, in His forbearance, permitted the Gentiles to walk in their ways (Acts 14:16) and overlooked the sins of His people, not punishing them according to their deserts (Rom. 3:25). He ordained all things under sin's dominion, so the promise might be given to the faithful, not by law's works, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:22, Rom. 3:9, 19, 11:32).

The righteousness revealed in the Gospel has a unique character. It is apart from the law, yet it must align with the law (Rom. 3:21). It must condemn and preserve, revealing both God's law and grace (Rom. 3:23-24). It must enable God to justify the wicked while maintaining His righteousness (Rom. 3:26, 4:5). This is accomplished objectively by presenting Christ as a propitiation

through His blood, and subjectively by accounting faith in Christ as righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5, Gal. 3:6). The righteousness revealed in the Gospel is the righteousness of faith, standing in direct opposition to law-based righteousness, to man's own righteousness (Rom. 3:21, 4:2-6, 9:32, 10:3, Phil. 3:9). It is a righteousness from God, received through faith in Christ (Phil. 3:9).

Thus, in Scripture's teaching on the justification of sinners before God, the emphasis is placed on the fact that the righteousness by which we are acquitted of guilt and punishment is a gift from God. If we were justified by the law's works, by keeping its commandments, we would present our own righteousness before God's judgment and could boast to some degree (Rom. 4:2). But Scripture teaches otherwise; Abraham had no grounds for boasting before God, for it was not works but faith that was credited to him as righteousness, and the reward was given not according to merit but according to grace (Rom. 4:4-5).

The righteousness which God bestows in Christ, enabling us to stand before Him, is not the fruit of our labor but wholly a gift of His grace. We are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24). God's grace is the profound ground and ultimate cause of our justification. Yet, this grace is not in contradiction to God's righteousness but is intimately related to it. Paul repeatedly affirms that God's righteousness is revealed in the Gospel (Rom. 1:17, 3:5, 21-22, 25-26, 10:3), and similarly, John declares that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Peter also states that we have obtained faith by virtue of the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:1).

This reveals that God, the God of law, has established a new legal order in the Gospel, distinct from the legal relationship established by the law. This new order reveals God's justice in such a way that He gives His law, demands obedience, and judges according to deeds, rewarding or punishing accordingly. However, since sin has nullified the law's efficacy, God has instituted a different legal order in the Gospel. This new order demands submission (Rom. 10:3) but provides the righteousness needed to stand before God's judgment through faith. Thus, the Gospel is both an order of law and grace. Grace lies in God's provision of a way to righteousness and life in Christ, while justice is preserved in the complete righteousness established through Christ's sacrifice and granted to us by grace. Christ is both a gift of God's love (John 3:16, Rom. 5:8) and a demonstration of His righteousness (Rom. 3:25); in the Cross, law and grace are united; justification is both judicial and an act of God's grace.

To this union of law and grace, we owe Christ and all His benefits, particularly the righteousness needed to stand before God. This righteousness, bestowed by faith, must be distinguished from God's intrinsic righteousness or the righteousness of Christ's divine or human nature. If God's or Christ's essential righteousness were the basis of our justification, Christ's suffering and death would lose their value, and the distinction between Creator and creature would be blurred. The righteousness that justifies us before God is acquired through Christ's suffering and death. God presented Christ as a propitiation through faith in His blood, a means of atonement for sins (Rom. 3:25). He was made sin for us and became a curse for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21,

Gal. 3:13). He has become for us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption from God (1 Cor. 1:30).

This righteousness of Christ is so complete and sufficient that it requires no addition from us. It cannot be increased or supplemented by us in any way, for it is an organic whole. Just as the law is a whole, so that he who keeps it entirely but stumbles in one commandment is guilty of all (James 2:10), so also is the righteousness which fulfills the law's demands a complete unity, like the seamless garment of Jesus, woven in one piece from top to bottom (John 19:23). It is not composed of parts but exists entirely; one either possesses it or does not; it cannot be partially received and supplemented by one's own works. Moreover, what could qualify us to supplement it? There can be no question of good works performed before faith, for Scripture clearly states that man's heart is evil from the beginning, that what is born of the flesh is flesh, that the mind of the flesh is hostile to God and cannot submit to His law, and that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6).

If good works were to supplement the righteousness acquired by Christ, the only works qualifying would be those performed by a regenerated man through faith. Indeed, believers can perform good works; as a good tree brings forth good fruit, so the good man brings forth good things out of the good treasure of his heart (Matt. 12:35). Renewed by the Spirit of God, he delights in the law of God according to the inner man (Rom. 7:22). However, first, all these works stemming from faith are still very imperfect and tainted with sin; even when the believer desires to do good, evil is always present with him (Rom. 7:21). Second, these good works presuppose the righteousness bestowed by Christ and accepted by faith. The believer

walks only in the good works that God has prepared for him, and for which he was created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10).

Our comfort in justification lies in the fact that all the righteousness we need resides outside of us in Christ Jesus. It is not we who must or can bring it about. God reveals His righteousness in the Gospel, providing righteousness through the sacrifice of Christ. The righteousness that justifies us is from God through faith in Christ; it is not of our works, either wholly or in part, but is altogether, completely, and sufficiently a gift of God, a free gift of grace (Phil. 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5). If it is by grace, it is no longer by works; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace (Rom. 11:6). Christ Himself is the righteousness with which we can stand before God (1 Cor. 1:30); by His suffering and death, He secured the right for Himself and His people to enter into eternal life, free from all guilt and punishment, and to sit at the right hand of God.

The righteousness that justifies us cannot, therefore, be separated from the person of Christ. It does not consist of a material or spiritual gift that Christ can give us without Himself, nor can we receive and accept it apart from His person. There is no communion with the benefits of Christ without communion with His person, and the latter always necessarily entails the former. To stand in the judgment of God, to be acquitted of all guilt and punishment, and to share in the glory of God and eternal life, we must have Christ—not merely something of Him, but Himself, in the fullness of His grace and truth, according to His divine and human nature, in His humiliation and exaltation. The crucified and glorified Christ is the righteousness that God grants us in justification by grace. When God grants this Christ with all His benefits to us freely, without any merit

on our part, by way of faith, He justifies us, freeing us from all guilt and punishment, and gives us the right to eternal life, heavenly glory, and His own blissful, never-ending fellowship. We stand before Him as free as if we had never sinned, yes, as if we had accomplished all the obedience that Christ accomplished for us.

There are two ways in which something can be given to us. We can acquire ownership of it by a legal decision, and we can, based on such a decision, take possession of it sooner or later. A person who is appointed heir in a legal will already receives the right to the inherited goods in the future, but may only take actual possession years later. Even when law and reality coincide, there remains a difference between the two. Ownership is the right; possession is the actual power over a thing. With animals, this distinction is less evident; an animal takes what it can get. For humans, created in the image of God, it is different; they must have a right to something in order to possess and use it. It is their honor and privilege to live by their own work, not by robbery.

This applies also in the spiritual sphere. We stand in various relationships to God: He is our Creator, and we are His creatures; He is the potter, and we are the clay; He is the builder and artist, and we are His temple; He is the farmer, and we are the branches of His vine; He is our Father, and we are His children. All these relationships illustrate the rich and varied relationship between God and man, especially believers. Neglecting any of these relationships damages the content of this intimate bond. The prodigal son retains the name of son in his wanderings, but is a lost and dead son, found and alive only when he returns to the Father in confession.

Simultaneously, we are in a legal relationship with God; He is our Creator, Lawgiver, King, and Judge. Scripture repeatedly emphasizes this (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 47:3, 8; Isa. 33:22; Heb. 4:12; James 4:12), and our hearts bear witness to it. The sense of justice is deeply ingrained in our soul, belonging to all people and nations. The concept of law itself is timeless and universal; there are differences in the content of laws, but the concept of law has no history, much like time, place, movement, life, good, and evil. It is part of human consciousness, gradually coming to awareness. Even the most untamed nation feels when its rights are violated and defends them. This broad sense of right includes the relationship to God; every human feels obliged to serve God and live according to His law, and every human knows that failing to do so makes them guilty and worthy of punishment. The law of the broken covenant of works remains in every human heart, and the moral law proclaimed at Sinai reinforces its commandments and the obligation to keep them.

This legal relationship is not nullified in the Gospel, as some might imagine, but rather restored and fulfilled. The distinction between law and gospel does not lie in the notion that in the law God acts solely as Judge, and in the gospel solely as Father; nor should it be equated with the distinction between Old and New Testaments. For even in the Old Testament, God revealed to His people the Gospel of His grace and mercy; the Law served the covenant of grace, following and being subordinate to the promise, and was itself a gift of His fatherly favor and educational wisdom. Although, in the person of Christ, the depth of God's mercy has been more fully revealed than was possible in the Old Testament, the Gospel of grace was not unknown to Israel, and the fullness of the Gospel in Christ was not a destruction but a fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.

Paul, with the greatest possible emphasis, declares that in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed (Romans 1:17, 3:21-26). The unity and harmony of the law and the Gospel consist in the fact that in both, the same righteousness of God is revealed. Yet the difference lies in this: in the law, that righteousness is revealed according to the rule: the man who does these things shall live; but in the Gospel, that righteousness is revealed apart from the law, according to the rule: the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the wicked, his faith is counted as righteousness (Romans 4:5). In the law, a personal, perfect, sufficient righteousness is demanded; in the Gospel, the same perfect, sufficient righteousness is given by God through grace in Christ. Since man was unwilling and unable to uphold God's law, God Himself restored and confirmed His law through the gift of righteousness in Christ. He places His love and mercy in service to His righteousness; by giving Himself, He fulfills His own law, and imputes to us by grace the righteousness of Christ. Thus, we may fully fulfill His law, receive complete forgiveness of all our sins, and boldly enter His heavenly kingdom.

Justification is therefore both a gracious and a righteous act of God, a declaration by which He as Judge acquits us of guilt and punishment and grants us the right to eternal life. Rome and those who seek justification wholly or partly in man himself (whether in his faith, good works, or even Christ in us) object to this judicial declaration of justification, arguing that it is false and unworthy of God. They claim that if the basis of our justification lies wholly in Christ outside of us, then the justified man is not truly righteous, and God renders an untrue and unjust judgment.

To this objection, it suffices to note that the Holy Scriptures consistently present justification as a judicial act. It speaks of the justification of sinners before God using a term borrowed from legal language, which always carries a legal meaning. To the judges in Israel, God commanded that they judge the righteous and condemn the unrighteous (Deut. 25:1, Ps. 82:2, Prov. 17:15, Isa. 5:23). He Himself demonstrates His righteousness by not justifying the wicked and not slaying the righteous (Gen. 18:25, Ex. 23:7). When transferred to the spiritual realm, Jesus says, for instance, that the wisdom manifest in Him was justified, meaning recognized as wisdom by her children (Matt. 11:19). Similarly, in Luke 7:29, the people who heard John and the tax collectors who were baptized with his baptism justified God, acknowledging Him as righteous. The moral meaning of justifying, or making holy, is entirely excluded in these contexts.

The same understanding applies to the salvation of sinners. Paul states that in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed (Rom. 1:19, 3:20). He declares that God justifies those who come by faith while remaining just Himself (Rom. 3:26). He imputes faith for righteousness to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the wicked (Rom. 4:5). Paul contrasts justifying with accusing and condemning, exclaiming: Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? (Rom. 8:33-34). He equates justifying with imputing righteousness (Rom. 4:3, 6) and with making righteous (Rom. 5:19). In the preceding verse, he says that just as by one trespass (of Adam) condemnation came upon all men, so by one act of righteousness (of Christ) justification leading to life came upon all men (Rom. 5:18). Thus, justification is everywhere a judicial act, a declaration of

acquittal pronounced by the heavenly Judge upon the sinner who, according to the law, is ungodly but who has accepted by faith the righteousness bestowed by God in Christ. Judged accordingly, this sinner is now considered righteous.

However, apart from the fact that Holy Scripture very clearly interprets justification as a judicial act, its opponents completely misrepresent its character. They claim that such an acquittal of man on the basis of a righteousness which is outside him is false, and leaves man himself entirely unchanged. This accusation falls back on themselves, for if they acquit man on the basis of a righteousness within him, they must admit that man's righteousness here on earth is always deeply flawed and imperfect, and they must conclude that God justifies someone on the basis of a very flawed righteousness and is thus guilty of an untrue judgment. Conversely, an acquittal on the basis of the righteousness that is in Christ is perfectly just, because that righteousness is perfect and was made by God Himself in the Son of His love. Moreover, this acquittal does not occur merely on the basis of the righteousness that is in Christ but, through faith, also works in the consciousness of man, bringing about the greatest transformation therein. Even when someone is acquitted of a serious crime before a human judge, his entire legal relationship is transformed. Similarly, the acquittal of God has an effect on man's consciousness and frees him from all sense of guilt.

In a certain sense, this acquittal has already taken place in the decree of election; it is objectively pronounced in the resurrection of Christ, who was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification (Romans 4:25), and in the Gospel, which proclaims the joyful message that through the death of Christ, God is reconciled and at

peace with the world (2 Cor. 5:19). Justification is but one link in the chain of salvation; it is connected on one side to foreknowledge and calling, and on the other to sanctification and glorification. Justification in the court of God thus penetrates the consciousness of man in due time through faith; the righteousness acquired by Christ is not a dead capital lying outside of Christ, but is included in His person. Christ was raised up to make Himself known to His own with all His benefits through the Holy Spirit. When man's eye of faith is opened to this, his whole legal relationship changes. He, who was poor, suddenly becomes rich through the riches which are in Christ Jesus; he, who was guilty of transgressing all God's commandments, suddenly sees himself freed from all guilt and punishment; he, who deserved eternal punishment, sees himself granted the right to eternal life. With Paul, he exults: Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? It is Christ who died, yes rather, who is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

Finally, justification and sanctification are distinct and should be sharply distinguished. For he who neglects or erases this distinction reestablishes his own righteousness in man, disregards the perfection and sufficiency of God's righteousness revealed in Christ, changes the Gospel into a new law, takes away the comfort of souls, and makes salvation dependent on man's merits. Faith, therefore, appears in justification only as a receiving organ, as the hand that accepts a gift, as the soul's trust in Christ and His righteousness alone. It is true that the Holy Scriptures repeatedly use the expression that faith is imputed as righteousness (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:22, Gal. 3:6, James 2:23). This undoubtedly indicates that faith replaces the righteousness demanded by the law, which the sinner

does not possess. But the question arises: why does faith take the place of the righteousness required by the law? Is it because faith has such an outstanding moral value and is such a good and valid work?

Many think so, claiming that faith justifies by its inner quality alone, regardless of its content and object. But this is not the teaching of Scripture. If faith, by virtue of its moral nature, justified, it would be seen as an act or work, not opposed to works. Yet Paul bluntly states that justification, now in the Gospel by faith, stands diametrically opposed to all justification by the works of the law (Rom. 3:20, 28, 4:4ff, Gal. 2:16, 3:11). This contradiction alternates with another: justification by faith is justification by grace, excluding all boasting and merit (Rom. 3:24, 4:4ff, Titus 3:5). Paul expressly says that the inheritance is by faith so that it may be by grace (Rom. 4:16). This could not be said if faith justified by its inner dignity and power. Furthermore, if faith alone justified, Christ would lose all significance in justification; it would only matter that, but not what, a person believed. Faith would justify, even if it were faith in an idol, in a demonic power, or in a false prophet, as some unbelieving healers recommend visits to Lourdes because "faith heals."

But the testimony of Scripture is diametrically opposed: it is precisely the content and object that matter in justifying faith. Faith can take the place of the righteousness required by the law and be imputed as righteousness because it is faith in Christ Jesus, whom God presented as a reconciliation through the power of His blood (Rom. 3:25). He bore our curse (Gal. 3:13), was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), died and rose again, is at the right hand of God, and prays for us (Rom. 8:34). Therefore, He became for us a righteousness from God (1 Cor. 1:30), in whom we are the righteousness of God (2

Cor. 5:21). In a word, faith justifies because it partakes of the righteousness in Christ, which is as perfect and sufficient as that demanded by the law but is now given in the Gospel by God through grace in Christ (Phil. 3:9). It justifies, not by its inner dignity, but by its substance: the righteousness of Christ.

However much it is of utmost importance to clearly comprehend and act upon the distinction between justification and sanctification, these two blessings are never separated even for a moment. They are not separated in God's decree, for justification is but one link in the chain of salvation. Those whom God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son; and whom He predestined, He also called; and whom He called, He also justified; and whom He justified, He also glorified. Nor are they separated in the person and work of Christ; for righteousness is not a good external to Christ that can be received apart from His person. Christ Himself is our righteousness, and simultaneously our wisdom, holiness, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). One cannot accept one of Christ's benefits without accepting the others, as they are all contained in His person. Whoever accepts Christ as his righteousness by faith also receives Him as his holiness; Christ cannot be accepted partially or fractionally. Whoever has Him possesses Him entirely with all His benefits, and whoever lacks His benefits is not a partaker of His person. Finally, justification and sanctification are inseparably united in faith. Faith is considered in justification solely from its religious aspect, as trust in God's grace, as acceptance of Christ and the righteousness granted by God in Him. But if faith truly is and does this, then it is a living, sanctifying faith, which is God's work par excellence (John 6:29) and reveals its genuineness and power in good works (Gal. 5:6). Justifying is not synonymous with making

alive; but as sin and death, so righteousness and life are intimately connected; the righteous shall live by faith (Rom. 1:17). As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men (Rom. 5:18).

Therefore, justification includes two benefits: the forgiveness of sins and the granting of the right to eternal life. These are interconnected and correspond to the passive and active obedience in the work of Christ. Christ not only repaired what Adam ruined by his transgression but also secured what Adam should have acquired by his obedience to God's commandment—eternal life. He who believes in Christ receives, therefore, both the forgiveness of all his sins (Matt. 9:2, Rom. 4:7, Eph. 4:32) and eternal life at the same moment (John 3:16, 36).

The forgiveness of sins is often taken lightly by many. They see it as entirely natural that God would forgive sins and overlook shortcomings, as if God must forgive sins to be a God of love. However, the experience of human life teaches otherwise. To forgive, to forgive wholeheartedly, in such a manner that no residue of the offense remains in the heart, requires a struggle against oneself and signifies a victory over oneself. It is true that the sense of being insulted is often misplaced in us; we take offense at trivial matters and overlook things that should deeply grieve us. Our sense of honor and justice is corrupted and misdirected. However, when we feel deeply wronged, and our honor, character, or name is tarnished, it requires a tremendous effort to banish all thoughts of revenge and hatred, and to forgive our enemy completely and wholeheartedly, so that we forget the insult and never recall it. Forgiveness presupposes

the violation of a right and consists in the remission of the penalty due for it.

All this applies even more significantly among men. But sin and forgiveness acquire a far more serious character when committed against God and granted by God. God also has a right—the right to be acknowledged, served, and worshipped as God by all people, at all times, everywhere, and in all things. This right is the principle and foundation of all law; whoever violates it, fundamentally disrupts the entire moral world order, which has its origin and stability in God. Sin is an overturning of God's justice. Whoever comes to know sin in this manner, considers it in the light of Holy Scripture, and sees it somewhat as God sees it, will think differently about forgiveness. He may find it difficult to believe because it contradicts the appearance of all things. First, his own heart condemns him and makes him feel guilty before God. Then, the law pronounces a curse upon him and deems him worthy of death. Satan accuses him and upholds justice against him. People abandon him in his hour of need and magnify his sins. And in and behind all of these, he hears the voice of God's righteousness, seeking him out, pursuing him, holding him accountable, and subjecting him to judgment. Who dares, who can, in light of all this, believe in the complete forgiveness of all his sins?

Yet the Church of Christ dares to believe, can believe, and indeed must believe; she confesses in humility and gladness of heart: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." She believes this even though it is unseen; she believes this even though her conscience accuses her of having gravely sinned against all God's commandments, of having never kept them, and even though she is still inclined to all evil. This faith stands upon a firm foundation. He who seeks forgiveness of

sins outside of Christ may desire it and hope for it, but he cannot believe it with full assurance and conviction; he equates it with leniency and a dilution of the seriousness of sin. But the Gospel reveals to us that God can and has forgiven sins because His justice has been fully satisfied in Christ. Satisfaction does not oppose forgiveness but paves the way for it, guarantees it, and allows us to believe in it with unwavering certainty. So perfect is this forgiveness that Scripture equates it to not remembering, to casting away, to forgetting (Isa. 38:17, 43:25; Heb. 8:12). The Lord does not behold iniquity in Jacob, nor does He see perverseness in Israel (Num. 23:21).

This forgiveness is already contained within the purpose of God, openly declared over the entire congregation in the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 4:25), proclaimed universally in the Gospel (Acts 5:31), and particularly distributed to each believer. Although the believer has received the forgiveness of all his sins, he must continually appropriate them in faith, day by day, to experience their assurance and comfort. It would be easy if we could live according to the principle: once converted, always converted; and many indeed continue to live off a past experience, reassuring themselves with it. But this is not the Christian life. Neither the righteousness in Christ Jesus nor the faith instilled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit is a dead capital. We partake of the forgiveness of our sins, its truth, and its certainty over the long term, through fellowship with Christ Himself, through the activity of sanctifying faith. That is why Jesus placed the plea for the forgiveness of sins on the lips of His disciples (Matt. 6:12); the humble confession of our sins is the means by which God reveals His faithfulness and justice to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). And to make us constantly

aware of the magnitude of the benefit given to us in the forgiveness of sins, Christ adds to the request for the forgiveness of our debts the words: "as we forgive our debtors." These words do not define the basis on which we dare or may ask God to forgive us our sins; they do not set the standard by which we may invoke it for ourselves; but they describe the disposition which must be present in the one who prays in order to receive, enjoy, and value the benefit of forgiveness. Only then do we somewhat understand what it has cost God, in human terms, to grant us the forgiveness of sins in Christ, when we have rooted out all enmity from our hearts and forgiven our debtors wholeheartedly for all their sins. We can only pray for that forgiveness with all earnestness if we are wholeheartedly forgiving toward our neighbor. The forgiveness of our sins is therefore established with God once and for all, but it is appropriated to us throughout our lives through faith and conversion. The Lord's Supper testifies to this, as in it we repeatedly celebrate the fact that Christ's body was broken and His blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins (Matt. 26:28).

The other side of this benefit of forgiveness is the right to eternal life. Whoever believes in Christ is not only freed from the wrath of God but also immediately receives eternal life. John particularly emphasizes this eternal life as the new life born of God and implanted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (John 1:13, 3:5). The sonship he speaks of arises from rebirth and primarily consists in conformity to God (John 1:13, 1 John 1:1-3). But Paul often speaks of 'sonship' in another sense; he understands it to mean that God accepts us as His children and heirs on the basis of righteousness in Christ.

Among the Romans, families were strictly separated from each other; each family had its own rights and especially its own religious customs. A child could only pass from one family to another by a formal, legal act, whereby the natural father, as it were, sold his child to the other father who wanted to accept it as his own. If the natural father had died, the transition could only occur through a solemn declaration by the people in a public assembly. Only in this way could the child be released from obligations in one family and subjected to those in another.

The Apostle Paul likely derived the concept of adoption from the Roman legal system to illustrate the new relationship believers have with God. In the Old Testament, this adoption was already a privilege of Israel (Romans 9:4), hence Israel is often referred to as the son of God (Exodus 4:22-23; Deuteronomy 8:5; Hosea 11:1). However, this adoption is primarily a blessing of the new covenant. The faithful of the Old Testament were still under the law (Galatians 3:23, 4:1-3), but now, Christ has come in the fullness of time, placing Himself under the law and bearing its curse to redeem those under the law and grant them the adoption of children (Galatians 4:4-5). Through His death, Christ freed us from the servitude of the law and sin, so we now belong to Him who was raised from the dead (Romans 7:1-4), accepted by God as His children and heirs (Galatians 4:7). As such, believers receive the Spirit of the Son, the Spirit of adoption, which assures them of their sonship and gives them the boldness to address God as their Father, continually guided by this Spirit (Romans 8:14-16; Galatians 4:6). This adoption, rooted in God's eternal purpose (Ephesians 1:5), extends into the future; though believers are now children and heirs, they await the full revelation of their sonship and the redemption of their bodies (Romans 8:18-23).

The benefit of justification by faith alone provides the Christian with rich consolation. The forgiveness of sins, hope for the future, and certainty of eternal salvation do not depend on the degree of holiness attained in life but are firmly rooted in God's grace and the redemption in Christ Jesus. If such certainty were based on the Christian's good works, it would remain perpetually uncertain, even unto death, for even the most holy have only a small measure of perfect obedience. Consequently, believers would be perpetually plagued by fear and anxiety, unable to stand in the freedom Christ has given, and would likely turn to church and priest, to altar and sacrament, to religious duties and penance for assurance. This is the plight of many Christians, both within and outside the Roman Church, who do not grasp the glory and comfort of free justification.

However, the believer who comprehends the riches of this benefit sees it differently. He humbly recognizes that good works, whether they consist of mental states, sensations of the soul, or outward actions, are never the grounds but only the fruits of faith. His salvation and blessedness are anchored outside of himself, in Christ Jesus and His righteousness, and therefore remain unshaken. His house is built on the rock, capable of withstanding the torrents of rain, the streams, and the winds. Naturally, this confession, like every article of faith, can be misused. If faith, which accepts Christ and His righteousness, is taken merely as intellectual assent to historical truth, the person remains cold, indifferent, and lifeless, producing no good works from that faith and failing to accept the person of Christ. But true faith drives the guilt-stricken and defeated soul to Christ Himself, clings to the grace of God alone, and in that very moment, produces good works.

Indeed, only this faith, which rests solely on God's grace in Christ and is conscious of the forgiveness of sins, is capable of producing truly good works. As long as we let the forgiveness of our sins depend wholly or partly on our emotions and good deeds, we remain in fear and anxiety. We are not yet children doing good out of love, but servants doing it for a reward. We do not yet do good purely for the sake of goodness itself, that is, for God's will, but more or less out of self-interest, to gain favor and make ourselves acceptable to God. But all this changes when we understand by faith that our salvation rests exclusively in God's grace and the righteousness of Christ. Then we abandon the idea of establishing our own righteousness and cease laboring on our own salvation, as it is an unshakable reality in Christ Jesus. Assured of that salvation in Christ, we can now devote all our attention to doing good works to glorify our Father. We no longer accomplish them for our own sake but for the Lord's sake. We belong to Christ, who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God (Romans 7:4). We have died to the law through the law, that we might live to the glory of God (Galatians 2:19).

Herein lies the liberty of the Christian, which he partakes through justification: he is released from the demand and curse of the law. The believer is not freed from the law in the sense that he can live according to his own desires or, as it is termed today, indulge the inclinations of his sinful nature. On the contrary, the believer is more firmly bound to the law than ever before; for faith does not nullify the law, but confirms it (Romans 3:31). Its righteousness is fulfilled in those who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4). Those who have died to sin cannot continue to live in it. Yet, the relationship the believer now has with the law is

markedly different from what it was before. He remains bound to it as a rule of gratitude, free from its demand and curse.

In this respect, the believers of the New Testament possess much more than those of the Old Covenant. In the Old Testament, religion is often described as the fear of the Lord, and the faithful are frequently called servants of the Lord. They were children, but as infants, and therefore like servants, placed under guardians and caretakers until the time appointed by the Father (Galatians 4:1-3, 3:23-24). But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law (Galatians 4:4). By fulfilling all righteousness in our place (Matthew 4:15), by becoming a curse for us (Galatians 3:13), and by being made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law and completely freed us from its demands. We are no longer bound to it, we are no longer its servants; we have died to it, and we now serve Christ and live for God (Romans 7:1-4, Galatians 2:19). We are no longer under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:15), standing in the freedom with which Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1). For us, the rule is no longer: do this and you will live; but rather, we live by faith and fulfill the law because we delight in it according to the inner man. Thus, the law has become powerless against believers: it can no longer accuse them, for their guilt has been borne by Christ and its demands fulfilled by Him; it can no longer condemn them, for Christ has taken upon Himself its curse and endured all its penalties; Satan can no longer use it to accuse the brethren, for who can bring charges against God's elect when God Himself justifies them, and Christ who died and was raised prays for them?

With the change wrought by justification in the believer's relationship to the law, to its demands and curses, so too does their relationship to all things and the world change. When reconciled to God, we are reconciled to all things; when in right relation to God, we are in right relation to the entire world. Redemption in Christ is a redemption from the guilt and punishment of sin, but also from the oppressive weight of the world. For the Father loves the world, and Christ has overcome it, so that while it may still trouble us, it cannot take away our joy (John 16:33). As children of their heavenly Father, the faithful do not worry about what they will eat or drink or how they will clothe themselves, for He knows they need all these things (Matthew 6:25ff). Though strangers, they are known; though dying, they live; though disciplined, they are not killed; though sorrowful, they always rejoice; though poor, they make many rich; though having nothing, they possess everything (2 Corinthians 6:9-10). They do not torment themselves with regulations of touch, taste, and handling, but esteem all God's creatures as good and receive them with thanksgiving (Colossians 2:20; 1 Timothy 4:4). They remain and work in their calling, serving Christ alone, not men (1 Corinthians 7:20-24). They see trials not as punishments but as discipline and evidence of God's love (Hebrews 12:5-8). They are free from all creatures because nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35, 39). Indeed, all things are theirs because they belong to Christ (1 Corinthians 3:21-23), and all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

The believer, justified in Christ, is the freest creature in the world. At least, that is how it should be.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the chapter define the concept of justice and righteousness in relation to God's nature and actions?

- Reflect on the biblical definitions and examples given in the chapter and how they shape our understanding of God's character.

2. In what ways does the chapter explain the relationship between God's law and His righteousness?

- Consider how the chapter describes the origin of laws in God's nature and the significance of His perfect consistency with Himself.

3. What role does God's justice play in His interactions with humanity, especially in the context of sin and salvation?

- Discuss the implications of God's justice in both judging sin and providing a way of salvation through Jesus Christ.

4. How does the chapter describe the Old Testament understanding of righteousness, and how is this related to the New Testament revelation?

- Reflect on the continuity and development of the concept of righteousness from the Old to the New Testament.

5. Why is it necessary for humans to be justified before God, according to the chapter?

- Consider the human condition described in the chapter and the need for justification to be in a right relationship with God.

6. What is the significance of Christ's work in securing righteousness for believers, as outlined in the chapter?

- Reflect on the role of Christ's life, death, and resurrection in providing the righteousness that believers need.

7. How does the chapter distinguish between righteousness based on the law and the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ?

- Discuss the differences and why righteousness through faith is essential for justification.

8. What is the relationship between faith and righteousness in the process of justification?

- Reflect on how faith functions as the means by which believers receive the righteousness of Christ.

9. How does the chapter explain the role of the Holy Spirit in the application of justification to believers?

- Consider the involvement of the Holy Spirit in convicting, regenerating, and assuring believers of their justified status.

10. What practical implications does the doctrine of justification have for the life of a believer?

- Reflect on how understanding justification by faith alone influences daily Christian living, assurance of salvation, and the

pursuit of holiness.

22. Sanctification.

As the image of God was reflected not only in knowledge and righteousness but also in holiness, so must the renewal of man restore him to a right relationship with God, renewing his inner being according to the holy demands of His law. Sin is both guilt and corruption; justification absolves the guilt, while sanctification cleanses the stain of sin. Through the former, his standing before God is restored; through the latter, his nature is renewed, enabling him to be and do good.

The term "holy" permeates the pages of Holy Scripture. The original meaning of the Hebrew term translated as "holy" is uncertain, likely derived from a root meaning "to cut off" or "to separate." Its introduction into the religious lexicon is debated: some assert that it first described things set apart from common use, while others argue it indicated a special relation to God. This latter view holds that persons and things are not inherently holy but become so through divine action. They cannot sanctify themselves; all holiness flows from God. Jehovah is holy, thus He desires a holy people, a holy priesthood, a holy dwelling (Ex. 19:6; 29:43; Lev. 11:44-45; 19:2). He designates who is His and who is holy (Num. 16:5).

In the Old Testament, God is repeatedly called the Holy One. This title is not a mere attribute but expresses His divine greatness, majesty, and transcendence. "There is none holy like the Lord," for He alone is God (1 Sam. 2:2). He is "God, not man, the Holy One" (Hos. 11:9); none can stand before Him (1 Sam. 6:20). Exalted above all gods, He is "glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing

wonders" (Ex. 15:11). His name is great and terrible (Ps. 99:2-3); to swear by His holiness is to swear by Himself (Amos 4:2; 6:8). Holiness, thus, signifies God's distinction from and exaltation above all creatures. Isaiah especially emphasizes this name (Isa. 5:16; 6:3; 29:23; 30:11; cf. Ezek. 37:28; 39:7; Hab. 1:12; 3:3).

God's holiness is revealed in all His relations with His people; the entire Mosaic legislation is founded on the holiness of Jehovah, aimed at the sanctification of His people. Holy is He in all His manifestations; holy is His name (Lev. 20:3), His arm (Ps. 98:1), His covenant (Dan. 11:28), His word (Ps. 105:42), His Spirit (Ps. 51:11; Isa. 63:10, 17). Hence, He commands His people to be holy (Ex. 19:6; 29:43-46; Lev. 11:44; 19:2), especially the priests and Levites who serve in holy matters, consecrated by special rites (Ex. 29). All connected with God's service—places, times, sacrifices, priestly garments, the temple—must be holy to the Lord. The law's essence is that Israel shall be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). A people is holy when it adheres to the law given by the Lord.

Now, the law given to Israel encompassed not only moral directives but also civil and ceremonial commands. Thus, holiness for the Israelites entailed a comprehensive adherence to the law, encompassing moral, civil, and ceremonial perfection. However, the people frequently erred by focusing solely on external, Levitical purity, neglecting the law's moral essence.

In response, the prophets rose against such misinterpretations, proclaiming that obedience is better than sacrifice and that heeding the Lord surpasses the fat of rams (1 Sam. 15:22). They emphasized that the Lord delights in mercy, not sacrifice, and in the knowledge

of God more than burnt offerings (Hos. 6:6). The prophets underscored that the essence of holiness lies in doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8). They revealed that God's holiness is manifest in His moral purity and His distinction from all sinfulness (Isa. 6:3-7). When men profane His name and covenant, God sanctifies Himself through righteousness and justice (Isa. 5:16, Ezek. 28:22). As the Holy One, He punishes enemies to make them know that He is the Lord (Jer. 50:29, Ezek. 36:23, 39:7), but He redeems His people by cleansing them from all iniquity, establishing a new covenant, and giving them a new heart to walk in His ways (Jer. 31:31-34, Ezek. 36:25-29). He does this not for Israel's sake but for His great name's sake (Isa. 43:25, Ezek. 36:22, 32).

In the New Covenant, as God has provided righteousness in Christ for His people, He has likewise provided holiness in the Son of His love. Christ is our sanctification just as He is our wisdom and redemption. Firstly, Christ possessed personal holiness; otherwise, He could not have sanctified us. What was conceived in Mary by the Holy Spirit was holy and called the Son of God (Luke 1:35). At His baptism, He received the Holy Spirit without measure and was full of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:22, 4:1). Those possessed by demons recognized Him as the Holy One of God (Mark 1:24, Luke 4:34), and His disciples, through Peter, confessed, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:69). Peter refers to Him as God's holy servant (Acts 4:27, cf. 3:14), and Christ Himself declares in Revelation, "I am the Holy One, the True One" (Rev. 3:7). Christ was aware of His sinlessness (Matt. 12:50, John 4:34, 8:46), and His apostles affirmed that He committed no sin, and

no deceit was found in His mouth (2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 4:15, 7:26, 1 Pet. 1:19, 2:22, 3:18, 1 John 2:1, 3:5).

With Christ, we must distinguish between the holiness He possessed by nature and that which He acquired through perfect obedience. His holy conception and birth enabled Him to be our Mediator, covering the sin in which we were conceived and born before God (Heid. Catech. Exh. 16, antw. 36). The holiness He was born into became part of the holiness He acquired throughout His life for His congregation. The Father sanctified Him by sending Him into the world (John 10:36), and Christ sanctified Himself, dedicating Himself to the Father's will from conception to death. His incarnation was an act of sanctification. Thus, Christ's holiness was not only inherent but also earned through His life's perfect obedience.

As Mediator, Christ faced severe tests and trials, especially after His baptism when He was anointed with the Holy Spirit and began His public ministry. The temptations recorded in the Gospels marked the beginning of a life filled with struggles; the devil departed from Him only for a time (Luke 4:13). These temptations were real, for He was made like His brothers in every respect, tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 2:17, 4:15). He sympathizes with our weaknesses and comes to our aid in every temptation. Unlike us, who often succumb, He remained faithful to the end, obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). He did not pray to avoid death but earnestly prayed to endure suffering and achieve life through death, and His prayers were heard (Heb. 5:7).

But although He was the Son, He still had to learn obedience through what He suffered (Heb. 5:8). From the very beginning, He was obedient and desired to be so; doing the Father's will was His sustenance (John 4:34). Yet, in suffering, He found the occasion to manifest this obedience; through suffering, He had to transform His intention and will to obey into action. Thus, through suffering, He was sanctified (Heb. 2:11, 5:9)—not in a moral sense, but in the sense of being completed, brought to the goal He had set out for, and crowned with honor and glory because of the suffering of death (Heb. 2:9, 12:2). He was fashioned into the chief conductor of the salvation of God's children and the finisher of their faith (Heb. 2:10, 12:2). By enduring the cross and despising the shame, with an eye on the joy awaiting Him after His humiliation, He became the leader, the forerunner, the architect of His own salvation, and the one who initiates and completes faith in them. By perfecting Himself through obedience, seeking the glory at the right hand of the Father only through the deepest humiliation, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9). He sanctified Himself, offering Himself as a sacrifice in death, that His disciples might be sanctified in truth (John 17:19). Thus, He was given to us by God for our holiness (1 Cor. 1:30).

To rightly comprehend the sanctification of believers, it is crucial to recognize that Christ is our holiness in the same manner as He is our righteousness. He is a complete and sufficient Savior; He does not finish His work half-heartedly but fully and truly saves us. He does not rest until He has made us full partakers of eternal life and heavenly glory. Through His righteousness, He not only restores us to the state of the righteous, freeing us in the judgment of God, but also does not leave it to us to reform ourselves in God's image by

doing good works to earn eternal life. Christ has accomplished everything for us; He bore our guilt and punishment for sin, and He also kept the law for us and secured life. His obedience was both active and passive.

His resurrection is proof of this. God did not leave His soul in Hades (not the place of the damned, as Christ's soul was in paradise after His death, Luke 23:43, but the grave or the realm of the dead, to which Christ also belonged as long as He was in the state of death) and did not let His Holy One see corruption according to the body, but made known to Him the paths of life and filled Him with joy in His presence (Acts 2:27-28, 13:35-37). By the Spirit of holiness dwelling in Him, He was declared by God through the resurrection of the dead, appointed as His Son in power (Rom. 1:4), as a Prince and Savior to give Israel repentance and the forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31), as a Prince who acquired eternal life and now distributes it to His own (Acts 3:15).

Yet, this holiness Christ acquired for His congregation does not remain external to us but is truly imparted to us. In justification, we are acquitted of guilt and punishment based on a righteousness that is outside us, in Christ Jesus, imputed to us by God's grace and accepted by us in faith. In sanctification, however, the holiness of Christ is genuinely infused in us by the Holy Spirit. Thus, when Rome speaks of infused grace, we do not object to the concept itself; our objection is to considering this infused grace as a piece of righteousness on the basis of which we would be acquitted by God. For then, justification and sanctification, liberation from guilt and the removal of stain, would be confused with one another; Christ would be deprived of the fullness of His righteousness, and the

believing soul of its comfort and security. However, there is indeed an infused grace, a Christ in us as well as a Christ for us, a renewal in the image of God as certain as a transition to the state of the righteous, a transformation in our moral condition no less than in our relationship to God.

Even this sanctification must be upheld with no less certainty and force than justification. Throughout history, there have been those who have regarded the forgiveness of sins as the sole significant act of Christ, neglecting or overshadowing the inner renewal of man into the image of God. They hold that if a man is justified and conscious of this in faith, nothing further is required of him; they argue that the consciousness of forgiveness transforms him into a new man, equating justification and regeneration as identical.

Indeed, it is undeniably true that a Christian who, with genuine faith, trusts that all his sins have been forgiven by pure grace through the merit of Christ alone, does indeed become a different person by this awareness. He feels freed from all guilt, having been justified by faith; he has peace with God, stands in the freedom Christ has granted, and can echo David's jubilance: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered; blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity!" Such a transformation may indeed be termed a rebirth in a certain sense, a renewal of consciousness.

However, if it is inferred from this that justification and rebirth are wholly identical, this conclusion is without foundation and stands in direct conflict with the testimony of Holy Scripture. True saving faith, which accepts Christ's righteousness and becomes assured of

the forgiveness of sins, does not originate from the natural man but is the fruit of rebirth, thus already presupposing a spiritual transformation wrought by the Holy Spirit. The heartfelt joy and peace the believer experiences through the certainty of forgiven sins are characteristics of the spiritual man, who, in fellowship with Christ, has risen from the death of sin.

Moreover, there exists a distinction between the state in which one is declared to be and the actual condition of one's being. These two can be so disparate that sometimes an innocent person is accused and convicted, while a guilty one is acquitted by the judge. Thus, a person's state in terms of legal standing does not change his actual condition, nor does the reverse. This holds true both in the natural and spiritual realms. Sin is not only guilt but also blemish; we are freed from the former in justification and from the latter in sanctification. Complete salvation encompasses not only knowledge and righteousness but also holiness and redemption. Therefore, Christ provided both forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Scripture clearly distinguishes between justification and regeneration. The Old Testament promise was that under the new covenant, the Lord would forgive the iniquities of His people and also grant them a new heart, writing His law upon it (Jer. 31:33, 34; Ezek. 36:25, 26). He would place His Spirit within them, enabling them to walk in His statutes and observe His decrees (Ezek. 36:27). To fulfill this promise, Christ not only offered His soul as a ransom for many but also, after His exaltation at the right hand of the Father, sent the Holy Spirit to dwell and work within the congregation. As we have already seen, through the Spirit, Christ imparts Himself and all His benefits to the church.

After Paul had thoroughly expounded the doctrine of justification in his epistle to the Romans, he naturally transitioned to the doctrine of sanctification in the sixth chapter. Even in his time, there were those who feared that the proclamation of free justification would lead to moral laxity. They suspected that advocating such a doctrine would encourage people to continue in sin so that grace might abound (Romans 3:8, 6:1). Paul refutes this objection vehemently, asserting that those who have died to sin cannot continue to live in it (6:2).

Paul demonstrates that believers, having received the forgiveness of sins and peace with God through faith, are also, by virtue of their baptism, united with Christ in His death and resurrection, thus walking in newness of life (6:3-11). He consistently refers to believers as those who have not only embraced God's righteousness in Christ for the remission of their sins but have also personally died and risen with Christ, thereby being dead to sin and alive to God (Gal. 2:20, 3:27, Col. 2:12). Christ's death not only justifies but also sanctifies and gives life (2 Cor. 5:15); thus, true faith embraces Christ both as righteousness and as holiness, for one cannot be without the other. Christ is indivisible, and His benefits are inseparable from His person. He is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption simultaneously (1 Cor. 1:30). Thus, God has made Him to be all these for us.

The sanctification we must partake in is fully available to us in Christ. However, many Christians, at least in their practical lives, often think otherwise. They acknowledge that they are justified by the righteousness Christ has wrought, but they act as though their sanctification depends on a holiness they must produce themselves. This notion is contrary to apostolic teaching (Romans 6:14, Galatians

4:31, 5:1, 13). If this were true, we would not be living under grace and freedom but still under the law. Gospel sanctification is distinct from legal sanctification, not in its content but in its manner of communication. It involves God granting us perfect holiness in Christ, along with righteousness, and communicating this holiness inwardly through the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

Sanctification, therefore, is God's work—a work of His righteousness and grace. He first imputes Christ to us with all His benefits and then communicates Him to us with all His fullness. It is He who circumcises the hearts (Deut. 30:6), who removes the heart of stone and gives a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26), who pours out His Spirit (Joel 2:28), who instills a new spirit within (Ezek. 36:26), who writes His law in our hearts, making us walk in His statutes and thereby making us His people (Jer. 31:33, 32:38, Ezek. 36:27-28). The New Testament affirms even more strongly that believers are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15), His handiwork, His building (1 Cor. 3:9, Eph. 2:20, Col. 2:7, 1 Pet. 2:5); all things are from God (2 Cor. 5:18). Having died and risen with Christ, they are also washed and sanctified in Him (1 Cor. 1:2, 6:2, Tit. 3:5), and they are continually sanctified (John 17:17, 2 Cor. 3:18, 1 Thess. 5:23, Eph. 5:26, Tit. 2:14, Heb. 13:20-21) until they are fully conformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29, 1 Cor. 15:49, Phil. 3:21). The chain of salvation is unbreakable because it is God’s work from beginning to end; whom He has foreknown, called, and justified, He also glorifies (Rom. 8:30).

On the foundation of this sanctifying work, which God accomplishes within the congregation through the Spirit of Christ, the believers are consistently referred to as saints in Scripture. Israel was designated as such in ancient times, as recorded in Exodus 19:6; it was set apart from the nations to be the Lord's possession, to walk in His ways, Leviticus 20:26, Exodus 19:5. In the future, under the new covenant established by God, Israel would be even more rightly and profoundly known as the holy people, the redeemed of the Lord, Isaiah 62:12, Joel 3:17, Obadiah 17. If, in the New Testament era, the High Priest sanctified Himself for His people so that they might also be sanctified in truth, John 17:19, believers are therefore immediately given the title of saints, Acts 9:13, 32, 41, 26:10, Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, etc. This designation does not imply that they are morally free from all sin and above all sins, but it signifies that the New Testament congregation has taken the place of old Israel and has become the Lord's possession, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Galatians 6:16, 1 Peter 2:5, because they are sanctified in Christ and are the temple of the Holy Spirit, John 17:19, 1 Corinthians 1:30, 3:16, 6:11, 19.

However, this holiness, given to the congregation in Christ and initially imparted by the Holy Spirit, imposes a profound obligation on believers. Sanctification is indeed a work of God, but it is intended to become a work in which believers themselves actively participate through God's power. In the Old Testament, it is sometimes said that the Lord Himself sanctifies His people, Exodus 31:13, Leviticus 20:8, 21:8, etc., and at other times that the people must sanctify themselves, Leviticus 11:44, 20:7, Numbers 11:18, etc. Sometimes it is stated that the Lord circumcises the heart, Deuteronomy 30:6, while at other times Israel is called to circumcise the foreskin of their

heart, Deuteronomy 10:16, Jeremiah 4:4. Repentance is sometimes described as a work of God, Jeremiah 31:18, Lamentations 5:21, and at other times as a duty of man, Jeremiah 3:12-13, etc. The New Testament reflects this same duality. Sanctification is presented both as a gift of God in Christ and as a work of the Holy Spirit, through whom believers are sanctified, John 17:17, 19, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, etc., yet believers are repeatedly exhorted to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect, Matthew 5:48, to perform good works that glorify the Father, Matthew 5:16, John 15:8, to offer their members as instruments of righteousness leading to sanctification, Romans 6:19, to be holy in all their conduct, 1 Peter 1:15, 2 Peter 3:11, to pursue and perfect their holiness in the fear of God, 2 Corinthians 7:1, 1 Thessalonians 3:13, 4:3, for without holiness no one will see the Lord, Hebrews 12:14.

These exhortations are not in conflict with each other. Rather, the believers' efforts in their own sanctification are made possible precisely because it is God's work within them. Grace does not annihilate nature; it restores it. While sin rendered man incapable of walking in the ways of the Lord, regeneration reinstates the disposition and ability, at least in principle, to live sincerely according to all of God's commandments. When God, through the powerful working of His regenerating Spirit, penetrates the depths of man's being, He opens the closed heart, softens the hardened, and circumcises the uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, transforming it from dead to alive, from evil to good, from unwilling to willing, from obstinate to obedient. He moves and strengthens the will, so that it, like a good tree, can produce the fruits of good works.

When the Reformed Church expresses itself thus in its confession (Can. Dordr. Ill IV 11), it stands firmly upon the foundation of Holy Scripture, finding particular support in the profound words of the Apostle Paul: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to work, for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). Just as in justification the forgiveness of sins, which is wholly available in Christ, can only be received and enjoyed by us through a living and active faith, so too God accomplishes sanctification in us through our own engagement; He does not annihilate our personality, but raises it up; He does not kill our intellect, will, or affections, but quickens them, revitalizing what was dead, and setting them to work; He makes us His fellow laborers and allies.

This sanctification of believers must be rightly understood; it must not devolve into a legalistic sanctification, but must remain a Gospel sanctification. It does not consist in believers sanctifying themselves by a holiness which they themselves must generate or acquire through their own efforts and good works. The holiness revealed by God in the Gospel is fully available in Christ and is applied and worked out in our hearts by His Spirit. Paul articulates this beautifully in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Just as the first creation was brought about by the Word, so the re-creation is realized in fellowship with Christ: believers are crucified with Him, die with Him, are buried with Him, and are raised to new life in union with Him.

This re-creation has a specific goal; it finds its purpose in the good works produced by believers. God is not solely concerned with the tree, but with the fruit it bears, and in that fruit, His own glory is magnified. These good works are not produced independently by believers but are already completed and provided for them by Christ, who fulfilled all righteousness and the entire law on their behalf; and they are worked out in them by the Holy Spirit, who takes from what is Christ's and distributes it according to His will. The entirety of holiness and all good works of the church, both collectively and individually, do not originate first from the believers but pre-exist in the good pleasure of the Father, in the work of the Son, and in the application of the Holy Spirit. Hence, all glory is excluded from sanctification. Thus, God is never indebted to us and never owes us thanks for our good works; on the contrary, we are indebted to God and must thank Him for the good works we perform (cf. Belgic Confession, Article 24).

This underscores the vital role of faith in sanctification. Just as in justification, faith alone is instrumental in sanctification. For we cannot receive Christ and His benefits in any other manner, nor make them our own, except through faith. If righteousness and holiness were of the law, we would need to achieve both by our good works. However, in the Gospel, they are gifts of God, given to us in the person of Christ; in Him is the fullness of grace and truth, John 1:17, of wisdom and knowledge, Colossians 2:3, of righteousness and holiness, 1 Corinthians 1:30; all spiritual blessings are contained in Him, Ephesians 1:3, and the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily, Colossians 2:9. This Christ communicates Himself to us by the Holy Spirit, and unites Himself as closely and intimately with us as the vine with the branches, John 15:2ff., as the head with the

body, Ephesians 1:22, 23, as the husband with the wife, Ephesians 5:32, and as He Himself, as Mediator, is united with the Father, John 14:20, 17:21-23. The faithful are one spirit with Him, 1 Corinthians 6:17, and one flesh, Ephesians 5:30, 31. Christ lives in them, and they live in Christ, Galatians 2:20. Christ is all in all to them, Colossians 3:11.

If Christ in us is the worker of our holiness, then our work of sanctification can only be accomplished by faith. For holiness, like all other benefits, is so indissolubly linked with the person of Christ that we cannot receive it apart from fellowship with Christ Himself, which on our part can only be obtained and enjoyed through a true faith. It is by faith that Christ dwells in our hearts, Ephesians 3:17, and that we live in Christ, Galatians 2:20, that we become children of God, Galatians 3:26, and receive the promise of the Spirit, Galatians 3:14, that we receive the forgiveness of sins, Romans 4:6, and eternal life, John 3:16. To live by faith means that Christ is in us, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Galatians 2:20. Just as the saints of old are presented as heroes of faith in Hebrews 11, we too are admonished to live by faith, Hebrews 10:38, to walk by faith, 2 Corinthians 5:7, to let faith work through love, Galatians 5:6, to quench all the fiery darts of the evil one with the shield of faith, Ephesians 6:16, and to overcome the world, 1 John 5:4. All these exhortations align with those given to believers, to walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit, Romans 8:4ff., to put off the old man and put on the new man, Ephesians 4:22-24, Colossians 3:10, Romans 6:4ff., to receive Christ Jesus and walk in Him, Colossians 2:6, 1 Peter 3:16, to put on the Lord Jesus and do everything in His name, Romans 13:14, Colossians 3:17, to be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might, Ephesians 6:10, 2 Timothy 2:1, to grow in the grace and

knowledge of our Lord and Savior, 2 Peter 3:18. In sum, sanctification in the evangelical sense is a continual activity and exercise of faith.

Many people object to this teaching of Scripture; they consider it one-sided and dangerous for the moral life. Sometimes they may concede that in justification the law is excluded and faith alone intervenes; but when they speak of sanctification, they believe that faith alone is insufficient, and that the law, with its commandments and prohibitions, with its rewards and punishments, must be added to spur one on to a holy walk and to the doing of good works. Although it is indeed true that the law remains the rule of life for Christians, the Gospel never derives its exhortations to a holy walk from the terrors of the law, but from the high calling to which believers in Christ are summoned. "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Jesus is the vine, the disciples are His branches; those who remain in Him bear much fruit, for without Him they can do nothing (John 15:5). The faithful have died to sin with Christ, but have become alive to God in Him (Romans 6:11). They are not under the law, but under grace, and therefore sin does not have dominion over them (Romans 6:14). They have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that they may belong to another, to Him who has been raised from the dead, in order that they may bear fruit for God (Romans 7:4, Galatians 2:19). The night has passed, the day has come; the works of darkness must therefore be laid aside, and the armor of light put on (Romans 13:12). The bodies of the believers are members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit; they must therefore flee from sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:15-20). They have been bought with a price, so they must glorify God in their bodies and minds, which are God's (1 Cor. 6:20). They

stand in the freedom with which Christ has set them free, and in Christ nothing has any power except faith working through love (Gal. 5:1, 6). Of this Christ they have heard, and through Him they have learned, that they must lay aside the old man and put on the new man, who was created after God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:21-24). As beloved children, they are to be imitators of God (Eph. 5:1). They must walk in love, as Christ loved them (Eph. 5:2). They are light in the Lord, and therefore must walk as children of light (Eph. 5:8).

In short, one would have to write off all the moral exhortations in the New Testament to fully enumerate the reasons why believers must walk in holiness. But the words quoted are sufficient to show that they are all derived from the Gospel, and not from the law. Whether the apostles are addressing men or women, parents or children, masters or servants, wives or husbands, rulers or subjects, they exhort them all in the Lord (Eph. 5:22-6:9, Col. 3:18-4:1, 1 Pet. 2:13-3:7). The solid foundation of God stands and bears this seal: Everyone who calls on the name of Christ must depart from iniquity (2 Tim 2:19).

Thus faith is the one great work that the Christian must accomplish in sanctification according to the principles of the Gospel (John 6:29). Although it operates differently in sanctification and is viewed from a different angle than in justification, in both it remains the sole and sufficient means by which we partake of them. The Gospel demands nothing else than faith, trust in God's grace in Christ; this faith not only justifies us, but also makes us holy and blessed. The sanctifying power of faith is manifest in several ways.

First, true, unfeigned faith dismantles false self-confidence, topples pride from its pedestal, and ends all reliance on our own righteousness. If we set aside those who care nothing for God or His commandments and who indulge in sin without restraint, as well as those who outwardly do good only out of fear of punishment, harm, or disgrace, there remain those who earnestly strive to fulfill the commandments of the moral law in their own strength. Yet they can never find the right attitude towards the moral law, nor the proper starting point for its fulfillment. They either place themselves above it or beneath it; they either make the law subservient to themselves or make themselves subservient to the law. In the former case, they claim that good must be done for the sake of the benefit and happiness it brings to individuals or the community. In the latter case, they elevate the moral law above man, yet make its fulfillment all the more impossible the more seriously they take it. The natural man oscillates between Sadduceeism and Pharisaism, between freedom and authority; he cannot find harmony between the commandment of God and his own will.

But faith puts an end to this vacillation. It makes us realize that the moral law stands high above us, demanding unconditional obedience, and yet it cannot be fulfilled by us in truth, nor can it bestow eternal life. In that seemingly irreconcilable contradiction, true faith surrenders itself to God's grace, trusting in His mercy, and glories in the righteousness that He Himself has provided. The true believer relinquishes any attempt to fulfill the moral law by his own efforts; he acknowledges the moral ideal in all its splendor but gives up the hope of ever achieving it through his own strength. Thus, he clings to God, who has revealed His righteousness in the Law and in the Gospel. This faith is therefore the mother of numerous virtues; it

breeds humility, dependence, trust—qualities that are of the greatest importance for the moral life. Doing good, thus grounded in faith, becomes a firm foundation and an unconquerable strength.

These virtues are immediately accompanied by others. According to the order that God Himself has established in the Church, the promises of the Gospel precede the commandments of the law. First, He assures us of His favor, the forgiveness of our sins, and our inheritance among the saints; then He leads us into the path of His testimonies and statutes. The good tree precedes the good fruit; we do not live by, but for, good works; we do not fulfill the law to obtain eternal life, but out of the eternal life that has been planted in our hearts through faith. Only in this order can we attain a truly moral life. Whoever tries to reverse this order and derive comfort, security, and salvation from his works will never reach the goal, will be tossed to and fro by doubt, and will be in constant fear. God follows a different path; in the Gospel, He gives us everything freely—the forgiveness of sins, the atonement of guilt, the remission of punishment, salvation, and glory. He tells us that by faith we may completely rely on His grace and gives us the certainty of this through the witness of the Holy Spirit. By its very nature, faith brings comfort, peace, joy, and happiness—all of which are of inestimable value for the moral life. They together form the principles and reasons for a holy walk. The cleansing of the conscience from dead works has its end and goal in serving the living God (Heb. 9:14). Those who are comforted by God are afterward strengthened by Him in all good words and works (2 Thess. 2:17). Joy in the Lord is the strength of His people (Neh. 8:10).

Faith turns the prodigal son from his sinful life and returns him to the father's house; it brings us into the fellowship of Christ's death and resurrection; it crucifies us and raises us up to a new life. He who truly believes in Christ dies to sin; he feels heartily sorry for it, because it has angered God, and begins to hate and flee from it; he brings about a separation between himself and sin, so that he can honestly say: I want to do what is good, though I do not do it; and I do not want to do what is evil (Rom. 7:19). On the other hand, faith appropriates Christ with His righteousness and holiness; it makes Christ Himself live in the heart and become more and more firmly established in His fellowship; it shapes Christ in us and reforms us more and more into His image.

Finally, faith is often and rightly compared to a hand. But a hand is not only the organ through which we accept something and make it our property; it is also the instrument through which we express our thoughts and our will. Thus, faith is not only a receiving organ but also an active force. Faith that justifies and saves is not a dead faith, but a living faith; it naturally produces fruits of good works; it is active in love (Gal. 5:6). Man is not justified by love, but the faith that justifies him manifests its living, active power in love. Without love, faith is not true, saving faith (1 Cor. 13:1); and with true faith, the work of love is always connected (1 Thess. 1:3), because the goal of the commandment (of the whole apostolic preaching) is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith (1 Tim. 1:5). This love, as the fruit of faith, is a perfect love, which casts out all fear (1 John 4:18), and it is also the perfect fulfillment of the law (Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; Jas. 2:8).

The Gospel does not nullify the Law but rather restores and confirms it. Its demands and curse have been fulfilled and borne by Christ, who put Himself under the Law, thus ending its curse for us, Matt. 3:15, Gal. 3:13, 4:4. Consequently, we are no longer servants but are set free to walk in the Spirit, Rom. 7:1-6, Gal. 4:5, 26ff., 5:1. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom, 2 Cor. 3:17, Gal. 5:18. This freedom of faith does not abolish the Law; on the contrary, it fulfills it. The righteousness demanded by the Law is fulfilled in those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit, Rom. 8:4. While the flesh renders the Law powerless, unable to submit to it, Rom. 8:3, 7, the Spirit of Christ quickens man, 2 Cor. 3:6, enlightening his mind to discern God's good, acceptable, and perfect will, Rom. 12:2, Eph. 5:10, Phil. 1:10.

This will of God, as understood by Jesus and the apostles, remains consistent with the Old Testament, even though the Law, in its previous sense, has been abolished. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them, Matt. 5:17. He spoke of the Law's abolition only concerning the fall of the city and temple, civil governance, and worship, Matt. 24, John 4:21-24. Yet, He purified the Law, returned to the prophets' understanding of it, emphasized the internal over the external, placed mercy above sacrifice, Matt. 9:13, 12:7, and summarized the Law and the Prophets in the commandment of love towards God and neighbor, Mark 12:28-34, Matt. 7:12. The moral commandments thus retain their power.

The apostles adopted the same attitude towards the Law and the Prophets. For them, the Old Testament retained divine authority, being inspired by God, 2 Tim. 3:15, written by holy men under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, 2 Pet. 1:21, for our instruction and

comfort, Rom. 15:4, 1 Cor. 10:11, 2 Tim. 3:15, 1 Pet. 1:12. The Old Testament is frequently quoted to convey God's will to the Christian congregation. For instance, Paul appeals in 1 Cor. 14:34 to Gen. 3:16 for the subordination of women to men, in 2 Cor. 9:9 to Ps. 112:9 for the duty of generosity, and in 1 Cor. 1:31 to Jer. 9:23 for the exhortation to glory only in the Lord. The moral law in the Old and New Testaments is essentially the same, summed up in the commandment of love, Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:14, Jas. 2:8. Christ refers to the disciples' mutual love as a new commandment, John 13:34, Acts 15:12, 1 Thess. 4:9, 1 Pet. 4:8, 1 John 3:23, 4:21, 2 John 5. Yet, He does not imply that this commandment was unknown previously, as Lev. 19:18 and Ps. 133 affirm the sweetness of brethren living together.

In the New Testament, however, this love gains a new character. During the Old Testament, church and nation were one, so brotherly love could not be clearly distinguished. In the New Testament, the church became separate from Israel's national existence, becoming an independent community with its own life principle in the Holy Spirit. Thus, a distinction was made between brotherly love and love for all, Gal. 6:10, 1 Thess. 3:12, 2 Pet. 1:7. Brotherly love binds believers together against the world, making it a new commandment. However, there remains one religion and one moral law in both Testaments. There is clarification, different effects, and application, but no external addition or mechanical supplement. Christ was not a new lawgiver besides and above Moses. He fulfilled the Law in His life and death and, through His Spirit, brings it to fulfillment in all His disciples.

Because Christ and His apostles always traced the moral law of the Old Testament back to the love of God and neighbor, the practice of explaining man's virtues and duties on the basis of the Ten Commandments gradually developed in Christian ethics. This approach was particularly esteemed among the Reformers, who held that good works must be done according to God's will. This stance was taken in opposition to the Roman Church, which considered as good works those actions rooted in human tradition and effort (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 91).

Rome distinguishes between commandments and counsels, asserting that the latter were added to the Law of Moses by Christ as a new and higher lawgiver. In the early days of the Christian Church, this distinction was not yet known. However, when the times of persecution ended, and people of all sorts joined the Church, seeking fellowship for honor and appearance, the moral standard diminished. Many devout families withdrew into solitude, giving rise to monasticism, which sought to uphold the moral ideal in a manner unattainable for ordinary Christians living in their families and professions. Thus, a distinction gradually emerged between monks (clergy) and laity, and consequently between a higher and lower morality, between commandments and counsels. The commandments, contained in the Ten Words, are obligatory for all Christians, while the counsels are set at everyone's discretion.

Among these counsels are chastity or the unmarried state, based on Matt. 19:11-12 and 1 Cor. 7:7ff; poverty or the renunciation of all worldly possessions, appealing to Matt. 19:21 and 1 Cor. 9:14; and absolute obedience to the superior under whose guidance one is placed, in imitation of Matt. 16:24 and Luke 14:26-27. In monastic

orders, these counsels often extend to various forms of abstinence, chastisements, and self-torture, following Matt. 5:29, 39, 42, etc. Rome maintains that the ideal of moral perfection is the same for all believers and must be pursued by all through obedience to the commandments. However, those who follow the counsels take a quicker and safer path to reach the goal and receive greater dignity and richer rewards. While the ordinary believer, who obeys the law, remains an unprofitable servant who has only done what he was obliged to do (Luke 17:10), the Christian who follows the counsels hears Jesus commend him as the good and faithful servant, who has been faithful over little and is appointed over much (Matt. 25:21).

It goes without saying that the Reformation did not agree with this distinction. Deeply convinced of the corruption of human nature, it taught that even the regenerated cannot keep the law completely, that their best works are still tainted with sin, and that the most holy can attain no more than a small beginning of perfect obedience (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 62, 114). The believer can never get around to following counsels, as he already has enough to do with fulfilling the commandments. Moreover, God demands in the moral law that we should love Him with all our mind and all our strength, and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37, Luke 10:27). How can there be any room for counsels with such a commandment? If God claims us entirely, at all times and everywhere, for His service, then nothing is left over for us to dispose of at our own discretion.

There is, therefore, no ground for asserting that Christ added counsels as the law of freedom to the necessary commandments of the Mosaic law. While there may be instances where one must abstain from marriage, divest oneself of possessions, and retreat

from usual environments and occupations, these are not special counsels that one may freely choose to follow or ignore. The rich young man did not receive mere advice from Christ, which he could accept or reject at will; rather, he received a command to sell all his possessions and give to the poor. This was a test of the sincerity and firmness of his heart, to reveal whether he was truly willing to sacrifice everything for Christ and His kingdom. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between law and duty; the law is universal, but duty is the specific way each person must act according to the general moral law, tailored to his nature and situation.

The Reformers rejected all works based on human will or ecclesiastical precepts and returned to the will of God as the standard of good works. They found this will concisely and objectively expressed in the Ten Commandments. However, the Law of the Ten Commandments does not stand alone; it exists within a rich context. Originally written in the heart of man, made in God's image, it is partly preserved there, as all men by nature do the things of the law, thereby showing that the work of the law is written in their hearts (Romans 2:14, 15). Every person is conscious of being bound by certain moral rules for existence and actions, and when these rules are transgressed, one feels accused by one's conscience. In Israel, the law was restored to its purity by special revelation, made subservient to the covenant of grace, and incorporated into a body of rights and statutes governing the entire life of the people. Moreover, in Israel's history, it was explained, elaborated, and applied by the psalmists, proverbs, and prophets, so that Jesus could say the whole Law and the prophets depend on the two commandments of love of God and neighbor (Matt 22:40).

When Christ brings about the fulfillment of all Old Testament salvation-promises, He does not abolish the Law but fulfills all its righteousness. He paves the way by His perfect obedience and gives the Holy Spirit's power, by which His disciples can and will walk according to all the commandments of the Law. It may be said that the whole Gospel is directed towards the fulfillment of the law in those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. The spiritual life of regeneration is made available for the restoration of the moral life. The long series of exhortations with which the apostles generally conclude their epistles extend and apply the holy law of the Lord, aiming to cause believers to live according to God's will and glorify His name in all their relationships and situations. The Law of the Ten Commandments cannot be separated from this rich context; it must be considered and explained in light of God's entire revelation in nature and Scripture.

Thus understood, the Ten Commandments are a concise summary of Christian moral teaching and an excellent rule for our lives. There are many other laws by which we are bound. God also gave laws for our thinking, for our enjoyment of beauty, for our dealings with others, and for our use of the materials of nature; He laid down rules for all creatures, for heaven and earth, for the sun and moon and stars, for day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest (Genesis 8:22, Jeremiah 31:28). But the moral law goes far beyond all these orders, for it is directed to man's will, or rather to man himself as a willing being, reaching the innermost part of his existence, to the core of his personality. It demands complete conformity to its rule, not only in words and deeds but also in thoughts and desires, in essence and being. The law is spiritual (Rom 7:14); we must be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew

5:48); the tenth commandment goes to the root of sin, to lust, rendering it guilty and unclean before God.

Furthermore, the Law addresses all relationships in which man finds himself: with God, his fellow beings, himself, and all of nature. It pertains to God in His essence, service, revelation, and day; to fellow beings in their various ranks and positions, in their life, honor, and property; to oneself in the truth of mind and purity of heart; and in all this, to the entirety of surrounding nature, encompassing one's office and calling, work and leisure, all living and lifeless creation. The moral law demands that man perform all actions to the glory of God, as stated in 1 Cor. 10:31 and Col. 3:17.

Understanding the law in its profound, spiritual sense may initially instill fear and doubt about its fulfillment. Without knowledge of any righteousness apart from what the law demands, we would be unable to fulfill it or even desire to do so. This would lead us to diminish the law's spiritual content, externalize it, align it with our fallen condition, and deceive ourselves into thinking we can meet its demands through civil and honorable living. The natural man is irked by the spiritual nature and perfection of the law, feeling internally vexed by its absolute righteousness and holiness. However, once we come to know the righteousness and holiness that God grants in Christ through faith, our relationship to and thoughts about the Law transform. We may lament with Paul that we are still sold under sin, yet we uphold the law in its glory, no longer attempting to diminish it. We honor it as holy, righteous, and good because it is God's law. We love it for its spirituality, delighting in it according to the inner man, and we thank God not only for His Gospel but also for His law, for His holy, righteous, perfect law. It too becomes a

revelation and a gift of His grace to us. "Oh, how I love Thy law; it is my meditation all the day."

Although believers receive an inner desire and love to live according to God's will and perform good works from the moment of regeneration, they do not attain perfection instantly and never achieve it fully in this life. Sanctification is inseparable from justification. The latter is a divine acquittal completed at once; it is reiterated and applied to the conscience but is not supplemented or increased. The life of sanctification, like all life among creatures, follows the law of development; it begins in rebirth, needs nourishment for strength and growth, and reaches its culmination when fully revealed with Christ.

In the Old Testament, it is said of the Messiah that He will shepherd His flock, gather the lambs in His arms, carry them in His bosom, and gently lead the nursing ewes (Isa. 40:11). Elsewhere it is even more extensively stated that the Lord has anointed Him to bring glad tidings to the meek, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to captives, and open the prison for the bound. He will comfort all who mourn, provide for those who grieve in Zion, giving them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, that they may be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for His glory (Isa. 61:1-3, cf. Ezek. 34:16).

During His earthly ministry, Christ addressed not only the adults among Israel but also the children, proclaiming to them the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-6, 19:13-14). He called not only the inhabitants of Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum, and Jerusalem but also tax collectors and sinners to repentance, inviting all the weary

and burdened to Himself for rest. He described the heirs of the kingdom with various names, referring to them as poor, mourning, hungry, thirsty, meek, and peaceful (Matthew 5:3-10), and distinguishing between those who are less and those who are more, the first and the last in the kingdom (Matthew 11:11, 20:16). He often lamented the small faith, fearfulness, and unreadiness of His disciples (Matt. 6:30, 8:26, 14:31, 16:8, Luke 24:25), rejoicing when He found great faith in some (Matt. 8:10, 15:28). Towards all, He proved Himself to be the Good Shepherd, who gathers all His sheep into one flock, gives them life and abundance, keeps them, and does not let any perish (John 10:1-30).

Similar distinctions are found among believers in the apostolic churches. The Old Testament believers were infants under guardians and caretakers, not differing from servants in this respect (Gal. 4:1-2). In contrast, New Testament believers are free sons and daughters, adopted by God as His children and heirs, standing in the freedom with which Christ has made them free (Gal. 4:4-7). Yet, even among them, there are various differences. The faith given to the congregation's members is the same in essence but varies in measure according to each individual (Rom. 12:3). The gifts distributed by the Holy Spirit are diverse (Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:4-11). There are differences between those who are still fleshly and those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 3:1-3, Gal. 6:1), between children who need milk and the mature who can handle solid food (1 Cor. 3:2, Heb. 5:12, 1 Pet. 2:2). There are young people who have overcome evil but must remain vigilant, and fathers who have gained deeper knowledge of Christ (1 John 2:12-14). Additionally, even in apostolic times, there were congregations or believers firm in faith, abounding in love, and enduring in tribulation, while others were misled by error and guilty

of various sins. The letters of the Apostles, especially Christ's letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 1-3), detail these differing situations.

All this teaches us that in the spiritual realm, as in the natural, man is born small and weak, in need of help, and must continually grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). If the spiritual life develops healthily and normally, feeding on spiritual food and drinking spiritual drink, which is Christ (John 6:48, 1 Cor. 10:3-4), there is a continual strengthening and confirmation in grace, a continual renewal in the image of Christ (Rom. 12:2, 2 Cor. 3:18, 4:16, Eph. 3:16, 1 Pet. 5:10). Yet, all kinds of obstacles hinder this normal development; the life of the Christian is not a quiet growth, but a constant struggle against enemies from without and within.

To understand this battle properly, we must first note that even the unregenerate often engage in a battle. However, this is not a spiritual battle but a rational one—a struggle between man's reason and conscience on one side, and his will and affections on the other. Through reason and conscience, man remains bound to the moral law and the realm of unseen and eternal things; the command "thou shalt" still echoes in his heart. When he desires to do evil, his better judgment resists, warns, and tries to stop him. No man is so far astray or so deeply sunk that he knows nothing of this discord within his being. In this struggle, man can, under favorable circumstances, gain the victory; he can use reason to counteract his desires, suppressing and silencing them, thus becoming a good, virtuous man leading an honorable life. But this is not true morality, nor Christian sanctification. The natural man's struggle is only between reason and

lust, duty and inclination, conscience and passion; it is not waged against all sin but only against some, and usually only against some external, annoying sins. It is not against sin as sin, because it offends God, but against certain sins that are despised by the world and bring damage or disgrace. It suppresses and at best curbs the evil inclination but does not eradicate it, nor does it bring about any inner change in the heart of man.

The spiritual battle that believers wage in their souls is of an entirely different nature. This battle is not between reason and lust but between flesh and spirit, between the old and the new man, between the sin that still dwells in the believer and the spiritual principle of life planted in his heart. These two forces are not locally separated in believers, as if one part of him—such as the intellect—had been reborn, while another part—such as the heart—had not. Instead, they both extend to the whole person and all his powers and faculties, so that each can be called a man—the old man and the new man.

Paul often expresses this contrast in his writings, but in Romans 7, he uses different terms: he refers to the spiritual, new man as the will, which loves and desires to do good, as the inner man who delights in God's law. The old man, on the other hand, he calls the flesh, the sin that dwells within, the law in his members that wars against the law of his mind and imprisons him under the law of sin that resides in his members. While this is a difference in expression, it is not a difference in substance. For Paul often uses "flesh" to describe all sinful inclinations remaining in the believer, which dwell within his soul, heart, and mind. The works of the flesh are not only uncleanness and fornication but also idolatry, enmity, strife, and wrath. By the "inner man," the Apostle does not refer to something

hidden and inactive within man, for he explicitly states that believers walk according to the Spirit and make their members instruments of righteousness. He calls it the "inner man" because, in the bitter struggle against the flesh, the new man is often undermined and rarely comes to full expression.

The struggle between these two forces consists of the Spirit of Christ, who dwells in believers, striving to awaken good thoughts, deliberations, affections, and movements (such as love, joy, peace, etc., Gal. 5:22) within their minds, hearts, and wills. Meanwhile, the flesh immediately raises its voice against this and seeks to defile them with evil lusts and desires (Gal. 5:19-20). The flesh always proves so powerful that believers do not, or do not fully, do what they desire to do (Gal. 5:17). When they want to do good, evil is present with them (Rom. 7:21); the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41).

The battle is therefore not between reason and will, duty and inclination, but rather between will and action, between the inner mind and the sinful power that opposes it, between the inner man of the heart, recreated in true righteousness and holiness, and the old man, who, though driven from the center, still strives to maintain his existence, fighting more fiercely as he loses ground. This battle is not waged between two faculties or parts of man, as if it were between head and heart, reason and lust, soul and body; but across the entire expanse of man's personality, these two forces stand armed against each other.

Within the same mind of the same person, there is a struggle between faith and unbelief, between truth and lies; in the same heart,

a conflict rages between pure and impure motives and qualities; in the same will, evil desires contend with good and pure inclinations. It is indeed a struggle between two natures within the same individual.

From a spiritual perspective, this can be explained by the fact that in the field of consciousness, two sets of ideas and in the realm of the heart and affections, two series of desires have taken root and are struggling with each other. We often speak of the old and new man within the believer, indicating that the new life has fundamentally transformed the whole person, while the power of sin still dwells in all his faculties and members. Yet, in reality, these are two sets of dispositions, ideas, inclinations, and qualities in conflict with each other, with neither being able to completely drive out the other from any aspect of humanity. If the truth of God fully occupied the believer's consciousness, there would be no room left for error and lies; if the love of God filled the whole person, there would be no place for hatred, envy, wrath, and the like. However, as experience and Scripture testify, such perfection is not to be expected in this life. There remains a struggle to the end because faith, hope, love, and all Christian virtues are never perfected in this life and therefore leave room for unbelief, doubt, despondency, and fear.

The extent to which both the old and new man are present in any thought or deed varies greatly, but in all conceptions and actions, there is something of both. All thoughts, words, and deeds are thus tainted with sin; they require reconciliation and purification, yet may still be called good works insofar as they are mixed with faith. For these reasons, we must be vigilant against antinomianism, which separates the old and new in the believer and opposes them to each other, much as spirit is opposed to matter and soul to body.

Such a view leads to the pernicious doctrine that sinful thoughts and deeds are the responsibility of the old man and have nothing to do with the new man. In contrast, Scripture and experience clearly teach that the believer is not an external union of two people but remains one person, with one self, one consciousness, one heart, one will, and that not two independent beings, but two sets of qualities and characteristics battle within him.

The seriousness of this struggle suggests that it will take a long time before victory is achieved by the new man. Nevertheless, many Christians believe that the faithful can attain perfection on earth and overcome all sinful acts and tendencies. The Pelagians taught this; Rome expressed the same spirit at the Council of Trent, and many Protestant circles hold the same view. They point to the splendid terms in which Holy Scripture speaks about the Christian position, e.g., 1 Peter 2:9, 10, 2 Peter 1:4, 1 John 2:20. Paul, in particular, is fully assured of his salvation after his conversion and only recalls his sinful past. The exhortations to a holy and blameless walk are as complete as possible, e.g., Matt. 5:48, and presuppose the attainment of perfection, Phil. 2:5, 1 Thess. 2:10, 3:13. They argue that the grace of God, obtainable through prayer, can accomplish all things, John 14:13, 14, Eph. 3:20, 2 Cor. 12:10, Phil. 4:13. They claim that to consider moral perfection unattainable in this life would be an understatement of the omnipotence and riches of God's love and would deprive the faithful of a powerful incentive to strive for it with all their might.

Indeed, there is no doubt that Holy Scripture extols the privilege and status of God's people in the most exalted terms. In the Old Testament, Israel is called a priestly kingdom, chosen by God from

among all the peoples of the earth as His own, the object of His love, His treasured possession, His son and servant, His bride, adorned and perfected with the glory He bestows upon her (Ex. 19:5-6; 29:43; Deut. 7:6 ff; 32:6 ff; Isa. 41:8 ff; Ezek. 16:14). Likewise, the New Testament believers are termed the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13), the light of the world (v. 14), children of God, born of God and adopted by Him (John 1:13; Gal. 4:5), chosen, called, saints and sanctified (1 Cor. 1:2), a chosen generation and royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9-10), partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4), anointed with the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20), made kings and priests by Christ (Rev. 1:5), heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). What eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor entered the heart of man, God has prepared for those who love Him in these New Testament days (1 Cor. 2:8).

Those who reject the scriptural teaching on sin and grace may view this as gross exaggeration, denying the necessity or possibility of the radical transformation that justification and rebirth entail. Yet, for the Scriptures, the change wrought in faith and conversion is a transition from darkness to light, from death to life, from bondage to freedom, from falsehood to truth, from sin to righteousness, from the expectation of God's wrath to the hope of His glory. The believers who appear in the Old and New Testaments, aware of this transformation, glory in the God of their salvation and rejoice in His fellowship. How far behind we lag in this joy of faith!

Furthermore, Scripture always sets before believers the highest moral ideal. Today, many strive for a moral life that Christianity seems to lack—one excessively religious, almost exclusively oriented toward heaven, averse to worldly interests, hostile to culture, comforting the poor and wretched with visions of eternity but

indifferent to their temporal well-being, rich perhaps in passive virtues such as submission and patience but poor in active virtues capable of transforming the world. Thus, many seek a different, higher morality that makes service to mankind its highest goal and limits its scope to this earthly life.

However, the protection of earthly interests is not in conflict with Christian morality but is rather founded and secured in the creation of man in God's image. Man was and remains in a certain sense an image-bearer of God, called to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all creatures (Genesis 1:26, 28; Ps. 8). No book opposes nature more freely than Holy Scripture. Paganism vacillates between overconfident abuse of the world and slavish, superstitious fear of its mysterious power. Yet Moses and the prophets, Christ and the apostles, exhibit complete freedom from the world, elevated above it by their communion with God. While early Christians, being a small flock, had to withdraw from many worldly circles and abstain from many activities permeated by heathen spirit, Christianity, in principle, embraced all elements granting it not only the freedom but also the right and calling to conquer and subdue the earth.

Christian moral teaching, encapsulated in the Ten Commandments and expounded throughout Scripture, is no different. Love of God stands foremost, but love of neighbor is equally paramount. Within this love of neighbor lies the duty of mission, reformation, and culture, provided it is understood in its active, Christian character rather than a passive, Buddhist sense. Mission extends the religious and moral riches of Christianity to all people and nations still deprived of them. Reformation, not confined to a single period or

moment, must continue unceasingly, renewing hearts, lives, families, and societies according to the Lord's will. Culture involves subjugating the earth, the dominion of spirit over matter, reason over nature.

The kingdom of heaven, which must first be sought, brings with it all other things, as stated in Matthew 6:33. Godliness is profitable for all things, having the promise of the present life and that which is to come, as expressed in 1 Timothy 4:8. Nothing is unclean in itself, for all of God's creatures are good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer, according to Romans 14:14 and 1 Timothy 4:4. Christianity, grounded in the creation of man in the image of God and advocating the restoration of all culture through the resurrection of Christ, exhorts its faithful to consider whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable, if there is any virtue and anything praiseworthy, as Philippians 4:8 teaches.

There is no higher morality, nor a higher religion, conceivable than that which is preached to us in the Gospel. One may seek another, but such a pursuit leads astray. The times in which we live provide the strongest evidence of this. The morality of Scripture is rejected, yet what replaces it contradicts the simplest rules of moral life.

The first step is to remove from moral teaching all those commandments concerning the love of God. Love for God, His name, His truth, His service, is almost dismissed: how can one love God when one doubts and disputes His visibility, His revelation, even His existence? This undermines the basis for the commandments of the second table, for if there is no God who obliges me to love my

neighbor, what grounds can there be for such love? Proponents of a moral doctrine independent of religion are hopelessly divided over the principle from which love for one's fellow man can and must derive. Some attempt to base it on self-interest, others on happiness, pity, or conscience, but all fail to establish a binding duty without divine authority.

Consequently, every commandment detailing love for one's neighbor becomes problematic. It is often claimed that people, despite religious differences, remain united in moral principles. While nature may indeed be stronger than doctrine and the work of the law is written in everyone's heart, reality tells a different story. No commandment in the second table of God's law remains unchallenged today. The authority of father and mother, and of all those appointed over us, is openly contested and rejected. Manslaughter is increasingly trivialized, suicide is often condoned, and the deprivation of life is frequently defended. Marriage is viewed as a contract entered into arbitrarily, and adultery and fornication find protection and advocacy among many. Property is regarded by some as merely another form of theft. Truth is made subservient to utility, thought is deemed dependent on development, and is distinguished from falsehood only by context, form, and degree. And as for covetousness, it finds its triumph in the Mammonist spirit of this age.

Against all these corrupted forms of morality, Scripture upholds the moral ideal in its unaltered and uncompromised sense. It never aligns with anything less than the holiness of God and His law, presenting them in all their majesty to the consciences of men. The command Jesus gave to His disciples, "Be perfect, as your Father in

heaven is perfect," is echoed by all the apostles in their exhortations to the faithful. Sin is never permitted to exist, not even in those who bear the name of Christ. The demands of the moral law may never be abandoned, even by those who have died to sin with Christ and risen to new life. If, then, according to God's order, the old man in believers only gradually dies away, and the new man only gradually matures and reaches perfection hereafter, this reflects God's great forbearance and tolerance. This patience is possible because Christ covers the sins of the community with His righteousness and holiness, guaranteeing its perfection.

While the moral law, which serves as the rule for the life of the faithful, demands nothing less than perfect love for God and neighbor, it is equally evident that, according to Scripture, no believer has ever achieved such perfection in this life, nor can any hope to do so. The saints of the Bible are all people who stumble in many ways, and sometimes, like David and Peter, fall into grievous sins, only to confess them in deep humility. Whenever you listen to them, you will never hear the claim, often heard from some Christians, that they are without sin. On the contrary, Abraham (Genesis 12:12), Isaac (Genesis 26:5), Jacob (Genesis 26:35), Moses (Numbers 20:7-12, Psalm 106:33), David (Psalm 51), Solomon (1 Kings 8:46), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Daniel (Daniel 9:4), and others all acknowledge their transgressions and confess their sins and errors.

The Apostle Paul himself, though crucified with Christ and walking in newness of the Spirit, standing righteous before God and fully assured of his salvation, bearing the pride of his apostolic work and being conscious of his faithful fulfillment of his office, attributes all this to God's grace. He confesses that no good thing dwells in his

flesh (Romans 7:18), that the flesh always desires to oppose the Spirit (Galatians 5:17), that his will and his actions are continually in conflict (Romans 7:7-26), and that he is in pursuit of perfection but has not yet attained it (Philippians 3:12).

Moses and the prophets testified similarly to the people of Israel, Christ to His disciples, and the apostles to the churches under their care. Jesus calls His disciples to perfection (Matthew 5:48), yet He also teaches them to pray for the forgiveness of their debts (Matthew 6:12). The Christians in Rome, though raised with Christ to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3ff), are exhorted to make their members servants of righteousness leading to sanctification (Romans 6:19). The Corinthians were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 6:11), yet they were still fleshly (1 Corinthians 3:1-4).

The Galatians had received the Spirit through the preaching of faith (Galatians 3:2), yet they were tempted to disobey the truth (Galatians 3:1). In the Philippians, the good work had begun but was not finished (Philippians 1:6). In all churches, there are situations, errors, and vices that are not in accordance with the Christian life. The apostles themselves were convinced that sin remains with the believers as long as they are in this life. "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

However, even though perfection is not attainable in this life, the exhortations to a holy walk are not useless or devoid of seriousness. Those who advocate the perfectibility of the faithful in this life raise objections, claiming that exhortations that cannot be fully obeyed

lose their power and cause the faithful to lose their zeal. But they are guilty of false reasoning: the obligation does not follow the ability; one who must pay a debt does not always have the means to do so but remains obliged nonetheless. Similarly, the moral law can never relinquish its demands, even if man is incapable of fulfilling them due to sin. Conversely, it can be more rightly asserted that those who teach the perfectibility of the faithful must invariably come to a lowering of the moral ideal and a less serious view of sin.

Who, after all, who thinks of sin not only in terms of external sinful acts but also in terms of all sinful thoughts and inclinations, would dare to claim that the faithful can be fully freed from it in this life? Perfection can only be asserted by disregarding the sinful nature of humanity, by overlooking sinful thoughts and inclinations, and thus by disregarding the absolute holiness of the law. In the sacrament meeting form of the Reformed churches, it is declared that no sin or weakness that remains in us against our will can hinder us from accepting God's grace. There has been much debate over whether sins can still occur in the regenerate that are not merely out of weakness but have an intentional character and must therefore be called sins of wickedness. Two things, however, are certain: first, that in those who have truly been born again, not only the conscience but also the new life, the disposition and the will resist these sins to a greater or lesser degree; and second, that sins committed against our will, even actual sins of weakness, are indeed sins and are contrary to the holiness of the law.

Furthermore, the exhortations to a holy walk are not in vain; they are precisely the means by which God applies and works out in believers the righteousness and holiness bestowed in Christ. Jesus Himself

prays in the high priestly prayer that the Father may sanctify His disciples in the truth, that is, through His Word, which is the truth (John 17:17, cf. 15:3). The Word that God has given us is indeed the primary means of our sanctification; the blessing that has flowed not only from public preaching but also from reading, examining, and contemplating that Word in solitude or in the domestic circle for the cultivation of a Christian life is simply incalculable. To this Word as a means of sanctification should be added prayer in Jesus' name (John 14:13, 14; 16:23, 24), which opens the door to divine majesty and fills us with confidence because there is no one, either in heaven or on earth, who prefers us to Jesus Christ (Col. 1:26); furthermore, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), which has a profound effect on the mood of the heart and the readiness of the will; and then also vigils and fasts (Matt. 17:21; 26:41; Ephesians 6:18; 4:3), which have fallen almost entirely into disuse. All these means of sanctification prove that in this His work, God does not neglect the way of means.

Of course, God, who is the Almighty, could have made all His children completely holy at the moment of rebirth. But apparently, that has not been His will; in the re-creation, He does not deny Himself as Creator. All creaturely life is born, grows up, and gradually reaches its peak. Because spiritual life is real life, it arises and develops in the same way. God does not pour Christ's righteousness and holiness into us mechanically, like water into a vessel, but He works them out organically in us and through us. Thus, the one does not conflict with the other if Scripture always presents it in such a way that believers must become what they are. The kingdom of heaven is a gift of God (Luke 12:32), and yet a treasure of great value that must be sought after (Matthew 6:33;

13:46). The believers are branches on the vine, who can do nothing without Christ, and yet are admonished to remain in Him, in His word, in His love (John 15). They are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, and yet must hasten to make their calling and election sure (Ephesians 1:4; 2 Peter 1:10). They are sanctified by the one sacrifice of Christ, and yet must pursue sanctification, without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 10:10; 12:14). They have put on the new man and still have to put him on (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). They have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires and still have to mortify their earthly members (Galatians 5:24; Colossians 3:5). It is God who works in them, both to will and to do according to His good pleasure, and yet they must work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12, 13).

All this is not contradictory; rather, the one is the basis and guarantee of the other. Because sanctification, as well as all salvation, is God's work, we are admonished, obligated, and also enabled to new obedience. He gives us abundant grace, not so that we can suddenly and at once be holy and rest in this holiness, but so that we can persevere in the struggle and remain steadfast. He hears and answers prayer in accordance with the order and law He has set for spiritual life. Therefore, we always have good courage, because He who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. The faithful can and will become holy because they are holy in Christ.

Is it not somewhat presumptuous to assert that believers, once engrafted into the body of Christ, shall infallibly remain therein forever? This contention is often challenged by those who uphold the

perfectibility of the saints and the possibility of their apostasy, for both doctrines spring from a common root—the belief that sanctification is primarily the work of man's will. If a believer, through the aid of grace, utilizes his will rightly and exercises all his strength, he may attain perfection in this life; conversely, if he falters, he can forfeit the grace in which he once stood, revert to ungodliness, and ultimately perish. This erroneous view of human will in sanctification breeds the fear that teaching the perseverance of the saints will undermine moral effort, as it seemingly grants a license to sin under the assurance of eternal security.

Were our confidence in the perseverance of the saints to rest on human will and strength, we would indeed stand on precarious ground, for all the saints possess but a small measure of perfect obedience. They remain inclined toward evil, stumbling daily. If their perseverance depended solely on themselves, none would endure to the end. Those who dispute the doctrine of perseverance escape this conclusion only by distinguishing between sins, suggesting that while believers may sin, they do not commit the kind of transgressions that lead to apostasy. However, all sins, flowing from the same corrupt source, lead to death, and yet all sins—save the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit—are forgivable through God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Moreover, who can truly discern whether a sin is "mortal" or "venial"? Sins deemed trivial by men may be grievous in the sight of God, who judges the heart and mind. This uncertainty leads believers to doubt continually whether they have lost grace through a mortal sin or rely on false assurances from a priest.

These uncertainties are resolved when we understand that the perseverance of the saints is not an act of human will but a work of God, carried out from beginning to end. It is God's preservation that undergirds man's perseverance. Scripture affirms this abundantly, highlighting the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the covenant of grace.

The Father chose believers in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), predestined them to eternal life (Acts 13:48), to be conformed to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:29). This election is unchangeable (Rom. 9:11, Heb. 6:17), and in due time, it brings about calling, justification, and glorification (Rom. 8:30). Christ, in whom all God's promises are affirmed (2 Cor. 1:20), died for those given to Him by the Father (John 17:6, 12), that He might grant them eternal life and lose none of them (John 6:39-40) John 6:39-40, 10:28, 17:2 declare that the Holy Spirit, who regenerates the faithful, abides with them forever, John 14:16, sealing them until the day of redemption, Eph. 1:13, 4:30. The covenant of grace is unbreakable and confirmed by an oath, Heb. 6:16-18, 13:20, akin to a marriage, Eph. 5:31-32, or a testament, Heb. 9:17. By virtue of this covenant, God calls His chosen ones, inscribes His law upon their hearts, instills His fear within them, Heb. 8:10, 10:14-17, does not permit them to be tempted beyond their capacity, 1 Cor. 10:13, and ensures the completion of the good work He has begun in them, 1 Cor. 1:9, Phil. 1:6, preserving them for Christ's return, to partake in the heavenly inheritance, 1 Thess. 5:23, 2 Thess. 3:13, 1 Pet. 1:4-5. Through His intercession with the Father, Christ continually works on their behalf, so their faith may not fail, Luke 22:32, they may be kept from evil, John 17:11,20, may be fully saved, Heb. 7:25, receive the forgiveness of sins, 1 John 2:1, and one day behold His glory,

John 17:24. The benefits of Christ, imparted by the Holy Spirit, are irrevocable, Rom. 11:29, and inseparably bound; he who is called is justified and glorified, Rom. 8:30; he who is adopted as God's child is an heir of eternal life, Rom. 8:17, Gal. 4:7; he who believes has eternal life, John 3:16. This eternal life is indestructible; it cannot sin, 1 John 3:9, nor die, John 11:25-26.

Just as sanctification, the preservation of the believers is wrought by the Holy Spirit, such that they themselves persevere in the grace granted by God. God never coerces but works with man in a reasonable manner. In regeneration, He instills new qualities and transforms the will, making it willing to do good. Similarly, He continues to work in believers' hearts, not rendering them weak, but raising them up to walk in the good works prepared for them. To this end, He employs His Word as an instrument in His hands.

He persistently exhorts them to persevere to the end, Matt. 10:22, 24:13, Rom. 2:7, 8; to abide in Christ, His word, and His love, John 15:1-10, 1 John 2:6, 24, 27, 3:6, 24, 4:12-16; to watch and be sober, Matt. 24:42, 25:13, 1 Thess. 5:6, 1 Pet. 5:8; to keep the faith and remain faithful to the Lord unto death, Col. 1:23, Heb. 2:1, 3:14, 6:11, Rev. 2:10, 26. He warns against pride and threatens severe punishment for unfaithfulness, John 15:2, Rom. 11:20-22, 2 Tim. 2:12, Heb. 4:1, 6:4-8, 10:26-31, 2 Pet. 2:18-22, yet He also attaches rich promises of reward to sanctification and perseverance, Matt. 5:12, 6:4, 10:22, 16:27, 24:13, 25:21-23, 31-46, Rom. 2:7, Rev. 2:7, 10-11, 22:12. Examples of profound falls, such as David and Peter, and cases of apostasy, like Hymenaeus, Alexander, 1 Tim. 1:19-20, 2 Tim. 2:17-18, Demas, 2 Tim. 4:10, Heb. 6:4-8, 1 Tim. 4:1, 2 Pet. 2:1, serve as warnings.

These exhortations and warnings do not prove the apostasy of the truly sanctified. For such cases, John's words apply: they went out from us, but they did not belong to us, 1 John 2:19. The examples of David and Peter demonstrate that God's grace did not abandon them in their fall but preserved and led them to repentance. They serve as both warnings and comforts, ensuring that if we fall into sin out of weakness, we do not despair of God's grace but strengthen ourselves with the assurance of His everlasting covenant. In the path of that covenant, God causes His people to walk by His word and Spirit. Teaching the apostasy of the saints undermines God's faithfulness, makes perseverance and salvation uncertain, and misjudges the unity and continuity of spiritual life. Conversely, believing in the preservation of the saints rests on God's grace, boasts in His faithfulness, and upholds the coherence of spiritual and eternal life. Though the life in the believer is subject to change, it is inherently indestructible; the seed God has planted remains, 1 John 3:9.

Thus, far from leading true believers to arrogance and negligence, faith in God's preservation fosters genuine humility, filial fear, true piety, perseverance in all trials, fervent prayer, steadfastness under the cross, and unwavering confession of the truth. It also engenders firm joy in God, prompting earnest and continuous gratitude and good works, as attested by Scripture and the examples of the saints (Canons of Dordt, V, 12).

For this precious fruit to flourish, the doctrine of the saints' perseverance must be embraced as God intends. Has He not revealed it in His Word to be accepted merely as doctrine and taught to others as sound teaching and pure truth? Indeed, this is part of God's intention, for truth holds intrinsic value. Yet, this is not the sole or

primary purpose. Embracing the perseverance of the saints with true faith entails confessing that God continues to work in this manner with His children. The preservation of the saints is not merely a historical fact or a scientific truth like a mathematical result; it is an eternal truth, upheld by God through the ages and manifest in the lives of all His children.

Believing in the preservation of the saints in this manner necessitates personal experience of its reality. Thus, anyone who truly believes in this preservation cannot misuse their confession to justify fleshly indulgence. Just as it is impossible for someone genuinely united with Christ by faith to fail in producing fruits of gratitude.

Moreover, if the preservation of the saints is a divine work continually performed in the hearts and lives of all believers, then assurance of this preservation must eventually be imparted to their consciousness. Without the preservation of the saints, no believer could ever be completely assured of their salvation, constantly fearing that they might lose God's grace through serious sin. However, if God indeed preserves His own, the believer can and will attain firm assurance of this in their heart. Without such certainty of salvation, the doctrine of the saints' perseverance would hold no practical value for the believer. What profit would this doctrine offer the children of God if they could never be certain of their status as His children? The preservation of the saints and assurance of salvation are inseparable; the latter makes the former a support for believers and a comfort for their hearts.

All the saints who appear before us in the Old and New Testaments share this assurance of salvation. Not only an Abraham, who

believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:18ff), or a Jacob, who waited for the salvation of the Lord (Genesis 49:18), or a David, who declared the Lord as his rock and fortress (2 Samuel 22:2ff), or a Habakkuk, who rejoiced in the God of his salvation even amidst desolation (Habakkuk 3:17-19), but also all the faithful, whose trials and tribulations are recorded by psalmists, prophets, and sages. They often found themselves in deep distress, oppressed by their enemies, mocked and persecuted: "Where is your God now? Let Him deliver you if He delights in you" (Psalm 22:8, 42:3, 71:11). Sometimes doubt gripped their souls, wondering if God had forgotten them, or if His mercy had ceased in His anger (Psalm 10:1, 13:1, 28:1, 44:9, 77:7-9). Yet, they acknowledged the righteousness of God's judgments, confessing their sins (Psalm 51:4, Nehemiah 9:33, Daniel 9:14). Nevertheless, they knew God as their Father, and themselves as His people, the sheep of His pasture (Psalm 95:7, 100:3, Isaiah 63:16, 64:8). God could not forsake them for His name's sake, for His covenant's sake (Psalm 79:8-9). His anger was momentary, but His favor was for life (Psalm 30:5). He did not deal with them according to their sins nor repay them according to their iniquities (Psalm 103:10). He forgave their transgressions and covered their sins (Psalm 32:1). The Lord was their rock and fortress, their stronghold and deliverer, their shield and the horn of their salvation, their light and their joy, their all in all (Psalm 18:2, 73:25).

Equally certain is the tone in which the apostles and the faithful of the New Testament speak of their salvation. They know that God did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for them all, and with Him will graciously give them all things (Romans 8:32). They are justified by faith, have peace with God, and can no longer be accused by

anyone (Romans 5:1, 8:33). They have been born again to a living hope and have passed from death to life (1 Peter 1:3, James 1:18, 1 John 3:14). They have received the Spirit of adoption, who testifies with their spirit that they are children of God (Romans 8:15-16).

This knowledge pertains not only to the present but also extends to the future. For those whom God has foreknown, called, and justified, He also glorifies (Romans 8:30). If they are children, then they are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17). They have already received eternal life by faith and cannot lose it (1 John 3:9, 5:1). They are born again to a living hope and are kept for salvation by God's power (1 Peter 1:3-5). The good work begun in them is brought to completion by God until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6). In a word, they are sealed with the Holy Spirit as a pledge and guarantee until the day of redemption (Romans 6:23, 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5, Ephesians 1:13-14, 4:30).

There would be more power and influence emanating from the believers if they always stood in this firm assurance of faith. But often they are not sure of their own standing; how then can they speak with enthusiasm, and by their joyful testimony arouse the envy of the world? In the Roman Church, even faith lacks certainty; the believer can only be absolutely sure of his salvation by a special revelation given to only a few; all other believers can come only to a suspicion, a hope, a probability. And Rome considers this uncertainty an advantage, believing it preserves a salutary fear and awakens an aspiration for sanctification. The Roman Christian does not rely on the testimony of the Holy Spirit in his own heart but on the judgment of the priest and the guarantee of the church for his salvation; and with that, he generally feels secure.

The Reformation held a fundamentally different understanding of justification, faith, and thus the security of salvation compared to Rome. For Rome, faith is merely assent to the doctrines of the Church; justification is the infusion of supernatural grace, enabling mankind to perform good works and thereby earn eternal life. Consequently, faith under this system cannot provide absolute certainty of salvation; any assurance must be derived from love and good works, resulting in only a relative and fluctuating presumption and hope. However, the Reformation attributed an independent significance to justification, viewing it as the restoration of man's relationship with God, thus redefining faith as a personal trust of the heart in God's grace in Christ Jesus.

This faith inherently included security. However, while the Lutherans and the Remonstrants limited this certainty to the present—asserting that a believer could be sure of their faith now but not necessarily of their perseverance to the end—the Reformed tradition extended this certainty to the future as well. Consequently, the quest for assurance of salvation became a significant aspect of the spiritual life among the Reformed. In the early days, when a vibrant and robust faith was flourishing, such an intentional quest for assurance was less necessary; believers spoke and lived from the abundance of their hearts, as evident in their confessions, forms, and prayers. But as faith waned, introspection and the search for signs of faith grew. Instead of finding assurance, this often led to deeper entanglement in doubt. True assurance of faith cannot be obtained through reasoning and deduction; it emerges naturally from faith itself. If faith is strong, it brings certainty with it; if it wanes, certainty also diminishes and cannot be artificially restored.

The Dordrecht Confession beautifully articulates this: the elect become assured of their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation in due time, albeit in varying stages and degrees; not through curious investigation into the mysteries of God, but by recognizing the infallible fruits of their election as indicated in the Word of God (such as true faith in Christ, filial fear of God, godly sorrow for sin, hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc.) within themselves, with spiritual joy and holy delight (I 12).

In the fifth chapter, §§ 9 and 10, this is further expounded: believers may be assured of the preservation of the elect in salvation and of the perseverance of true believers in faith, according to the degree of faith with which they truly believe they are and will always remain living members of the Church, having forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This assurance does not arise from some special revelation outside or apart from the Word, but from faith in the promises of God abundantly revealed in His Word for our comfort; from the testimony of the Holy Spirit, who bears witness with our spirit that we are children and heirs of God; and finally, from the earnest and holy practice of a good conscience and good works.

Thus, the security of salvation does not come to the life of faith from external sources but blossoms from the life of faith itself, being integrally connected to it and varying with its strength. Consequently, the degree of security fluctuates; in this life, believers must contend with various fleshly doubts, undergo severe temptations, and therefore do not always feel the full confidence of faith and assurance of perseverance (T.a.p. V 11).

But all this does not alter the fact that the beatific faith, as the Scriptures describe it and as the Reformation restored it, is, according to its inner nature, certainty, and increases in certainty as it grows stronger. It does not stand against knowing and being known, but it is opposed to all doubt; doubt does not arise from the new man, but from the old man, not from the Spirit, but from the flesh. Faith says yes and amen to all of God's promises, embraces them, and rests on them. And when it does this, and as it does this, it gives the believer the boldness to apply all God's promises to himself and to appropriate them for himself; it becomes a firm trust that not only others, but also I, have been granted forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation by God, through pure grace, solely because of the merit of Christ.

This confidence extends naturally, not through artificial reasoning, but according to its nature and essence, also to the future. It would be a strange kind of faith to say: I am a child of God, but I do not know whether I will still be one tomorrow. If faith is real and powerful, then it will jubilate: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me. And so faith testifies and rejoices, not because it trusts in itself, but because it trusts in God's vows. Those vows also include: I will be your God now and forever; I have loved you with an everlasting love and will never leave you or forsake you. Faith, which is not a certainty for the present and the future, does not do justice to the truth of God's promises and the faithfulness of His love.

Now, in the second place, there is the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the great and almighty Witness to Christ, who

takes up the cause of Christ in our hearts, leads us to faith in His name, and makes us know the things that are given to us by God in His Christ, John 15:26, 16:13-15, 1 Cor. 12:3, 2 Cor. 4:3-6, etc. This Spirit of Christ makes us know the truth of God's promises and His faithfulness to us. He also reveals ourselves to us, not only in our guilt and impurity but also in our fellowship with and participation in Christ. He reveals our faith to us. Having first convinced us of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and having worked faith in us as the Spirit of faith, 2 Cor. 4:13, He then assures us of our faith. He becomes a Spirit of adoption, Gal. 4:6, a Spirit as befits children and dwells in them, Rom. 8:15, and makes us aware of our childhood.

He does this in various ways and by various means. By awakening a new life in us, by guiding us continually, and by filling our souls with a joy previously unknown, Rom. 8:10, 11, 14:17, 15:13; He does it, to mention no more, by sealing us up to the day of redemption, Eph. 1:13, 4:30.

Sometimes sealing is employed to secure persons or things (such as letters) from being tampered with or violated, as seen in Deut. 32:34, Song of Solomon 4:12, Isa. 8:16, 29:11, Dan. 6:18, 12:4, Ezek. 9:1-6, Matt. 27:66, Rev. 5:5, 6, 7:1-4, 20:3, 22:10. At other times, it serves to authenticate persons or testimonies as genuine, to confirm them, as in Esth. 3:12, 13, 8:8, 10, 1 Kings 21:8, Neh. 9:38, Jer. 32:10, John 3:13, 6:27, Rom. 4:11, 1 Cor. 9:2. In this latter sense, believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit as a pledge until the day of redemption, Rom. 8:33, 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Eph. 1:13, 14, 4:30. The Holy Spirit, given to the believers, who plants faith in them and constantly sustains it, testifies within them, leads them, and in doing all this, also serves as a pledge and guarantee for believers that they will be

preserved until the day of redemption and will inherit heavenly salvation. This Spirit will never depart from them but remains with them forever, John 14:16. He who has this Spirit belongs to Christ, is His property, Rom. 8:19, and is preserved by Him for eternity, John 17:24. Christ in heaven and the Holy Spirit on earth guarantee the salvation of the elect and assure them of it in their hearts.

These two ways by which the assurance of salvation arises in believers are not actually two distinct paths but one way viewed from different perspectives. The Holy Spirit does not work, testify, and seal apart from or through faith, but always in and through faith. However, this faith is not dead but living, revealing its essence and demonstrating its power through good works.

Therefore, along with faith in the promises of God and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, these good works may be considered as a means by which God assures believers of their adoption, as noted in the Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86, and the Canons of Dort V, 10. But it should be noted that one cannot begin the search for assurance with these good works, as faith can never firmly rest on them, and they cannot be performed with the intention of gaining assurance through them. All good works are imperfect, and their perfection varies with the strength of the faith from which they proceed. However, insofar as they result from faith, they can serve as means of assurance. As faith manifests and proves itself in them, it is also confirmed and strengthened by them. And when men see our good works, they glorify the Father who is in heaven.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. What is the primary difference between justification and sanctification according to Bavinck?

- Reflect on how justification addresses guilt and sanctification deals with the stain of sin.

2. How is the concept of "holiness" understood in the Old Testament context?

- Consider the root meaning of "holy" and its implications for the relationship between God and His people.

3. In what ways does the holiness of God manifest in His relationships with His people?

- Examine how God's holiness is revealed through various aspects such as His name, covenant, and commandments.

4. Discuss the dual role of sanctification as both a work of God and a work in which believers actively participate.

- Reflect on the balance between divine action and human responsibility in the process of sanctification.

5. How does the New Testament present the concept of believers being called to be saints?

- Analyze the significance of believers being referred to as saints and what it implies about their identity in Christ.

6. What are the means of sanctification mentioned in the chapter, and how do they function in a believer's life?

- Reflect on the roles of the Word, prayer, singing of psalms, and other spiritual disciplines in sanctification.

7. Why is it stated that God does not make His children completely holy at the moment of rebirth?

- Consider the reasons behind the gradual process of sanctification and its implications for spiritual growth.

8. Discuss the statement, "Believers must become what they are." How does this paradox reflect the nature of sanctification?

- Reflect on the idea of living out one's identity in Christ through the process of becoming holy.

9. What role does suffering play in the process of sanctification according to Bavinck?

- Examine how suffering can be a means of developing obedience and holiness in a believer's life.

10. How does the concept of sanctification relate to the ultimate goal of being conformed to the image of the Son?

- Reflect on the end goal of sanctification and how it shapes the believer's journey towards Christlikeness.

23. The Church of Christ

All those abundant blessings which Christ confers upon His faithful on earth reach their culmination and crowning glory in the glorification that awaits them—partly after death, but fully after Judgment Day. Yet, we cannot discuss this final benefit without first considering the means and path through which Christ establishes, maintains, and strengthens His gifts of calling and regeneration, faith and conversion, justification and adoption, renewal and sanctification in His believers on earth. We have previously noted that He bestows all these blessings through His Word and Spirit, but it is now crucial to understand that He dispenses them within the fellowship that binds all believers together. He does not distribute these graces to isolated individuals or small groups but to a vast multitude, the entire new humanity chosen by the Father in Him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

Thus, the believer is never isolated, never alone. In the natural order, every human being is born into the community of his parents and thereby becomes, without any action of his own, a member of a family, a nation, and, broadly, of all humanity. Similarly, in the spiritual realm, the believer is born from above, of God, but he receives this new life only within the fellowship of the covenant of grace, of which Christ is both head and substance. If, by virtue of regeneration, God is his Father, the Church can rightly be called his Mother. Even in the heathen world, no believer or assembly of believers comes into being except through the mission sent out by the church of Christ. From the moment of his regeneration, therefore, the believer is, without his own will or action, incorporated into a vast whole, included in a rich community; he becomes a member of a new people and a citizen of a spiritual kingdom, whose King is glorious in the multitude of His subjects.

This community serves as a strong support for each believer individually. Ideally, we ought to be so strong in faith that we do not doubt or fear even if we were completely alone, surrounded, as Luther says, by as many devils as tiles on the roof. For if God is for us, who can be against us? If the Lord is with us, what can man do to us? (Ps. 56:12, 118:6, Rom. 8:31). Yet, generally, we are not suited for such independence, such isolation and solitude. There are indeed special cases where one is called to heed the voice of the Lord, to break from all surroundings, and to contend against one's entire family; and in these instances, God grants special grace and extraordinary strength, as He did for Abraham, Moses, and Elijah. But even then, the solitude is hard to bear; Elijah lamented that he was left alone (1 Kings 18:22, 19:10, 14), and Paul was grieved at being forsaken by everyone towards the end of his life (2 Tim. 4:16). Man is a social being and does not thrive in loneliness.

Election, therefore, encompasses a vast multitude from every race, language, people, and nation. It is personal and targets specific individuals whom God knows by name, yet it elects them in such a way and unites them in such a way that together they form the temple of God, the body and bride of Christ. The purpose of election is the creation of an organism: the redemption, renewal, and glorification of a reborn humanity that proclaims the virtues of God and bears His name on its forehead. When God executes this election in time, He does so through the covenant of grace; and in that covenant, He never includes an isolated individual but calls their family and lineage alongside them. This was evident with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and continues with each one He draws into His community from worldly service; He establishes His covenant with

them and their offspring, confirming it from generation to generation.

This organic activity of God corresponds to a social impulse within the hearts of all believers—a longing for fellowship, not only with God Himself but also with all His people. No force in the world divides humanity as hopelessly or unites them as intimately as religion. Outside Christianity, religious communities almost always coincide with tribal or national identities; their religion cannot stand independently without these supports, thus no true church exists in the full sense of the word. Christianity, however, is different.

Under Israel, the nation and the church often overlapped, yet the community's foundation rested more on religious unity than national identity. This is exemplified by Isaac's miraculous birth, which underscores how God's covenant of grace makes nature subservient to divine purpose. Hence, in the Old Testament, the God of the covenant, the people of Israel, and the land of Canaan are deeply interconnected. Israel's nationality and unity stem from being chosen by God as His own possession (Ex. 19:5-6; Deut. 4:20; 7:6), and Canaan is the Lord's land, given freely to Abraham and his descendants as an inheritance (Gen. 12:7; Lev. 20:24). Ruth's declaration upon returning to Judah captures this beautifully: "Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people and your God my God." Even as Israel fell into apostasy and exile, a faithful remnant persisted, forming the true Israel, the genuine seed of Abraham (Amos 5:15; Isaiah 1:9; 4:3; 8:18). These faithful ones separated from the wicked, united in fellowship, and strengthened one another (Psalm 1:1; 16:3; 22:23, 26; 26:4-12; 35:18; 40:10; 66:16; 122:1; 133:1).

This separation culminated in the New Testament era. After John the Baptist's ministry of repentance and forgiveness, Jesus began His public ministry, initially addressing all Israel. He taught throughout Galilee and Judea, in cities and villages, healing and doing good to all oppressed by the devil (Acts 10:38). Yet, the people, led by the Scribes and Pharisees, rejected His Messiahship and His spiritual kingdom, growing increasingly hostile until they crucified Him. As this rejection became evident, Jesus pronounced severe judgments on the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt. 11:20-24), on the Pharisees and Scribes (Matt. 23:13-36), on Jerusalem and its children (Matt. 23:37-39), on Israel itself (Matt. 21:19-43), and on the city and the temple (Matt. 24). Israel rejected its Messiah, and thus others would be brought into the fold.

Initially, it was a mere handful of disciples who confessed Jesus as the Christ; yet this confession bound them together so closely that even after their Master had ascended, they remained united, persisting in prayer and supplication together (Acts 1:14). On the day of Pentecost, they were endued with power from on high and received a new principle of life in the Holy Spirit, which liberated them from national ties and organized them into a distinct community amidst the world, independent of nation and country. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit granted the church of Christ its distinct and independent existence.

From its inception, the assembly of those who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord was termed the congregation or church. The Hebrew Old Testament already utilized two words for the assemblies of Israel, but there was no significant difference in meaning between them. Later Judaism, however, distinguished the two words in such a

manner that one referred more to the congregation in its actual situation, while the other to its ideal character as an assembly called by God to His salvation. The first word was translated into Greek as synagogue, and the second as ekklesia. This distinction, already established by the Jews, naturally led the Christians to favor the second term. After all, the Christian congregation was that assembly of believers which replaced the old Israel and brought the concept of God's electing love to fruition.

As Jews and Christians gradually parted ways, the practice developed of calling the Jewish assembly the synagogue and the Christian assembly the ekklesia (church), a custom that persists to this day. Initially, this distinction was not observed in the two terms; in James 2:2 (Heb. 10:25), synagogue is used for the Christian congregation, and in Acts 7:38 (Heb. 2:12), ekklesia refers to the assembly of Israel, and even for a general assembly in Acts 19:32, 39, 40. However, the separation of Jews and Christians promoted the differentiation in terminology.

Following Pentecost, the disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem frequently met in the Temple or one of its outbuildings (Acts 2:2, 46; 3:1, 11; 5:12), adhering to the prayer times sanctified by Jewish custom while also preaching the Gospel of Christ. The apostles' preaching, both on and long after Pentecost, was richly blessed; thousands were added to the church, those who were being saved (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7). Yet, persecution arose, making Stephen the first martyr (Acts 6:8–7:60), and scattering the disciples from Jerusalem across Judea and Samaria to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (Acts 8:1; 11:19). Through the disciples' preaching, believers were won and congregations established in many places among the Jews, enjoying

a period of peace and great multiplication (Acts 8:4, 14, 25; 9:31, 35, 38). Naturally, these Jewish Christians long harbored the hope that the entire nation of Israel would turn to the Lord (Acts 3:17-26). Yet, over time, that hope waned, and the focus shifted from the Jewish-Christian congregation to the Gentile converts.

Even during Jesus' ministry, there were some proselytes from the Greeks who had come to worship at the feast and expressed a desire to see Jesus (John 12:20ff). Among the members of the Jerusalem congregation were also Hellenists (Acts 6:1), who likely, like Stephen, held a more liberal view regarding the relationship of Christians to the Temple and the Law (Acts 6:13, 14). This broader view extended to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26ff), the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), and the Greeks in Antioch (Acts 11:20).

All these events were preparatory to the great missionary endeavor which Paul undertook among the Gentiles with Barnabas, by the Holy Spirit's direction and the laying on of hands by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:2ff). Though Paul first addressed the Jews (Rom. 1:16; 2:9; 3:1; 9:3; 11:13ff; 1 Cor. 1:22ff; 9:20), when they despised his message, as often occurred, he turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 17:17; 18:4, 6; 28:25-28). It pained him deeply that his brethren by flesh rejected the cross of Christ, seeking their own righteousness (Rom. 9:2); yet, he never ceased striving to provoke them to envy and save some (Rom. 11:14).

Nevertheless, it was undeniable that a hardening had come upon Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles had come in (Rom. 11:25). The natural branches were broken off due to unbelief, and wild branches grafted in their place (Rom. 11:17-24). Thus, there

emerged a distinction between Israel of the flesh and Israel of the spirit (Rom. 2:28-29; 9:8; 1 Cor. 10:18).

Now, the church of Christ constitutes the true seed of Abraham, the people and Israel of God (Acts 15:14; Rom. 9:25-26; 2 Cor. 6:16-18; Gal. 3:29; 6:16; Heb. 8:8-10; Jas. 1:1, 18; 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 21:3, 12). Those Jews who rejected Christ are not true Jews; they are not the circumcision but the mutilation (Phil. 3:2); they are unruly, vain speakers, seducers, and persecutors of the faithful (1 Thess. 2:14-16; Tit. 1:10-11). The Jews who blaspheme the church in Smyrna claim to be Jews but are rather a synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9; 3:9). Thus, Jews and Christians became distinct; while early Christians were viewed as a Jewish sect (Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22), in Antioch, they were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). The linguistic distinction solidified as Jews were associated with the synagogue, and Christians with the ekklesia (church).

The term ekklesia was rendered as congregation in our translations; the term church, likely derived from a Greek word meaning "of the Lord's (house)," appears only in phrases like churchwarden and church robber (Acts 19:35, 37). Translators preferred congregation, emphasizing the assembly of the faithful in their mutual community, while church denotes institutional organization. Both terms, however, are used interchangeably; confessional writings frequently employ church (Ned. Gel. art. 27-32, Heid. Cat. Zond. 7. 21). The church of Christ, though organized, remains an assembly of believers by nature. The terms thus complement each other, presenting the same assembly from different perspectives.

Christ Himself first used the term congregation for His followers (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). This is not surprising, given that the Hebrew word He used occurs frequently in the Old Testament. The novelty lies in Christ applying it to His disciples, indicating that His congregation would replace Israel. He used it to refer not to a local assembly, but to all who would believe in Him through the Apostles' word, encompassing the broadest sense possible. As the church developed, the term acquired more specific meanings.

In Acts 2:47, 5:11, 8:1, 11:22, the term "congregation" is employed to describe the local assembly of believers in Jerusalem, which initially stood almost alone. Certainly, there were disciples of Jesus scattered throughout Judea, Samaria, and Galilee who had been personally won by His preaching. These disciples, after the persecution in Jerusalem, formed connection points for missionary work among the Jews. Initially, however, an assembly of believers, a congregation, existed solely in Jerusalem. As the disciples preached and established assemblies elsewhere, the term "congregation" came to be applied to each of these local gatherings. The congregation in Jerusalem was not a central society that planted branches elsewhere but was joined by other assemblies of believers, each fully a congregation in its own right.

Thus, we read of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:26, 13:1), the churches in Lystra, Derbe, and surrounding regions (Acts 14:23), in Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), and so on. Paul continually refers to each local assembly of believers in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, etc., as a "congregation," and he also speaks in the plural of the congregations in Galatia (Gal. 1:2) and Judea (Gal. 1:22). The believers in a given place met regularly, sometimes daily (Acts 2:46),

and soon began to meet on Sundays (1 Cor. 16:2, Acts 20:7, Rev. 1:10). Without their own church buildings—James 2:2 likely contains the New Testament's first reference to a specific meeting place—they gathered in the homes of brethren.

In Jerusalem, they initially gathered in the temple (Acts 2:1, 46, 3:11, 5:12, 20, 42), but they also held special meetings in private homes (Acts 1:14, 2:42), such as the house of Mary, mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12), and later the house of James (Acts 21:18). Because the congregation was too large, it divided, meeting in different homes at different times, or simultaneously in separate houses. This arrangement was then adopted elsewhere: in Thessalonica (Acts 17:7), Troas (Acts 20:8), Ephesus (Acts 20:20), Corinth (1 Cor. 16:19), Colossae (Philem. 2), Laodicea (Col. 4:15), and Rome (Rom. 16:5, 14, 15). Remarkably, each of these house churches was individually recognized as a church (Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15, Philem. 2). They were independent and equal, not subordinate to one another.

Yet, they were united as one. Jesus referred to all His disciples collectively as His congregation (Matt. 16:18, 18:17), and the apostles, particularly Paul, did the same. The church, as a whole, is the body of Christ, with Him as its head (Eph. 1:22-23, 4:15-16, Col. 1:18, 24); it is the bride of the Lamb, adorned for her husband (Eph. 5:32, 2 Cor. 11:2, Rev. 21:2); the house and temple of God, built by the apostles on the foundation of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-16), or on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone and believers as living stones (Eph. 2:20-22, 1 Tim. 3:15, 1 Pet. 2:5, Rev. 21:3); a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, to proclaim the excellencies

of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

In light of the glorious virtues which the apostles ascribed to the church, a distinction was sometimes made between the ideal and the empirical church. Such Western distinctions, however, are foreign to the New Testament. When the apostles, reflecting on the example of Christ, especially in John 14-17, speak so gloriously of the congregation, they are not contemplating something that exists solely in the mind or an ideal that we must strive for but may never achieve. Rather, they always have in view the whole, real congregation, of which the assemblies of the faithful in various towns and villages, across different countries and times, are the local manifestations. These manifestations, while imperfect—as the apostles frequently attest in their letters—are nonetheless revelations of a reality that lies behind them, the fulfillment of a divine decree unfolding from generation to generation.

In that decree, God beholds the entire congregation of Christ already perfected before Him; in Christ, who redeemed it with His blood, it is contained like the fruit within the wheat grain; in the Holy Spirit, who takes from Christ, is the root of its existence and the guarantee of its completion. It is, therefore, not merely an idea or an ideal but a reality that is becoming, can become, and will become, because it already exists. Thus, the church is in a state of constant change; it has been gathered from the beginning of the world and will continue to be gathered until its end. Daily, members depart who have fought the good fight, kept the faith, and received the crown of righteousness, thus constituting the triumphant church, the assembly of the firstborn and the spirits of the righteous made

perfect. Simultaneously, new members are daily added to the earthly church, the church militant, born within the church or brought to it through missionary work among the nations.

These two parts of the congregation belong together; they are the vanguard and rearguard of the one great army of Christ. Those who have gone before us now form a cloud of witnesses around us, having testified to their faith during their lives and thereby exhorting us to patience and steadfastness. Without us, they could not be perfected, and without them, neither can we be perfected, as stated in Hebrews 11:40. Only all the saints together can fully comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love and be filled with all the fullness of God, as articulated in Ephesians 3:18-19. Thus, the history of salvation progresses until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, Ephesians 4:13.

The apostles, attributing such glorious characteristics to the church as a whole, had in mind not an abstract idea or an unattainable ideal, but a tangible reality. This is evident from the way they speak of each local church and each believer. The church in Corinth, despite its many errors and defects, is referred to by Paul as the temple of God, the dwelling place of His Spirit, and the body of Christ (1 Cor. 3:16, 12:27). Similarly, every believer is called a temple of the Holy Spirit and is said to belong to God, body and soul (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The universal church, each local church, and each individual believer all partake of the same blessings, have fellowship with the same Christ, possess the same Spirit, and are led by that Spirit to the same Father (1 Cor. 8:6, Eph. 2:18, 4:3-6). There is a difference in the measure of grace given to each believer (Rom. 12:6, Eph. 4:7); there is a diversity

of gifts, ministries, and workings (1 Cor. 12:4-6). However, this diversity does not hinder the unity of believers; rather, it promotes and strengthens it.

If the church is indeed an organism, a living body, it implies that it has many distinct members, each with a name, place, task, and calling. If they were all one member, where would the body be? Just as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with the church of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Each member of the congregation, therefore, receives from Christ a unique gift, however modest or small it may be, and is to use that gift not for self-service, but for the benefit of the congregation. Each one, according to the nature of the gift received, must serve the brethren, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Pet. 4:10). This gift is given not for self-indulgence, but for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), for the edification of the church (1 Cor. 14:12), to care for others as they do for him (1 Cor. 14:25).

In this rich diversity, the Church of Christ remains a unity. This unity is not merely a singularity in name or tradition, but it signifies that the Church is fundamentally and essentially one across all times and places, sharing the same benefits, privileges, and graces. This unity is not imposed externally through force or temporary agreements against common foes. It does not even arise from the social instincts inherent in religious life; rather, it is spiritual in nature. It is grounded in and exemplified by the unity between the Father and Christ as Mediator (John 17:21-23). This unity stems from Christ as the vine, nurturing all branches (John 15:5), and from Him as the head from whom the whole body grows (Ephesians 4:16). It is brought about by the one Spirit, who leads us all to one Father (1

Cor. 12:13, Ephesians 2:18, 4:4). The love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit belong to every believer, every local congregation, and the entire Church; herein lies its deep, unbreakable, and imperishable unity.

This unity, however, is still incomplete and imperfect in the earthly congregation. Like the Church itself, this unity is in the process of becoming; it exists but is gradually being realized and applied. Jesus prayed for this unity (John 17:21), and the apostle Paul described it as something to be fully realized in the future (Eph. 4:13). Yet, this unity is already present and manifests itself, albeit imperfectly, in the life of the Church. In the Jerusalem congregation, this unity was evident in the perseverance of the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42), as well as in their sharing of possessions and unity of heart and soul (Acts 2:44-45, 4:32-35). As congregations were established in other places, this unity among believers was maintained.

Nevertheless, the diverse backgrounds and customs of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians posed significant challenges. Often, these groups clashed within mixed congregations, and even Peter faltered momentarily in this conflict in Antioch, earning a rebuke from Paul (Gal. 2:11-14). Yet, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, kept the great goal of unity in mind, urging love and peace in all churches. All believers, regardless of their background, were one body with one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:4-6). Through Christ’s death, the dividing wall of hostility was torn down, reconciling Jews and Gentiles into one new humanity (Eph. 2:14-16). This unity did not demand uniformity, for a body requires diverse members with different gifts serving the whole (1

Cor. 12:4-31). In confessing Christ as Lord, they were united (1 Cor. 12:3), and all were to do everything for the glory of God (Rom. 14:6-8, 1 Cor. 10:31, Col. 3:17). Paul's efforts were blessed, and the unity of the Church was preserved as the contrasts faded.

However, throughout history, heresies and schisms have plagued the Church. Today, with its countless denominations and sects, the Church presents a sorrowful sight. Yet, traces of that original unity persist: all Christian churches are distinguished from the world by one baptism, confirmed in the apostles' doctrine through the confession of the creeds, and maintain the breaking of bread and prayers, albeit in diverse forms. The Church, with its unity, remains an object of faith; though we do not see it as clearly as we might wish, it nonetheless exists and will one day be fully realized.

This also applies to another characteristic of the Church: its holiness. From the beginning, entry into the Church has been by faith and conversion; those who converted were baptized, receiving forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Although Jesus did not baptize (John 4:2) and the apostles often delegated this task (Acts 10:48, 1 Cor. 1:14-17), baptism was conferred on all who sought to join the Church. This baptism was always seen as a unity of the visible sign and the invisible grace it signified, as a renunciation of the filthiness of the flesh and a call to a good conscience before God (1 Pet. 3:21), and as opposed to circumcision as a mere ceremony. Viewed this way, baptism was indeed a means of salvation, like the ark that saved Noah (1 Pet. 3:20-21), a death and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:3-4), a washing away of sins (Acts 22:16), a break with the world, and an entry into a new community.

Baptism thus signified a complete reorientation toward the world, requiring great courage to partake and join the congregation of Christ. This congregation was composed largely of the simple and humble (1 Cor. 1:25-29), and they endured much reproach and oppression. Initially, hostility and persecution arose from the Jews, whether from the government (Acts 4:1 ff., 5:17 ff., 6:12 ff., 9:1 ff., etc.), or from the populace, who often incited the Gentiles to revolt (Acts 9:23 ff., 13:50, 14:2, 19, 17:5, etc.). Occasionally, the Gentiles themselves acted hostilely against Christians (Acts 16:16 ff., 19:23 ff., 1 Thess. 2:14), but this was exceptional, and generally, the government was not displeased with the Christians (Acts 17:9, 18:17, 19:35 ff., 21:32, 23:17 ff.).

Persecution from Rome began under Nero in AD 64. Therefore, Christians initially expected protection rather than persecution from the Roman government (Acts 16:37, 22:25, 25:10, 2 Thess. 2:7), viewed it as a power ordained by God, and urged submission to its laws and prayers for its welfare (Rom. 13:1-7, 1 Tim. 2:2, Tit. 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Regarding social life, the apostles advised believers not to leave their unbelieving spouses (1 Cor. 7:12, 1 Pet. 3:1), but to marry in the Lord when entering marriage (1 Cor. 7:39, 2 Cor. 6:14); everyone, including slaves, was to remain in the calling they were called to (1 Cor. 7:20); believers were not to shun all association with unbelievers (1 Cor. 5:10); they were to accept invitations to meals but refrain from eating food sacrificed to idols for conscience's sake and as an example (1 Cor. 10:27, 28, 8:12, 10:20); they were to practice love towards all, even enemies (Rom. 12:14, 17, 13:10, Gal. 6:10, Col. 4:5, 1 Thess. 3:12, 2 Pet. 1:7), and nothing was to be considered

impure in itself, for all God's creatures are good (Rom. 14:14, 1 Tim. 4:4, Heb. 13:4).

Thus, the Church's relationship to the world is one of freedom, devoid of false, unnatural abstinence; but this freedom is only possible when the Church is aware of her calling and walks in holiness before God. The congregation is holy, a holy people, and the believers are saints (Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:2), because together and individually they are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16, 17, 6:19); they have been washed and sanctified by that Spirit in Christ Jesus (John 17:17, 19, 1 Cor. 1:2, 6:11, Eph. 5:26, 27), and therefore must avoid and fight to the death all sins, works of the flesh, and worldly lusts (Gal. 5:19, Col. 3:5, Heb. 12:1, 4), and instead practice all virtues and perform all good works (Gal. 5:22, Phil. 4:8, Col. 3:12, Tit. 2:14). It is a life of love that Christians must lead (Eph. 5:2), for love is the greatest of all virtues (1 Cor. 13:13), the bond of perfection (Col. 3:14), and the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:10).

Discipline is a means given by Christ to the Church to preserve its holy character; it must not only be exercised privately by one brother over another (Matt. 18:15-16, 1 Thess. 5:14, Heb. 10:24), but in cases of public sins, it must also be applied by the Church to its members (Matt. 18:17, 1 Cor. 5:16). The letters of the apostles show how much this holiness left to be desired in the apostolic age, and subsequent centuries have often witnessed a deep religious and moral decline in the Church. Yet, after each relapse, revival and renewal came about through the Spirit of Christ; the holiness of the congregation is a characteristic that Christ acquired for it and continually works out in it.

Finally, the Church bears the mark of catholicity, or universality. This term first emerged in post-apostolic writings, signifying that the true Church is the one which adheres to the bishop and remains with the entirety, for the whole, universal, Catholic Church is where Christ dwells. Various interpretations of this term have since arisen, suggesting that the Church spans the globe, includes all the faithful from the dawn of time to the present, and contains all truth and grace, thereby serving as a complete means of salvation for all. These assertions hold true, provided one does not confine the Church to a single denomination, such as the Roman Church, but regards the Christian congregation manifested across all churches, in varying degrees of purity. For indeed, that congregation is truly Catholic. Even in the Old Testament, the promise of the Mother was revealed to Adam and Eve, and through them, to the entire human race. Though a particular people was later chosen in Abraham to be the bearers of revelation, that revelation was always intended for humanity at large. Through Abraham's seed, all nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:2). Prophecy consistently maintained this universal scope of salvation (Joel 2:32, Mic. 4:1,2, Zeph. 2:11, Isa. 25:6-10).

When Christ ministered, He directed His efforts towards the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 15:24), yet the kingdom He proclaimed was inherently universal, free from national boundaries, and open to all who believed and repented (Mark 1:15). Should the Jews reject His gospel, He declares, the children of the kingdom will be cast out, and many will come from east and west to sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11, 12). Like a grain of wheat that must die to bear much fruit, Christ's sacrifice would yield a bountiful harvest (John 12:24). He spoke of other sheep beyond Israel, who must also be

brought into one flock under one shepherd (John 10:16, 11:52). Following His resurrection, Christ commissioned His disciples to preach the gospel to all creation and to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19, Mark 16:15). The apostles fulfilled this command, bearing witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

It is noteworthy that while Jesus frequently spoke of the kingdom of heaven and rarely mentioned the Church, the apostles often spoke of the Church of Christ rather than the kingdom of God. This distinction holds a significant explanation.

The kingdom of heaven, as Jesus described it, is primarily a collection of spiritual blessings and goods, rather than a mere assembly of people. It is a treasure (Matt. 13:44), a pearl of great value (Matt. 13:45), encompassing righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 6:33, Rom. 14:17). This kingdom originates from heaven and descends to earth through Christ, for in Him, the Father bestows all these blessings and goods (1 Cor. 1:30, Eph. 1:3). The Father has granted the kingdom to Christ, and Christ, in turn, confers it upon His disciples (Luke 22:29). He begins this work on earth; when He casts out demons by the Spirit of God, it is proof that the kingdom of God has come (Matt. 12:28). This kingdom grows like a tree, rising and spreading, like leaven that permeates all the dough (Matt. 13:31-33), and it will be fully realized in the future, at Christ's return (Matt. 5:3 ff., 6:10, Luke 12:32, Acts 14:22, 1 Cor. 15:24-28, 2 Thess. 1:5).

That kingdom, however, from the first coming of Christ until His second advent, is bestowed upon those who are reborn of water and

the Spirit, and who place their faith in the name of Christ (John 1:12-13, 3:3, 5). The apostles serve as the fishermen who cast their nets to gather individuals into the fold, that they may partake in the present and future blessings of the kingdom (Matt. 4:19).

Thus, while Jesus heralds the Gospel of the kingdom, elucidating its essence, progression, and destiny, the apostles are summoned and empowered by Him to assemble, through the Gospel, a congregation destined to share in the riches of that kingdom and ultimately to fully receive and revel in them. The term "kingdom" primarily draws our attention to the treasures, goods, and blessings dispensed by the Father through Christ. In contrast, the "congregation" signifies the assembly of those who have received these blessings and are poised to enjoy them in their fullness. In Christ, the congregation stands as the proprietor, possessor, custodian, distributor, and heir of the kingdom of God. This is her treasure and her glory; she possesses no other wealth. What Peter once declared, the congregation can reiterate in her own manner: "Silver and gold have I none, but what I have, I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6).

Since the treasures of the kingdom, which the Church holds, are of a spiritual nature—not composed of gold or silver, of power or force, but of righteousness, peace, and joy through the Holy Spirit—the Church embodies universality. It is not constrained by nation or people, by time or place, by gender or age, by wealth or property; it transcends all earthly distinctions and oppositions. It proclaims the Gospel to all creation, and that Gospel is always and solely "good news," a joyful proclamation suitable and necessary for all peoples,

in all eras, under all conditions. The kingdom of God opposes nothing but sin.

From its inception, this congregation as an assembly of believers possessed a certain organization. Every society, to avoid chaos and disintegration and to fulfill its intended purpose, requires a set of rules for its gatherings and activities. Likewise, the Church of Christ is governed by this general principle of human society. God is not a God of disorder but of peace; He has established ordinances for all His creatures, and He desires everything in the congregations to be conducted decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). The Church, while on earth, remains imperfect; each member and the collective body must continually combat sin and pursue sanctification. They require instruction, guidance, direction, encouragement, consolation, exhortation, and discipline at all times. Additionally, the Church must perpetuate itself from generation to generation; it does not retain the same members but loses them daily to the triumphant Church, and regularly incorporates new members who must be nurtured and integrated into the life of the Church. Moreover, it has received from Christ the commission to preach the Gospel to all humanity across the world.

Both inwardly and outwardly, the Church has a sacred and significant vocation to fulfill.

If God imposes this vocation upon her, He also grants her the capability and the means to accomplish it. He equips her with gifts, powers, and ministries, ensuring she can perform the duties placed upon her. As Paul articulates, He has given Apostles, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers, so they may carry out their diverse ministries

within the congregation, thereby edifying the body of Christ and perfecting the saints. This whole structure is to persist until the ultimate goal is attained, when all reach the unity of faith and the knowledge of God, becoming perfect, attaining the measure of the fullness of Christ. Thus, the Church, as an assembly of believers, has been endowed by Christ with a specific institution, a unique arrangement of gifts, powers, offices, and ministries, enabling her to fulfill her earthly calling. This institution was not an afterthought but was present from the Church's inception. Although we must address the congregation as a gathering of believers first and then its organizational structure, it should not be inferred that the former existed long before the latter. God immediately structured the Church on earth in accordance with its place and mission in the world.

Although there is no temporal separation between the two, a distinction exists. This is evident from the significant changes in the Church's structure over time. From the beginning, believers on earth undoubtedly gathered and met. In Genesis 4:26, we read that during Enos' days, people began to call upon the name of the Lord, likely indicating that the Sethites separated from the Cainites and assembled around the confession of the Lord's name. Thus, from that time, there was public worship, primarily consisting of preaching, offering, and prayer. In the patriarchal era, the father acted as both king and priest within his family; he performed circumcision (Genesis 17:23) and conducted sacrifices (Genesis 22:2, 26:1, etc.).

With the giving of the Law at Sinai, when God established His covenant with a people, a significant change occurred. A special priesthood and the office of Levites were instituted; specific places

and times for sacrifices were designated; the sacrifices themselves were organized and delineated; and everything relating to holy persons, times, places, and actions was meticulously regulated and prescribed. The Law was a yoke, difficult to bear (Acts 15:10), yet necessary to sharpen the awareness of sin, awaken the need for forgiveness, illuminate the significance and necessity of sacrifices, and ultimately lead to Christ.

Despite this official, legal regulation, there existed another layer of religious life within Israel. The people lived throughout Canaan and even beyond the Jordan. Naturally, only a small portion could journey to Jerusalem for the major feasts; moreover, all were required to diligently observe the Sabbath, celebrating it in their own locales. It is evident, and highly probable, that the believers held religious meetings on such days, gathering for contemplation of the law, singing, and prayer. Acts 15:21 notes that Moses had those who preached him in every city and that he was read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

The origins of these synagogues are shrouded in antiquity, yet it is certain that they date back to ancient times. During and following the exile, as Jews found themselves dispersed across various lands and distant from their homeland and Temple, these synagogues assumed a rich and profound significance. Wherever Jews resided, a synagogue was erected, serving as a place where they regularly gathered on the Sabbath, feast days, and even weekdays, for communal confession, prayer, the reading of the law and the prophets, and free readings (Luke 4:21), concluding with the priestly benediction. The governance of the congregation was vested in a council of elders, who wielded the authority to administer discipline

and excommunication. They were assisted by various officials, such as the synagogue leader (Mark 5:22, 35; Luke 8:49, 13:14), who regulated religious gatherings; a chaplain, responsible for receiving alms; and a servant (Luke 4:20), who managed the sacred texts. The entire structure of the synagogues was of paramount importance for the spiritual life of the Jews, and in many respects, it served as a model for the organization of the Christian church.

Jesus habitually attended these synagogue meetings (Luke 4:16), adhering to the entirety of the Mosaic law and fulfilling all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). Yet, His mission was to fulfill the law through His observance, thereby placing a new yoke upon His disciples, one that was easy and light, offering rest for their souls (Matt. 11:29-30). He proclaimed the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, gathering disciples who acknowledged Him as their Master and gradually grew in their understanding of His person and work.

From this circle of disciples, He chose twelve, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28), and designated them as Apostles (Luke 6:13). The gravity of this selection is underscored by the fact that Jesus made it after a night spent in solitary prayer on the mountain (Luke 6:12). The term Apostle, meaning envoy, messenger, or missionary, was not uncommon in those days; among the Jews, it likely referred to men dispatched from Jerusalem to collect funds for the Temple. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself is called an Apostle (Heb. 3:1), as is Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), and perhaps other servants of the Gospel. However, the title soon became specifically associated with the twelve chosen by Jesus, and with Paul, who was uniquely called and appointed as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 1:2, 2:37; Gal. 1:17; 1 Cor. 9:5, 15:7; Rev. 2:2, 18:20, 21:14).

The immediate purpose of choosing these apostles was that they might accompany Jesus and be sent out by Him to preach and heal (Mark 3:14-15). According to Matthew 10:1ff (Mark 6:9ff; Luke 9:1ff), Jesus sent them to various towns and villages in Galilee. This mission aimed to bring the Gospel to those Jews whom Jesus could not reach personally, while also preparing the Apostles for their future role. This role was to bear witness to Jesus in the world after His ascension and to establish His church upon that testimony. Jesus prepared them through His teaching and example, allowing them to witness His words and deeds, His life, suffering, death, and especially His resurrection (Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15). He promised them the Spirit of truth, who would guide them into all truth, comfort them, and remain with them forever (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:7ff, 20:22). With this empowerment, He granted them special authority: to preach and teach, to heal miraculously, to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper, to exercise church discipline, and to open and close the kingdom of heaven by forgiving or retaining sins (Matthew 16:19, 18:18, 28:19; John 20:23). Thus, the apostles were servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1).

Among the apostles, Peter occupied a position of prominence. He was the son of Jonas, a fisherman from Bethsaida (John 1:43-44), and was already married and residing in Capernaum when he encountered Jesus (Mark 1:16-18). Originally named Simon, Jesus immediately gave him the name Cephas or Peter, meaning "rock," symbolizing his firmness, boldness, openness, and steadfastness (John 1:42). This is how we come to know him throughout Jesus' ministry; he was the first chosen among the apostles (Mark 3:13-19), and he often acted as their spokesman and representative. His steadfastness was severely tested during Christ's passion, leading to

his grievous denial. Yet, Jesus restored him from this deep fall, allowing him to strengthen his brethren even more (Luke 22:32, John 21:15-17). Consequently, Peter took a leading role immediately after Jesus' ascension, during the election of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26), in preaching at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41), performing miracles (Acts 3:6), judging Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), visiting Samaria (Acts 8:14-25), preaching to Gentiles (Acts 10:1-48), and at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:7-11).

The Roman Catholics infer from these accounts that Peter held a rank above the other apostles and that he later became the first pope in Rome. However, there is no basis for such a claim. Peter was indeed the foremost among his equals but held no rank or authority over them. The other eleven were also apostles, endowed with the same authority to preach, teach, administer baptism and the Lord's Supper, and open and close the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19, 18:18, 28:19; John 20:23). After Acts 15, Peter's prominence diminishes, and we only hear of him in Antioch (Galatians 2:11) and Babylon (1 Peter 5:13), and that he eventually died a martyr in Rome (John 21:18-19). In rank, office, power, and work, he was not superior to any of them, and Paul, though he considered himself the least of the apostles, often surpassed them in labor (1 Corinthians 15:9-10, 2 Corinthians 11:23-28, 12:11).

When Jesus, in Matthew 16:18, commends Peter for his bold confession of His Messiahship, He says, "You are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church." This does not refer solely to Peter's person, nor to his confession apart from himself, but to Peter as a confessor of Christ, embodying the confession that all apostles would share. Thus, the church is built not on Peter alone but on all the

apostles together. The apostolic foundation is essential to the church; there is no fellowship with Christ except through fellowship with them and their word (John 17:20, 1 John 1:3).

Immediately following Jesus' ascension, the apostles assumed leadership of the congregation in Jerusalem, functioning as its governing council. All authority resided with them, granted by Christ, not by the congregation. Yet, their authority, as Peter later described, was to shepherd God's flock and oversee it not by compulsion, but willingly; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in their charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3). The apostolate was thus above the congregation but served its benefit; it was instituted by Christ for the church's edification (Ephesians 4:11-12). Initially, the apostles performed all roles: preaching, baptizing (Acts 2:38), teaching, breaking bread, fellowship, and prayers (Acts 2:42), performing miracles and signs (Acts 2:43), and distributing aid to the needy (Acts 4:37, 5:2). However, as the church grew and new congregations formed in Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and the Gentile world, additional structures and support were needed, both universally and locally.

The congregations that gradually arose outside Jerusalem in other cities and towns were not, and did not become, subordinate to the congregation in Jerusalem, but stood independently beside it. The congregation in Jerusalem may be called the mother congregation in the sense that it was the first and that other congregations arose through her missionary work; however, this name is incorrect if it suggests that the other congregations were dependent on the one in Jerusalem. In this regard, there is not and cannot be a mother church, for every church, even the smallest, owes its origin and

existence solely and directly to Christ and His Spirit, even though the mission is the means to that end. Every congregation, therefore, is a congregation of Christ and not an offshoot or a colony of a congregation elsewhere, whether in Jerusalem, Rome, or anywhere else. Even though the congregations established in Palestine and elsewhere were sisters, not daughters, of the congregation in Jerusalem, it is noteworthy that they all continued to depend on and be subject to the college of the apostles without distinction and in the same manner.

The apostles were much more than a local church council; they were and remained the church council of the entire Christian congregation, wherever it was established. Therefore, as soon as Samaria had accepted the word of God, the apostles sent Peter and John there to pray for the believers, to lay hands on them to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and further to preach the word among them (Acts 8:14-25); and later Peter traveled through all the new churches in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, to strengthen them and promote mutual fellowship (Acts 9:31-32). Thus, the churches did not stand apart from one another and were not left to their own devices but retained their foundation and center in the apostolate.

This considerably increased the apostles' activity and necessitated both a division of their work and an increase in their manpower. The first was accomplished when it was agreed at the Jerusalem council, in brotherly consultation, that the apostles should go to the Jews in Jerusalem and Paul to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:6-9). Of course, this division was not meant so strictly that Paul was never again to associate with the Jews, nor the apostles in Jerusalem to associate with the Gentiles; for Paul continued to turn first to his fellow

countrymen, whom he loved so dearly, and Peter, John, and James, according to their letters, also worked among the Christians from the Gentiles. But it was still a division that generally drew boundaries and provided relief and freedom of work for both parties.

Secondly, the apostles added co-workers to assist them in their many labors. Such co-workers included Barnabas (Acts 13:2), Mark and Luke (Acts 12:25, 13:5; Philemon 1:24), Timothy (Romans 16:21, 1 Thess. 3:2), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), Silas (Acts 15:40), and others (Romans 16:9; Philippians 2:25, 4:3; Col. 4:10-11). They also, like Philip (Acts 8:5, 40; 21:8), bore the name of evangelists (Ephesians 4:11, 2 Tim. 4:5). Additionally, they received help from prophets, who held no particular office but received a special gift from God to instruct the church and build it up in the truth, such as Agabus (Acts 11:28, 21:10) and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). These prophets were instrumental in the church, as evidenced by passages like 1 Corinthians 12:28, 14:4, 22-25, and Ephesians 4:11.

All these offices—of apostles, prophets, and evangelists—have ceased as their bearers have passed away and, by the nature of their calling, have not been succeeded by others. They were essential in the foundational period when the church was being established on earth. However, their labor has not been in vain in the Lord. For, firstly, they indeed laid the foundation of the church on Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Secondly, their testimony, preserved in the books of the New Testament—in the Gospels, Epistles, Acts, and Revelation—endures within the church to this day. Through that testimony, the church is empowered to continue steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42). The apostles'

spoken and written word preserves and sustains the unity of the church, not only across the world but throughout the ages.

As the apostles received aid in overseeing the universal church through the special offices of prophets and evangelists, so they were supported in the care of each local church through the ministry of elders and deacons. Initially, the apostles themselves distributed the gifts of mercy (Acts 4:37, 5:2), but as the congregation grew, they could no longer manage this work alone. In response to a dispute regarding daily ministrations, they proposed that seven men, full of faith and the Holy Spirit, be chosen to oversee the ministry of the tables (Acts 6:1-6). There has been much debate about whether this passage describes the institution of the deacon's office; it is possible that the ministry of the seven men originally encompassed more duties than the later deaconate. Nonetheless, it is clear that the apostles retained the ministry of the word and prayer for themselves (Acts 6:4), while the seven were entrusted with the service of the tables, managing the common meals (often concluded with Holy Communion) and distributing food, drink, and monetary gifts to the poor.

This deaconate ministry was later adopted in other churches. We find references to deacons in Philippi (Phil. 1:1) and Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:8), as well as in passages such as Romans 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 (helpers). In 1 Timothy 3:8ff, Paul enumerates the qualifications required of deacons. The apostles in Jerusalem had already set a precedent by proposing the selection of seven men, outlining their required qualities and service, with the congregation choosing them. Ultimately, it was the apostles who appointed them through the laying on of hands and entrusted them with their office.

Alongside the deacons were the elders. The origins of their office are not explicitly detailed, but considering the Jewish practice of being governed by elders, both civilly and in the synagogues, it is unsurprising that some members of the congregation were entrusted with oversight and discipline. Elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30, where they received the gifts that Barnabas and Saul brought for the brethren in Judea. In Acts 15:2ff, they participate with the apostles in the council at Jerusalem, convened to address the regulation of missionary work among Jews and Gentiles.

The office of elder was also swiftly introduced into other churches. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every congregation they founded on their missionary journeys (Acts 14:23). We find them in Ephesus (Acts 20:28) and in Philippi (Phil. 1:1), under the name of overseers, and perhaps under the designation of governors (1 Cor. 12:28), or pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11). This is further confirmed in passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:12, 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, Romans 12:8, Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24, 1 Peter 5:1-2, James 5:14-16, 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:17-22, and Titus 1:5-9. In 1 Timothy 3:1ff. and Titus 1:6-9, Paul outlines their qualifications, instructing Titus to appoint elders in every congregation (Titus 1:5). These elders were tasked with overseeing the congregation (Acts 20:28, Eph. 4:11, 1 Pet. 5:2). Even within the apostolic age, there emerged a distinction between elders who ruled and those who also labored in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17, Heb. 13:7, 1 Pet. 4:11, 1 Tim. 3:2).

This simple arrangement for the governance of the congregation established by the apostles included two primary offices: elder and deacon. The elder's role was divided into teaching elders and ruling elders. These offices were ordained by the apostles, who set the

requirements for service. In selecting individuals, the apostles considered the congregation's input and formally installed them through the laying on of hands. There was no notion of a governing power separate from Christ. Christ alone is the head of the congregation (Eph. 1:22), the only Master (Matt. 23:8, 10), and Lord (John 13:13, 1 Cor. 8:6, Phil. 2:11). Therefore, any power in the church must come from Him and remain bound to Him.

This principle applied to the extraordinary offices of apostle, prophet, and evangelist, instituted by Christ in the church's foundational period. These roles received their authority directly from Christ, not the church, but were to be exercised in service to the church (Matt. 20:25-27, 1 Pet. 5:3).

In an even stronger sense, this principle applies to the ordinary offices that continue in the church today. Pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons derive their authority from Christ, who instituted these offices and continually upholds them. He grants individuals with the necessary gifts and allows the congregation to appoint them (1 Cor. 12:28, Eph. 4:11). The purpose of these offices is to ensure the congregation persists in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42).

However, this straightforward and beautiful arrangement began to deteriorate soon after the apostolic era. The so-called episcopate (bishop's office) emerged. In the New Testament and early post-apostolic writings, the terms elder (presbyter) and bishop (episcopus) referred to the same individuals. The bishopric was simply a description of the supervisory and disciplinary duties

assigned to the elected elders (Acts 20:17-28, Titus 1:5-7, 1 Pet. 5:1-2).

In the early second century, some churches began to distinguish between the bishop (episcopus) and the elders (presbyters) and deacons. The bishop was elevated above the elders and deacons, considered the bearer of a special ministry, the successor of the apostles, the guardian of pure doctrine, and the cornerstone of the church. This hierarchical path led to the stripping of the elders and deacons of their autonomy, reducing the faithful to mere laymen. The bishops, now viewed as priests, were placed high above the congregation, culminating in the elevation of the Bishop of Rome to the sovereign of the whole church. As the successor of Peter, he was believed to hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven, act as Christ's substitute on earth, and, as Pope, wield divine, infallible power in matters of faith and life.

This development of priestly government in the church of Christ met resistance and opposition at every step. However, it was not until the Reformation that this conflict reached a point where Christianity was divided into two large parts. Some, like the Anabaptists, went to the other extreme, considering all office, authority, and power as contrary to the church of Christ. Others, like the Anglican Church in England, severed ties with the Pope in Rome but retained episcopal government. The Lutherans restored the preaching ministry but gradually left the government of the church and the care of the poor entirely to the civil authorities. Various systems of church government coexisted, and to this day, there is as much difference between the many Christian denominations in the organization and government of the church as in its confession.

Calvin is to be honored for restoring the office of elder and deacon alongside that of preacher, in his battle against the Roman Catholic priesthood. Through him, the church regained its territory and independent task. For its independence, for the free exercise of its discipline, and for the pure maintenance of the ministry of Word and Sacrament, he fought a hard battle for years. Yet, with that church, he did not primarily think of the offices and their bearers, nor of the church as an institution, but he saw it as an assembly of Christ-followers. By their confession and conduct, they had to prove that they were God's people, all personally anointed with Christ as prophets, priests, and kings. The Church is simultaneously a mother and community of the faithful. It is more than a crowd gathering on Sundays to listen to preaching; it is a community exerting its influence both within and without throughout the week. The preaching ministry is but one of the ministries. Alongside it is the eldership, which must exercise supervision and discipline through personal visits to homes; the deaconhood, which must show mercy to all the poor and sick; and the doctorhood, which must develop, teach, and defend the truth.

And while each church is independent, owing its origin, existence, gifts, and power, offices, and ministries to Christ alone, it is nonetheless intimately connected with all other churches standing on the same foundation. This was the way in the apostolic age. Every congregation, however small and feeble, was a congregation of Christ, His body, and temple.

Christ, His body, and temple; yet each congregation was also woven into the spiritual fabric of all congregations, without needing to first judge or decide. All churches collectively form one Church, as stated

in Matthew 16:18; they are all subject to the authority of the apostles, who lay the foundation of the entire Church by their word, as declared in Ephesians 2:20. They are united in life and confession, sharing one baptism, one faith, one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father, who is above all and in all, Ephesians 4:3-6. They maintain fellowship with one another through traveling brethren, such as Aquila and Priscilla, Acts 18:2, 18, Romans 16:3, 2 Timothy 4:19, through reciprocal greetings, Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, through mutual acts of love, Acts 11:29, 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2 Corinthians 8:1, 4, 9:1, Galatians 2:10, and by sharing the letters written by the apostles, Colossians 4:16. They also consult and decide together on matters of common concern, Acts 15.

Among all systems of church government, the Presbyterian system, as restored by Calvin, closely mirrors that of the apostolic age.

All the services and offices instituted by Christ in His congregation find their center in the Word. He bestowed upon His disciples no temporal power, Matthew 20:25-27, nor priestly dominion, 1 Peter 5:3, for they are all spiritual men, anointed with the Holy Spirit, 1 John 2:20, forming a royal priesthood, 1 Peter 2:9. The gifts and offices serve only that one might love another, Romans 13:8, Galatians 5:13. The weapons of their warfare are spiritual, 2 Corinthians 10:4; they are the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, Ephesians 6:14-17.

Therefore, the Word is the only sign by which the truth and purity of Christ's Church can be recognized. By the Word, all true members of the congregation are reborn, brought to faith and conversion,

cleansed, sanctified, gathered, and confirmed. They are called to keep that Word, John 8:31, 14:23, to examine it, John 5:39, to test spirits according to it, 1 John 4:1, and to avoid those who do not teach it, Galatians 1:8, Titus 3:10, 2 John 9. The Word of God, as Calvin expressed, is the soul of the Church.

This Word is not given exclusively to the Church as an institution or to office bearers, but to all believers, John 5:39, Acts 17:11, so that they may have hope through patience and the comfort of the Scriptures, Romans 15:4, and may also teach and admonish one another, Romans 12:7, 8, Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 10:24, 25. While Rome misunderstood this, the Reformation returned the Bible to all hands, opening a source of teaching and instruction for family and school, science and art, society and state, and every believer. Additionally, God provided a ministerial ministry for the Word, giving pastors and teachers (1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 5:17, 2 Timothy 2:2) to minister the Word in public and in homes (Acts 20:20), offering milk to the young and solid food to mature members of the congregation (1 Corinthians 3:2, Hebrews 5:12, 1 Peter 2:2), according to the needs of each people and age, each congregation and believer (Acts 20:20, 27, 2 Timothy 2:15, 4:2). The ministry ensures the Word is preserved, translated, explained, spread, defended, and preached to all mankind, thus maintaining the Church as a pillar and ground of the truth, 1 Timothy 3:15.

This Word is confirmed in the sacraments, which are signs and seals of the covenant of grace, strengthening faith. In the Old Testament, God instituted circumcision (Genesis 17:7) and the Passover (Exodus 12:7ff) for this purpose. Circumcision signified spiritual purification, Romans 2:28, 29, and the Passover pointed to Christ as the

sacrificial lamb, John 1:29, 36, 19:33, 36. Both were fulfilled by Christ in His suffering and death, Colossians 2:11, 1 Corinthians 5:7, and in the New Testament by baptism (Matthew 28:19) and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:17ff). These two sacraments, traditionally called mysteries (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1), do not contain God's grace materially but remind and confirm the grace bestowed through the Holy Spirit in believers' hearts. They represent the whole covenant of grace and Christ Himself, not dispensing benefits apart from faith. Instituted for believers, they affirm their share in Christ, following rather than preceding the Word, not bestowing special grace apart from the Word, but built upon the covenant of grace from God's side and man's assent.

Baptism serves as a distinct sign and seal of the blessings of forgiveness, as seen in Acts 2:38 and 22:16, and of regeneration, according to Titus 3:5. It marks an incorporation into the fellowship with Christ and His Church, as stated in Romans 6:4. Hence, baptism is not solely administered to adults who are brought to Christ through missionary work, but also to the children of believers. These children are included in the covenant of grace alongside their parents, as affirmed in Genesis 17:7, 10, Matthew 18:2, 3, 19:14, 21:16, and Acts 2:39. They belong to the Church, as noted in 1 Corinthians 7:14, and are part of the fellowship with the Lord, as described in Ephesians 6:1 and Colossians 3:20. When these children mature, they are called upon to publicly profess their faith, thereby affirming their personal commitment to the covenant of grace. They are then expected to examine themselves and discern the body and blood of the Lord, as instructed in 1 Corinthians 11:28. Consequently, they join the congregation in proclaiming the Lord's death until His return, thus strengthening their fellowship with Christ. Although

baptism and the Lord's Supper share the same covenantal content and both assure the forgiveness of sins, the Lord's Supper differs in that it serves as a sign and seal not of incorporation, but of deepening and strengthening the fellowship with Christ and His members, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17.

In addition to the ministry of Word and sacrament, the Church exercises discipline and offers acts of mercy. Discipline, often referred to as the power of the keys, is initially entrusted to Peter, as seen in Matthew 18:18 and John 20:20, and subsequently to the whole Church in its official capacity, as noted in Matthew 18:7, 1 Corinthians 5:4, and 2 Thessalonians 3:14. The Church, through its ministers, conveys the assurance of blessing to the righteous and warns the wicked of impending judgment, as articulated in Isaiah 3:10-11. This discipline is particularly exercised through pastoral home visits, which have supplanted the Roman confessional practice and are grounded in apostolic precedent, as seen in Matthew 10:12, John 21:15-17, Acts 20:20, and Hebrews 13:17. Moreover, discipline is enforced through specific admonitions, which, if unheeded, may lead to excommunication, as outlined in Matthew 18:15-17, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5:2, 9-13, 2 Corinthians 2:5-10, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, Titus 3:10, 2 John 10, and Revelation 2:2.

While the Church upholds the holiness of the Lord and removes persistent sinners, it also shows compassion to the poor and sick, attending to both their spiritual and physical needs. This follows the example of Christ Himself, as recounted in Matthew 11:5, and the disciples' commitment to such deeds, as encouraged in Matthew 5:42-45, 6:1-4, 25:34ff, and Mark 14:7. They are to meet the needs of the saints, distribute aid with simplicity, show mercy cheerfully, visit

widows and orphans in their distress (James 1:27), pray for the sick (James 5:14), and generally bear one another's burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ, as stated in Romans 12:8, 15, and Galatians 6:2.

Faith and love are the strength of the Lord's Church, anchoring its hope. Amidst a world lost in uncertainty and despair, the Church proclaims its joyful expectation: "I believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the flesh, and eternal life."

Study Questions for Reflection

1. How does the chapter describe the relationship between the individual believer and the Church community, and why is this relationship significant?

- Reflect on the analogy of the believer being part of a family and a new people, and how this shapes our understanding of belonging to the Church.

2. In what ways does the Church serve as a support system for individual believers, according to Bavinck?

- Consider the practical implications of the Church as a community that provides strength and encouragement to its members.

3. How does the concept of election tie into the formation and unity of the Church?

- Reflect on the idea that election encompasses a vast multitude and how this informs our understanding of the Church's universal nature.

4. What role does the covenant of grace play in the life of the Church and its members?

- Discuss the significance of the covenant of grace in establishing the Church as a community of believers and in the transmission of faith across generations.

5. How does Bavinck explain the separation of the Church from national and tribal identities, particularly in the context of Israel and the early Christian Church?

- Consider the transformation from a nationalistic view of God's people to a more inclusive and spiritual community in Christ.

6. What is the significance of the term "ekklesia" for the Christian congregation, and how does it differentiate from the term "synagogue"?

- Reflect on the historical and theological implications of Christians adopting the term "ekklesia" for their assemblies.

7. How does the New Testament portrayal of the Church as the body of Christ and the bride of the Lamb inform our understanding of its purpose and mission?

- Discuss the metaphors used to describe the Church and their relevance to its identity and function.

8. What challenges and changes did the early Church face in maintaining unity amidst diversity, and how were these addressed?

- Reflect on the issues of unity and diversity within the early Church and the apostolic efforts to preserve harmony among believers.

9. How does the concept of the Church as a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" impact the way believers live and interact with the world?

- Consider the practical and ethical implications of this identity for the daily lives of Christians.

10. In what ways does the chapter emphasize the importance of both the visible and invisible aspects of the Church, and how should this shape our understanding of its nature and mission?

- Reflect on the dual nature of the Church as both a tangible community and a spiritual reality, and how this influences its role in God's plan.

24. Eternal Life.

The end and destination of things, much like their origin and essence, lie shrouded in an impenetrable darkness to the probing intellect of man. Those who place their hope in science to illuminate

these profound mysteries will inevitably find themselves aligning with a scholar of the modern age: the purpose and ultimate aim of history are unknown and remain a mystery to all.

Yet, mankind continuously strives to answer these perplexing questions or to dismiss and eradicate them from the human consciousness. Not too long ago, many scholars staunchly held to materialism, proclaiming boldly that death marked the end of all, and that belief in an afterlife was mere folly. A prominent voice among them declared that belief in an existence beyond the grave was the last enemy science must confront and, if possible, vanquish. They asserted that this visible and tangible world was all that existed, with no beginning and no end, perpetually revolving in an eternal cycle. The practical outgrowth of this shallow and bleak doctrine was the dismissal of all arguments for eternity as meaningless, urging people to indulge in the pleasures of this sensual life: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

Many still live and think in this manner, yet there has been a significant shift in the prevailing attitudes. Upon closer scrutiny, the questions surrounding eternity have proven neither foolish nor trivial, nor as easily dismissed as once believed. The study of world religions has unveiled that belief in immortality is intrinsic to all humanity, found even among the most primitive and uncivilized tribes. A renowned national scientist, having garnered considerable respect in this field, recently affirmed that belief in immortality is ubiquitous, present among all peoples at every stage of development, untouched by philosophical skepticism or other suppressive forces. This belief is not merely an aspect of life but an integral part of human existence, intrinsically linked with religion. Indeed, all

peoples operate under the conviction that man is inherently immortal, and it is death, not immortality, that requires explanation. Death is universally perceived as something unnatural, often attributed to the malevolence of hostile spirits. Many cultures hold that there was once a time when death did not exist, and unbroken life was the natural state of mankind.

In the pagan world, a plethora of divergent conceptions regarding the state of souls post-mortem prevailed. Some held that souls lingered with the bodies in the tombs, maintaining a spectral intercourse with the living, influencing their destinies, and occasionally manifesting themselves. Others posited that, following death, all souls congregate in a vast underworld, leading a shadowy existence or even lapsing into complete unconsciousness and slumber. A prevalent belief also maintained that souls, upon departure from the human form, transmigrate into another body, assuming the form of a tree, an animal, another human, or a higher being, based on their earthly conduct. Moreover, the notion of immortality was often nuanced to suggest that the righteous and the wicked faced divergent fates and continued their existence in disparate realms. These varied perspectives on the afterlife, coupled with the diverse burial or cremation rites and services rendered to the dead, often saw entire heathen religions practically absorbed in ancestor veneration. Sometimes, the focus was solely on the post-mortem state of the souls; yet, at times, it extended to eschatological visions wherein the ultimate triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, and heavenly dominion over earthly and subterranean powers was anticipated.

All these heathen conceptions, which Christianity sought to either vanquish or purify, have resurfaced in modern times, garnering a multitude of adherents. The insufficiency of materialism soon became apparent, driving many to the opposite extreme; humanity, unchanged in its essence, cannot endure without hope. The belief in the continued existence of souls post-mortem, their apparitions and revelations to the living, their immediate reincarnation contingent upon earthly conduct, and their subsequent development in new forms, is now heralded in many circles as the pinnacle of contemporary wisdom. The phenomena of invoking, venerating, and fearing the dead persist; for many, spiritism has supplanted the worship of the one true God.

It is a notable sign of the times that this spiritism is intimately entwined with the doctrine of evolution. Initially, this connection might appear incongruous; how can one who posits human evolution from animals simultaneously believe in the "survival of souls post-mortem"? Yet, upon closer examination, the link appears straightforward and natural. For if, in the past, life emerged from death, the soul from metabolism, humanity from the animal, why should it be impossible for humanity to ascend further, not only on earth but also beyond the grave? If life can arise from death, death might lead to a higher form of life. If an animal could evolve into a human, then a human might ascend to become an angel. With the notion of evolution, everything seems possible and explicable.

However, as this edifice of hope is constructed, its very foundation begins to quake.

The proponents of the aforementioned theories of immortality and development often reject or disregard the Scriptural teachings on death, the grave, judgment, and punishment. They view death not as a penalty for sin but as a mere transition to a different, higher life. They dismiss the concept of divine judgment, asserting instead that each individual merely bears the consequences of their own actions. Hell, in their view, holds no place since everyone is thought to be part of an ongoing developmental process, ultimately culminating in a higher state of being after varying periods of wandering. Yet, the critical question of whether an eternal life—a life of unbroken bliss and glory—remains possible is conspicuously absent. In their fervent opposition to Christian doctrines of death, the grave, judgment, and punishment, they have neglected to consider whether the hope of eternal life, of endless salvation, is also thereby forfeited. When this question arises, it becomes evident that, in the fervor of battle, the very expectation of eternal life has been obliterated. The same blade that sought to excise all fear from the human heart has simultaneously extinguished all hope in the human soul.

It is evident that if development is the sole, all-encompassing law governing the world and humanity, both in this life and beyond, the expectation of eternal life is stripped of any firm foundation. The notion that everything will ultimately be rectified is merely speculative and lacks support from Scripture, conscience, nature, or history. Even if this conjecture were momentarily valid, such a state could never be permanent. The very law of development that shaped past conditions and brought about the current state would inevitably lead to another change. The theory of development offers no point of rest, no definitive end or goal; the salvation it promises is negated the moment it is achieved. An eternal, blissful life is incompatible

with this view. Consequently, some, recognizing the impossibility of a fixed point, have reverted to the ancient pagan doctrine of the eternal recurrence of all things, proposing it as the resolution to the world's conundrum. Once the present world reaches the pinnacle of its development, it collapses, and everything recommences from the beginning. The flood follows the ebb, which in turn gives rise to another flood; development is succeeded by retrogression, initiating another phase of development. This cycle continues endlessly; there is only time, not eternity; only motion, not rest; only becoming, not being; only creation, no Creator, who is, who was, and who is to come.

This affirms the scriptural assertion that those without Christ are estranged from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and being without God in the world. Though they may guess, wish, and persist in their hopes, they lack the solid foundation and certainty of the Christian hope.

Turning to Israel, however, ushers us into an entirely different realm of thought. The Old Testament does not mention the so-called immortality of the soul, nor does it provide any evidence for it; yet it presents concepts of life and death that are unique and cast the future in a different light.

In Scripture, death is never equated with destruction and non-existence. Instead, dying and being dead are contrasted with the rich and full life initially intended for humanity in fellowship with God on earth. When a person dies, both body and soul are affected. The deceased no longer belong to the earth but reside in the realm of the dead, believed to be in the earth's depths, in the lowest regions

beneath the waters and the mountains' foundations (Num. 16:30, Deut. 32:22, Job 26:5, Ps. 63:10). The dead continue to exist there, but their existence scarcely merits the name of life and resembles non-being (Job 7:21, 14:10, Ps. 39:14). They are weakened and powerless (Ps. 88:5, Isa. 14:10), living in silence (Job 3:13, 18, Ps. 94:17, 115:17), in a land of darkness (Job 10:21-22) and destruction (Job 26:6, 28:22). Everything that characterizes life ceases there; God and man are no longer seen (Is. 38:11); the Lord is neither believed in nor thanked (Ps. 6:6, 115:17), His virtues are no longer proclaimed, and His miracles are no longer witnessed (Ps. 88:11-13). The dead know nothing, possess no wisdom or knowledge; they perform no work and have no share in anything occurring under the sun (Job 14:21, Eccles. 9:5-6, 10).

Thus, death was perceived by the devout in Israel as a comprehensive exile from the realm of life and light. Conversely, life was seen as the embodiment of salvation and blessing. Life was not conceived in a purely philosophical sense as mere existence. Instead, life, in its essence, encompassed a plenitude of blessings: foremost, fellowship with God, but also communion with His people and the land He bestowed upon them. Life is the full and rich existence of man, uniting soul and body, in oneness with God and harmony with his surroundings. It includes bliss and glory, virtue and happiness, peace and joy. Had man remained obedient to God's command, he would have experienced this abundant life and not known death (Gen 2:17). No separation would have occurred between his soul and body, and no bond would have been broken that bound him to God, to mankind, and to the earth. Man would have lived eternally in the rich community in which he was originally placed, immortal as man in the unity and fullness of his being.

Even though death entered the world because of sin, God, in His grace, re-establishes fellowship with mankind and establishes His covenant with Israel. In this covenant, the full fellowship man originally enjoyed is restored in principle. The covenant of the Old Testament reinstated fellowship with God, and consequently, fellowship with His people and His land. Fellowship with God is the foremost aspect of the covenant; without it, life cannot be conceived. God covenanted with Abraham and his descendants, declaring: "I will be your God and the God of your seed" (Gen 17:7). He led Israel out of Egypt and entered into a covenant with them at Sinai (Ex 19:5, 20:2, Ezek 16:8).

For Israel and each member of that people, life and joy are found solely in fellowship with the Lord. The wicked did not understand this, broke the covenant, and sought life and peace in their own ways. They abandoned the fountain of living water and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that could hold no water (Jer 2:13). The Lord was their portion, their rock and stronghold, their shield and high place (Ps 16:5, 18:3). His mercy was better than life itself (Ps 63:4). He was their chief blessing, besides whom nothing in heaven or earth could please them (Ps 73:25). Though forsaken by all and pursued by enemies, they rejoiced in Him and exulted in the God of their salvation (Hab 3:18).

In this fellowship with God, they overcame all the miseries of earthly life, as well as the fear of the grave, the terror of death, and the darkness of the realm of the dead. While the godless may enjoy temporary prosperity, they ultimately perish and come to an end (Ps 73:18-20). Their path leads to death (Prov 8:36, 11:19). For the righteous, however, the fear of the Lord is a fountain of life (Prov

8:35, 14:27). God saves them repeatedly in this life and holds power over the realm of the dead. With His Spirit, He is present even there (Ps 139:7-8), and nothing is hidden from Him, whether in the depths of the earth or the hearts of men (Job 26:6, 38:17, Prov 15:11). The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and raises up again (Deut 32:39, 1 Sam 2:6, 2 Kings 5:7). He can take Enoch and Elijah to Himself without death (Gen 5:24, 2 Kings 2:11) and restore life to those who have died (1 Kings 17:22, 2 Kings 4:34, 13:21). He can nullify death and completely triumph over it by raising the dead (Job 14:13-15, 19:25-27, Hos 6:2, 13:14, Isa 25:8, 26:19, Ezek 37:11-12, Dan 12:2).

But even though the believers of the Old Testament realized to a greater or lesser degree that their fellowship with the Lord could not be destroyed or even broken off by their death, their descent into the pit, and their return to the state of death, they generally lived in a different circle of thought. Their feelings were so completely different from ours. When we think of the future, we almost only envision our own death and the acceptance of our souls into heaven. But the Israelites had a conception of life far richer than ours. In their consciousness, fellowship with God was inseparable from fellowship with His people and His land. The true, full life was the victory over all separation, the restoration and confirmation of that rich community in which man was originally created. The covenant was established by God not with a single person, but with His people, and furthermore with the land, which He had given to that people as an inheritance. Therefore, death had only been completely conquered and life brought to light when the Lord Himself came to dwell among His people in the future, cleansed them of all unrighteousness,

granted them victory over all their enemies, and made them live safely in a land of prosperity and peace.

That is why the faithful Israelite's eye rarely focused on the end of his own personal life but usually stretched farther out into the future of his country and his people. He always felt himself to be part of the whole, as a member of his family, his tribe, his people, of that people with whom God had established His covenant and whom He could never abandon or destroy by virtue of that covenant. And in the future of that people, the believer among Israel found his own future assured; his immortality and eternal life found their guarantee in his participation in the theocracy. There might be a day in the Lord's wrath, but there would be a life in His mercy; the present might seem as if God had forgotten His people and their right before Him, but after the chastisement, God would return and establish a new covenant that could never be broken. The longing of the souls of Israel's pious people for that future stretched out; they were a people of hope, and the promise of the Messiah was the core of their expectations.

All those hopes had their foundation in the covenant that God had established with His people. Already the law of that covenant implied that Israel, if they disobeyed the voice of the Lord and walked in their own ways, would be punished severely by the Lord and visited with all kinds of plagues; precisely because they were known by Him from all the nations of the earth, He would visit all unrighteousness upon them (Amos 3:2). But this chastisement would be temporary; after it was finished the Lord would have mercy on His people again and let them share in His salvation (Lev. 26:42 ff, Deut. 4:29 ff, 30:1-10, 32:15-43).

For God cannot forget His covenant (Lev. 26:42); He chastises His people with moderation and leaves them only for a little time (Isa. 27:7, 54:7-8, Jer. 30:11); He loves His people with an everlasting love (Micah 7:18-20). He owes it to His own name, to His fame among the Gentiles, to redeem His people at the end of the time of punishment and to make them triumph over all their enemies (Deut. 32:27, Isa. 43:25, 48:9, Ezek. 36:22).

There will, therefore, be a "day of the Lord," a great and fearful day (Joel 2:11, 31; Mal. 4:5), when the Lord shall have mercy on His people and take vengeance on His enemies. This kingdom, which He shall establish, will not emerge through the gradual development of human moral strength, but will descend from above, from the heavens, and be brought to earth by the Lord's Anointed. The promise of such an Anointed One traces back in Israel's history to ancient times. Even in Paradise, the enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent was proclaimed, and victory was promised to the former (Genesis 3:15). To Abraham, it was said that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in him and in his seed (Gen. 12:3, 26:4). Judah was praised above his brethren, for from him would come forth the Shiloh, whom the nations would obey (Gen. 49:10).

This promise took a more definite shape when David was appointed king over all Israel and received the assurance that his house would endure forever (2 Sam. 7:6, 23:5). Prophecy elaborated on this promise; the Ruler, through whom God would establish His kingdom, would be born of David's royal house in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:1-2). He would spring forth as a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:1-2), as a branch from his roots (Isa. 4:2; Jer. 23:5-6, 33:14-17;

Zech. 3:8, 6:12). He would grow up in humility (Isa. 7:14-17), be meek and lowly, riding on a donkey's colt (Zech. 9:9), and as the suffering servant of the Lord, bear the iniquities of His people (Isa. 53). Yet this humble son of David is also David's Lord (Ps. 110:1; Matt. 22:43), the Anointed One par excellence, the true King of Israel, who unites the prophetic and priestly offices with the royal dignity (Deut. 18:15; Ps. 110; Isa. 11:2, 53:1ff.; Zech. 5:1ff., 6:13; Mal. 4:5). He is the Ruler to whom all nations shall bow (Gen. 49:10; Ps. 2, 72), and He will bear the name Immanuel, the Lord our Righteousness, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 7:14, 9:6; Jer. 23:6).

The kingdom which this Messiah comes to establish shall be a realm of righteousness and peace, overflowing with spiritual and temporal blessings. The Psalms and prophets extol the glory of this Messianic Kingdom. Through His Anointed One, the Lord will restore His people from exile and grant them true repentance. Many shall perish in the judgment He executes upon His people (Am. 9:8-10; Hos. 2:13; Ezek. 20:33ff.), but a remnant, according to the election of grace, shall remain (Isa. 4:3, 6:13; Jer. 3:14; Zeph. 3:21; Zech. 13:8-9). This remnant shall be a holy people unto the Lord, betrothed to Him forever (Hos. 1:10, 2:15, 18, 22; Isa. 4:3, 11:9). He will establish a new covenant with them, forgive their sins, cleanse them from all impurity, give them new hearts, inscribe His law upon them, pour out His Spirit upon them, and dwell among them (Mic. 5:11ff.; Joel 2:28; Isa. 44:21ff., 43:25; Jer. 31:31; Ezek. 11:19, 36:25ff.).

And with these spiritual benefits shall come manifold temporal blessings. There shall be no more war; swords will be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and all shall sit in peace

under their vine and fig tree. The land will yield its abundance; animals will possess a different nature; heaven and earth shall be renewed. There will be no more sickness, sorrow, or mourning, and death will be swallowed up in victory. Even the dead Israelites will share in these triumphs, for they shall be brought back from the grave (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2), and the Gentiles, in the end, will acknowledge that the Lord is God and in Him they will bless and boast (Jer. 3:17, 4:2, 16:19; Ezek. 17:24). The saints shall possess dominion over all nations, Dan. 7:14, 27, and the Anointed King of David's house will reign from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth (Ps. 2:8, 22:28, 72:8ff.).

All these Old Testament promises found their fulfillment when Christ appeared in the flesh; for in His person and through His work, that kingdom of heaven was established on earth, which the pious of Israel had long awaited. He ratified the new and better covenant with His own blood, which the Lord had promised to His people in the latter days. On the day of Pentecost, He poured out the Spirit of grace and supplication upon the church, who would lead it into all truth and bring it to perfection until the end. Yet, what the prophecy of the old covenant had portrayed as a singular, grand vision, came to be realized progressively, not in a moment but over a protracted period, with each part unfolding in its due time. The New Testament reveals that the one coming of the Messiah anticipated by the prophets is divided into a first and a second advent. According to prophecy, the Messiah was to come both for redemption and for judgment—redemption for His people and judgment upon His enemies. But as this prophecy comes to fruition, it is evident that these two purposes are accomplished through distinct comings of Christ.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly affirmed that He had come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28), not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17, 12:47; 1 John 4:14). Concurrently, He also made it clear that the light He brought into the world would result in judgment, creating a division among men (John 3:19, 9:39). Furthermore, He foretold that He would return one day to judge the living and the dead (John 5:22, 27-29). He must first be crucified and killed, but He would rise again and ascend to where He was before (Matt. 16:21; John 6:62), and at the end, He would come again in glory to gather all nations before Him and judge them according to their deeds (Matt. 16:27, 24:30, 25:32).

There is a profound difference between these two comings. In the first, Christ came in the weakness of the flesh, in the form of a servant, to suffer and die for the sins of His people (Phil. 2:7-8). At His second coming, He will appear in great power and glory, as a conquering King (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 6:2, 19:11). However, these two comings are intrinsically linked; the first paves the way for the second. According to the Scriptures and the constitution of the kingdom of heaven, suffering precedes glory, the cross precedes the crown, and humiliation precedes exaltation (Luke 24:26).

At His first coming, Christ laid the foundation; at His second, He will bring the building of God to completion. This marks the beginning and the end of His Mediatorial Work. Because Christ is a perfect Savior, who accomplishes not only the potential but the actuality of salvation, He cannot, must not, and will not rest until He brings His redeemed, whom He purchased with His blood and renewed by His Spirit, to be where He is and to behold and share in His glory (John

14:3, 17:24). The Father has assigned Him a complete work, not a partial one; He must give eternal life to all whom the Father has given Him (John 6:39, 10:28), present His church to the Father without spot or wrinkle or any such blemish (Eph. 5:27), and hand over the kingdom to the Father when it is fully accomplished and perfected (1 Cor. 15:23-28).

Because the first and second comings of Christ are so intimately connected, and the one is inconceivable without the other, Scripture places little emphasis on the length or brevity of the interval between them. The temporal connection recedes far behind the objective one. The time between the two is often depicted as very short; believers in the New Testament are described as living at the end of the ages (1 Cor. 10:11), in the last times (1 Pet. 1:20), and in the last hour (1 John 2:18). They are said to have only a little time left to suffer (1 Pet. 1:6, 5:10), for the day is approaching (Heb. 10:25, 37), and the future is near. Paul did not consider it impossible that he and his fellow believers might yet experience Christ's second coming (1 Thess. 4:15, 1 Cor. 15:51).

However, Scripture does not offer a definitive doctrine on the timing of this future event, for it explicitly testifies that the day and hour of that future are hidden from men and angels, and have been determined by the Father by His own power (Matt. 24:36, Acts 1:7). Any attempt to calculate the time of this future is unauthorized and unfruitful (Acts 1:7), for the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night, at an hour which men do not know (Matt. 24:42-44, 1 Thess. 5:2, 4, 2 Pet. 3:10, Rev. 3:3, 16:15). The Lord has a different measure of time than we have; with Him, one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. His seeming slowness is long-suffering,

not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:8, 9).

What Scripture aims to teach us through these various statements about the interval is that the first and second comings of Christ are closely related. It is one work that the Father has entrusted to Christ, and that work spans all ages and encompasses the entire history of mankind. It began in eternity, continued in time, and ends again in eternity. The brief period that Christ lived on earth in the flesh is but a small part of the centuries over which He was appointed Lord and King. What He acquired then by His suffering and death, He applies to the church through His Word and Spirit from the moment of His ascension, and He completes it at His return. Indeed, He ascended to heaven to be closer to His own, to become more intimately associated with them, and to draw ever nearer to them. The time that elapses between His first and second comings is one continuous coming of Christ to the world.

Just as in the days of the Old Testament He preceded His coming in the flesh with various appearances and activities, so now He is preparing His second coming by the judgment and separation He brings about in the world of men through His Word and Spirit. It is one continual coming of Christ, of which New Testament believers are witnesses; they see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the power of God and coming on the clouds of heaven (Matt. 26:64). They perceive His coming in the preaching of His Word and in the working of His Spirit (John 14:18-20, 16:16, 19). Christ did not come to earth only once; He is always coming. He is the coming one and the one who is to come (Heb. 10:37, Rev. 1:4, 8).

For these reasons, New Testament believers looked forward to His return with great longing. Like the faithful of the Old Covenant, they seldom thought or spoke about their personal end at death; all their expectations were focused on the reappearance of Christ and the consummation of the Kingdom of God. They were aware that they were living in the day of fulfillment, the day that the prophecy of the Old Testament described as the great and terrible day of the Lord, stretching from the ascension to the return of Christ. The nearness with which they envisioned this second coming is but an expression of the absolute certainty with which they awaited it. Their strong faith is the root of their unshakable hope.

When Jesus dwelt among His disciples, He spoke extensively of faith and love but mentioned hope sparingly, for it was essential then to fix their minds wholly on His person and work. Yet, He abundantly promised His resurrection, ascension, the sending of the Spirit, and His return in glory. Though Christ's suffering and death momentarily plunged His disciples into dejection and disappointment (Luke 24:41), His resurrection rekindled them to a living hope (1 Peter 1:3, 21). Christ Himself became their hope, encompassing all their expectations (1 Tim. 1:1); for at His return, He will fulfill all His promises, bestowing perfect salvation and eternal life upon His confessors. Thus, they lived in hope, continually awaiting the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of their great God and Savior Jesus Christ (Tit. 2:13). In this hope, the entire suffering creation, subject to vanity, shares the longing to be liberated from the bondage of decay into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

Though New Testament believers concentrated almost wholly on Christ's return, there are nevertheless indications in the New Testament about the state of believers upon death. According to the Roman Church, only a few saints and martyrs attain sufficient merit through their good works on earth to be received directly into heaven upon death. The vast majority of believers, however, upon dying, proceed to purgatory—a place of purification—to atone for the temporal punishments their sins accrued, which they could not fully satisfy during their earthly lives.

Purgatory, contrary to some misunderstandings, is neither a place of conversion where the unbelievers and ungodly have another chance at salvation—they go immediately to hell—nor a place of purification and sanctification, for the souls there cannot acquire new virtues and merits. It is merely a place of punishment where the faithful, undergoing salvation, are tormented by material fire until their temporary punishments are fulfilled. According to Rome, besides the militant church on earth and the triumphant church in heaven, there exists also the suffering church in purgatory. The members of this suffering church can be aided in their torment through intercessions, good works, indulgences, and especially through the sacrifice of the Mass. These suffering souls, being closer to salvation, can also invoke the angels and saints in heaven for assistance.

Due to misunderstandings of this Roman doctrine, some have exaggerated its implications, advocating for a continuous purification of the faithful after death, unable to comprehend how believers, imperfect and prone to sin until their dying breath, could be rendered sinless and fit for heaven upon death. Others have gone further still, applying the concept of evolution to the afterlife,

positing that all individuals, regardless of their earthly lives, continue in a linear progression beyond the grave, possibly extending from prior existences. Death, in this view, is neither the cessation of life nor a penalty for sin but merely a transition to another mode of existence, akin to a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly. This development continues until all is rectified or returns to a prior state.

The Holy Scriptures know nothing of this dreary teaching. Everywhere they present it as if this earth were the only place of conversion and purification; there is no mention of a preaching of the Gospel beyond the grave, not even in Mt. 12:32, 1 Pet. Death, as the punishment for sin, signifies a total break from life here on earth. At the last judgment, the intermediate state is never considered; the judgment is solely based on what has been done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10). For in fellowship with God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, dying is no longer dying. The covenant God has graciously established with His own guarantees complete salvation and eternal life; God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. He who believes in Christ, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in Him shall never die eternally (John 11:25-26), neither shall he come into judgment, for he has passed from death unto life (John 5:24).

Therefore, at death, believers are immediately taken up with Christ into heaven. If justification and sanctification were the work of man, to be accomplished by his own power or through the power of a supernatural gift he had received, it would be incomprehensible that he could complete this work in the short time of this life. Then, a purgatory and continuing purification after this life would need to be accepted. But Christ has accomplished everything for His own; He

has not only borne their punishment and obtained the complete forgiveness of all their sins, but He has also fulfilled the law in their place and brought eternal life to light in immortality. He who believes is immediately freed from God's wrath and partakes of eternal life; at the same time, he is "ready for heaven." If he must remain on earth, it is not to complete himself and earn eternal life through good works, but it is necessary for the sake of his brothers, so that he may walk in the good works which God has prepared for him, and for which he was created in Christ (Phil. 1:24, Eph. 2:10). Even the suffering he still endures on earth is no longer a punishment or penance, but a fatherly chastisement that serves for his education (Heb. 12:5-11), a completion of the remnants of the tribulations that Christ continues to suffer in the body of His church, in order to build it up and confirm it in the truth (Col. 1:24).

Because of Christ's perfect work, heaven is open to believers immediately upon their death. They no longer bear the punishment for their sins in purgatory, for Christ has accomplished and gained everything. According to the parable in Luke 16, the poor Lazarus is taken by the angels into Abraham's bosom immediately after his death, to enjoy eternal salvation in fellowship with Abraham. When Jesus died on the cross, He commended His own spirit into the hands of His Father and promised the thief beside Him that he would be with Him that very day in paradise (Luke 23:43, 46). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, cried out to the Lord Jesus as he was being stoned and prayed that He would receive his spirit (Acts 7:59). Paul confidently asserts that when he is dissolved, he will be with Christ and dwell in the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8, Phil. 1:23). According to Rev. 6:8, 7:9, the souls of the martyrs and all the saved are in heaven, before the throne of God and the Lamb, clothed in white robes and

holding palm branches. For blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth; they rest from their labors on earth, and their deeds follow them (Rev. 14:13, Heb. 4:9); and they live and reign with Christ throughout the days until His return (Rev. 20:4, 6).

Although believers receive heavenly bliss at their death, in a certain sense this situation remains preliminary and incomplete. Their bodies still lie in the grave, subject to decay; soul and body are yet separated and do not jointly partake in eternal glory. As persons, believers in the interim state remain in the state of death, similar to how Jesus was after His death and before His resurrection, though His soul was in paradise. Thus, they are referred to as asleep or dead in Christ (1 Thess. 4:14, 16; 1 Cor. 15:18). Their death is called sleeping (John 11:11; 1 Cor. 11:30; Acts 13:36). All this signifies that the intermediate state is not the final state. Since Christ is a perfect Savior, He does not rest content with the salvation of the soul alone but also accomplishes the redemption of the body. The kingdom of God will be complete only when Christ has nullified all dominion, power, and strength, subjugated all enemies under His feet, and finally vanquished the last enemy, death.

Both heaven and earth long for the future, where the final battle will be fought and the ultimate victory secured. The souls of the martyrs in heaven cry out: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10). The Spirit and the bride on earth call, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!" (Rev. 22:17). Moreover, Christ Himself, both in heaven and on earth, prepares His own coming. In His Father's house, He prepares a place for His own; when it is ready, He will come again to receive them unto Himself, so that they may be where He is (John

14:2-3). On earth, He reigns as King, in the church by His grace, and in the world by His power, until He has gathered all His elect and subdued all His enemies (1 Cor. 15:25). He works unceasingly, proclaiming, "Behold, I come quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give every man according to his works" (Rev. 22:12, 20).

The history of the world, from Jesus' ascension to His return, is a continuous coming of Christ, a continual gathering of His congregation, a persistent subjugation of His enemies. Though we often fail to see it and understand it, Christ indeed is the Lord of time, the King of the ages; He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last (Rev. 22:13). Because the Father loved the Son, He created the world in Him, chose the congregation, and destined all who were given to Him to share in His glory (John 17:24).

The completion of the Kingdom of God is not the outcome of guided natural development, nor the product of human labor. Although the kingdom of heaven is likened to a mustard seed, leaven, and seed, it grows without the knowledge or consent of mankind. Paul may plant, and Apollos may water, but it is God alone who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6). Scripture knows no independent nature and no autonomous man; it is always God who sustains the world and directs history. Especially as the end draws near, He will intervene in an extraordinary manner, through the appearance of Christ, to bring history to a close and transform time into eternity.

That will be a momentous event when Christ, sent by the Father (Acts 3:20, 1 Tim. 6:15), shall appear on the clouds of heaven. As He ascended, taken up by a cloud that concealed Him from His disciples,

so shall He return from heaven to earth in like manner (Phil. 3:20). At His ascension, a cloud received Him out of their sight; on the clouds of heaven, which serve as His chariot, He will descend, Matt. 24:30, Rev. 1:7. He came the first time in the form of a servant, but His second advent shall be with great power and glory, Matt. 24:30, as the King of kings and Lord of lords, seated on a white horse, with a sharp sword proceeding from His mouth, surrounded by His angels and saints, Matt. 25:31, 1 Thess. 3:13, Rev. 19:14, heralded by the voice of an archangel and the trumpet of God, Matt. 24:31, 1 Cor. 15:52, 1 Thess. 4:16.

To convey the majesty and splendor of Christ's return, Scripture employs terms and imagery that transcend our understanding. It is often challenging to separate the reality from the depiction. Yet, this is certain: Christ shall return, the very same who was born of Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, was buried, rose again, and ascended into heaven. He returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. He who descended is the same who ascended above all heavens, that He might fill all things, Eph. 4:10. He who humbled Himself and was obedient unto death is the same who was exalted by God and given a name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father, Phil. 2:6-11. He who was once offered to bear the sins of many will appear a second time, apart from sin, to those who eagerly await Him for salvation, Heb. 9:28. This Maranatha is the congregation’s comfort; He who loved her from eternity and gave Himself for her shall come again to take her unto Himself and share His eternal glory with her. Her Savior and her Judge are one and the same.

However, this comfort is significantly undermined by the proponents of Chiliasm, or millenarianism, who advocate for a thousand-year earthly kingdom. They distinguish between a first and a second coming of Christ. At His initial reappearance, they assert, Christ will vanquish the anti-Christian powers, bind Satan, resurrect the deceased believers, gather His church—especially the converted people of Israel—and reign with them over the nations. After this millennial kingdom has persisted for a time, and Satan is released, they claim He will come a second time to resurrect all the dead, judge all people, and establish the consummated Kingdom of God on the renewed earth.

This distinction between Christ's two comings extends the end of world history by a considerable duration. When Christ appears on the clouds of heaven, the end of the ages is not yet, but rather an interim period of dominion and blessing, both spiritual and material. This period is difficult for even the Chiliasts to clearly define, and they remain deeply divided over the nature and length of this provisional state.

The fundamental error of Chiliasm lies in a misunderstanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. The election of Abraham and his seed was not intended to place Israel at the forefront of all nations in the future or in the consummated kingdom of God. Rather, it was to bless all the nations of the earth through Him who is the true seed of Abraham, Genesis 12:3, Galatians 3:8, 14. Israel was chosen not to the detriment of mankind but for its benefit. When Christ came, all the promises of the Old Testament began to find their fulfillment in Him and in His Church. These promises are not postponed for future fulfillment but are

progressively realized from Christ's first coming until His return. Christ, in His person, is the true prophet, priest, and king, the genuine servant of the Lord, and His sacrifice is the ultimate peace offering, the true circumcision, the true Passover, Romans 3:25, 1 Cor. 2:11, etc. Similarly, His Church is the true seed of Abraham, the true Israel, the people of God, the genuine temple, and the true Zion. All the blessings of Abraham and the promises of the Old Covenant belong to the Church through Christ and are being fulfilled throughout the ages, Romans 9:25-26, 11:17, 2 Cor. 6:16-18, Gal. 3:14, 29.

Just as Christ's life is divided into a state of humiliation and exaltation, so His Church and each believer must pass through suffering to enter the kingdom of glory. There is no separate suffering church in purgatory as Rome claims; the suffering church is the same as the militant church here on earth. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any indication that Christ's Church will again come to power and dominion in this age. On the contrary, a disciple is not above his master, nor a servant above his lord. If they persecuted Jesus, they will also persecute His disciples, John 15:19-20. The New Testament repeatedly suggests that towards the end of the ages, wickedness will increase, temptation and apostasy will spread, Matt. 24:37 ff., Luke 17:26 ff., 18:8, etc. The day of Christ is preceded by the great apostasy and the revelation of the man of sin, the antichrist, 2 Thess. 2:3 ff., whose coming is prepared by many false prophets and false Christs, Matt. 7:15, 24:5, 24, 1 Jn. 2:22, 4:3. Finally, he himself will appear, concentrating all his power in a worldly empire (the beast from the sea or the abyss, Rev. 11:7, 13:1-10), supported by false religion (the beast of the earth, Rev. 13:11-18),

headquartered in Babylon, Rev. 17 and 18, and launching a final, fierce assault against Christ and His kingdom.

By His glorious appearing, Rev. 19:11-16, Christ will decisively end the power of the beast from the sea and the earth, Rev. 19:20, and also bring Satan to his ultimate defeat. This occurs in two stages: first, Satan is seized and bound as the tempter of Christian nations, Rev. 20:1-3, cf. 12:7-11, and then as the tempter of the nations in the four corners of the earth, Rev. 20:7-10. Meanwhile, the faithful who have remained steadfast to Jesus' testimony and God's word unto death live and reign with Christ in heaven throughout this period (symbolically represented by the thousand years, Rev. 20:3-7), during which Satan is expelled from the nations among whom the Church spreads, and among the heathen nations a new power is organized against Christ's kingdom, Rev. 20:4, cf. 2:26, 3:21. This living and reigning with Christ constitutes the first resurrection; the rest of the dead, who followed the beast and his image, do not come to life until the second resurrection, and they face the second death, the punishment of hell. Those who partake in the first resurrection are priests of God and of Christ, Rev. 20:6, and after the resurrection and final judgment, they will be admitted as citizens into the new Jerusalem.

The advent of Christ will be succeeded by the resurrection of the dead. While this resurrection is generally ascribed to God, as evidenced in 1 Corinthians 6:14 and 2 Corinthians 1:9, it is more specifically the work of the Son. To Him, the Father has granted life in Himself (John 5:26), and He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). He has been endowed with the authority to summon all the dead from their graves by the power of His voice (John 5:28-29).

This universal resurrection is attested in various scriptures, such as Daniel 12:2, Matthew 10:28, Acts 24:15, and Revelation 20:12-13, affirming that both the righteous and the unrighteous will be raised.

Yet, a significant distinction exists between the two. The resurrection of the unrighteous evidences Christ's power and righteousness, while that of the righteous also showcases His mercy and grace. The former represents merely the reunification of soul and body for judgment (John 5:29), whereas the latter constitutes a resurrection unto life, a complete renewal of both soul and body in communion with and through the Spirit of Christ (John 5:29, Romans 8:11, Philippians 3:21). It is not necessarily indicated that these resurrections are separated by a temporal interval, but they differ qualitatively. Only the resurrection of the righteous is a blessed one, grounded in and guaranteed by Christ's own resurrection. He is the firstfruits, the firstborn from the dead, and those who belong to Him will follow at His coming (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

The comprehension of this reality, given the profound disruption caused by death, eludes us. Consequently, many deny the bodily resurrection, positing instead that the soul assumes a different body —human or animal, of finer or coarser material. They overlook, however, that the continuity of the soul's unity after death faces comparable objections. Thus, some propose the immortality of the soul merely as the persistence of the spirit, devoid of self-conscious unity. But this effectively nullifies true immortality; for if self-consciousness and memory are obliterated by death, the surviving entity is no longer the same person who lived on earth.

Self-consciousness in man entails both body and soul. The body is not a mere vessel for the spirit but integral to human essence. Therefore, Christ, as a perfect Savior, redeems the body just as He redeems the soul. Man, created in God's image and corrupted by sin, is redeemed in entirety by Christ—restored to the divine image and ushered into His kingdom. However, the resurrection body will not mirror the earthly body in outward form, accidental features, or material composition, but in essence alone. It is a spiritual body, transcending sexual differentiation (Matthew 22:30) and the need for sustenance (1 Corinthians 6:13), characterized by immortality, glorification, and being made like Christ's resurrected body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, Philippians 3:21).

The resurrection is succeeded by the judgment. From the beginning, since God set up enmity, there has been a division among the people between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, as Genesis 3:15 testifies. This division persisted in the Old Testament between Seth and Cain, Shem and Japheth, Israel and the nations, and within Israel itself between the children of promise and the children of the flesh. When Christ came to earth, He confirmed and intensified this division, though His first coming was not for the condemnation of the world, but for its salvation, as stated in John 3:17 and Matthew 10:34-36. Through His person and His testimony, He brought about a judgment, a division among the people, as described in John 3:19-21, which continues to the present day and reaches its consummation in the last judgment. There is a judgment traversing the history of all peoples, generations, families, and individuals; if we knew the secrets of the hearts of men, we would be far more convinced of this than we are now. Nevertheless, world history is not world judgment. There remains too much unpunished

injustice, too much unrewarded good, for our consciences to be satisfied with the present dispensation of time. The head and heart of mankind, reason and conscience, philosophy and religion, the whole history of the world cries out for a final, just, and decisive judgment.

And such a judgment we face, according to the testimony of Scripture. It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, as Hebrews 9:27 declares. Although God alone is the Lawgiver and Judge of all men, as Genesis 18:25, Psalm 50:6, Isaiah 33:22, and James 4:12 affirm, the final judgment is more specifically committed to Christ, to whom the Father has entrusted it because He is the Son of Man, as revealed in John 5:22, 27, Acts 10:42, 17:31, and Romans 14:9. Judging the living and the dead is the culmination of His work as Mediator, the final stage of His exaltation; it will manifest that He has perfectly accomplished everything the Father gave Him to do, that He has placed all His enemies under His feet, and has completely and eternally saved His entire congregation.

But when Christ executes the judgment, we also understand its nature: merciful and gracious, and at the same time strictly righteous. For He knows man and all that is in him; He discerns the hidden recesses of the heart and exposes all malice and deviation, but He also perceives the smallest and weakest principle of faith and love present there. He does not judge by appearances and does not regard the person of a man, but He judges by truth and righteousness. With the law and gospel as His standard, He will judge the works, as described in Matthew 25:35ff, the words, as noted in Matthew 12:36, and the thoughts of men, as stated in Romans 2:16 and 1 Corinthians 4:5, for nothing remains hidden and everything is revealed, as Matthew 6:4 and 10:26 proclaim. For all

those who can say with Peter, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you," this judgment is a source of comfort; but for all those who did not want this Christ to reign over them, it is a cause of fear and anxious dread.

This judgment brings about a complete and eternal separation between man and man. Just as there were among Israel those who said, "The Lord does not see, and the God of Jacob does not notice" (Psalm 94:7), and those who claimed, "He who does evil is good in the eyes of the Lord, and He is pleased with them," or asked, "Where is the God of justice?" (Malachi 2:17), so there are many today who placate themselves with the thought that there is no final judgment, that the possibility of conversion remains open even after this life and the end of the world's history, that therefore all men, and even the devils, will eventually partake in salvation, or that the wicked, who continue to resist, will finally be destroyed forever.

But both conscience and Scripture stand against these vain imaginations equally. The history of the world culminates in an eternal separation. In the night of judgment, two will be in one bed; one shall be taken and the other left; two women will be grinding at the mill, one shall be taken and the other left; two will be in the field, one shall be taken and the other left (Luke 17:34-36). The righteous shall enter into eternal life, but the unrighteous shall be consigned to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). There is a heaven of glory, but there is also a Gehenna, a hell, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:44), where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12), where there is darkness and destruction and death for all eternity (Matthew 7:13, 8:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Revelation 21:8). It is the place where God's

wrath will be revealed in all its horror (Romans 2:8, 9:22; Hebrews 10:31; Revelation 6:16-17).

Yet in this eternal punishment, which afflicts all the wicked, there will be a significant difference in degrees. The Gentiles, who did not have the Mosaic law but sinned against the law known to them by nature through their conscience, will perish without that law (Romans 2:12). Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon will fare more tolerably in the day of judgment than Capernaum and Jerusalem (Matthew 10:15, 11:22, 24). Those who knew the will of the Lord and did not do it will be beaten with many stripes (Luke 12:47). Even among evil spirits, there is a distinction in the degree of their wickedness (Matthew 12:45). Therefore, everyone will receive retribution according to their deeds (Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6; Revelation 22:12). The judgment will be so perfectly righteous that no one will be able to question it; each person's own conscience will say yes and amen to it. Just as Christ fights with spiritual weapons here on earth, so will He justify Himself in the consciences of all people on judgment day through His Word and Spirit.

For He is the faithful and true One, who does not make war except in righteousness; the sharp sword that issues from His mouth is the sword of the Word (Revelation 19:11, 15, 21).

Therefore, at the end of days, whether willingly or unwillingly, every knee shall bow in the name of Jesus, and every tongue confess that Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). It is not the punishment of the wicked that is in itself the final goal, but the glory of God, which is revealed in the victory of Christ over all His enemies. Sinners shall be removed from the earth, and the wicked

shall be no more. Praise the Lord, my soul, Hallelujah (Psalm 104:35).

After the final judgment and the expulsion of the wicked comes the renewal of the world. The Holy Scriptures often speak of this in very strong terms, declaring that heaven and earth will perish, vanish like smoke, become old as a garment, and that God will create new heavens and a new earth (Psalm 102:27; Isaiah 34:4, 51:6, 65:17, 66:22; Matthew 24:35; Hebrews 1:11-12; 2 Peter 3:10, 12-13; 1 John 2:17; Revelation 21:1). Yet, an entirely new creation is not to be thought of. The present heaven and earth pass away in their current form (1 Corinthians 7:31), and just as the old earth perished through the waters of the flood, they will be burned and cleansed by fire (2 Peter 3:6-7, 10). Similarly, as man is renewed in Christ but not destroyed and then recreated (2 Corinthians 5:17), so also the world remains preserved in its essence, even though it undergoes such a transformation in its form that it can be called a new heaven and a new earth. The world, as a whole, approaches the great day of its rebirth (Matthew 19:28).

In this new creation, God then establishes His kingdom. For Christ has completed the work entrusted to Him as Mediator; He has reigned as King until He has put all His enemies under His feet and raised up all those given to Him by the Father to eternal life. Thereafter, and forever, He remains the head of the church, giving it His glory to behold and filling it with His fullness (John 17:24; Ephesians 1:23). Yet, His work of redemption is finished; He has completed the kingdom and now surrenders it to God the Father, subjecting Himself as Mediator, who has subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:24, 28).

This kingdom then encompasses heaven and earth, bringing with it a wealth of spiritual and physical blessings. Both the Old and New Testaments clearly teach that the righteous shall inherit the earthly kingdom (Matthew 5:5). The whole creation will one day be freed from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Romans 8:21). The heavenly Jerusalem, which is now above and signifies the city where God dwells with His people, will then come down to earth (Revelation 21:2). In this new Jerusalem, in the immediate presence of God, there will be no more sin, no more sickness, and no more death. Even in the world of matter, glory and immortality will reign (1 Corinthians 15:42-44; Revelation 7:16-17, 21:4), as a revelation of the eternal, holy, and blissful life, which all citizens in the community of God share (1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 21:3, 22:1-5).

In that kingdom, there will be both unity and diversity. There are those who are small and those who are great (Revelation 22:12), those who are first and those who are last (Matthew 20:16); each one receives his own name and place (Revelation 2:17), according to the works of faith and love done on earth. For he that sows sparingly shall also reap sparingly, and he that sows bountifully shall also reap bountifully (2 Corinthians 9:6). There is reward in heaven for all the reproach a disciple of Jesus endures for His sake and for the work done in His name (Matthew 5:12, 6:1, 6, 18). Even the cup of cold water given to one of His little ones in the name of a disciple will not be forgotten by Jesus on Judgment Day; He will crown and reward the good works accomplished in and through His own. Thus, all are partakers of the same salvation, the same eternal life, and the same fellowship with God, yet there is still a difference in splendor and glory among them. According to the measure of their faithfulness

and diligence, the churches receive from their Lord and King a distinctive jewel and crown (Revelation 2-3). There are many mansions in the one Father's house (John 14:2).

Through this diversity of rank, place, and task, the communion of saints is enriched. As the harmony of song is magnified by the variety of voices, and the beauty of light is enhanced by the richness of colors and shades, so will Christ be glorified in the great multitude of His saints, and He will be made wondrous in the myriad who believe in His name. For all the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem shall behold the face of God and bear His name upon their foreheads. They will all sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb before the throne, each in their own manner proclaiming the mighty works of God: "Great and marvelous are Thy works, O Lord God Almighty; just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints. Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name?" (Revelation 15:3-4).

For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. What is the primary argument presented against materialism regarding the belief in an afterlife?

- Reflect on how the chapter addresses the limitations of materialism and the intrinsic human belief in immortality.

2. How does the chapter explain the persistence of belief in immortality across various cultures and religions?

- Consider the evidence presented that suggests a universal belief in the afterlife and its implications for understanding human nature.

3. What are some of the divergent conceptions of the afterlife in pagan religions mentioned in the chapter?

- Reflect on how different cultures view the state of the soul after death and the impact of these beliefs on their practices.

4. How does the chapter describe the relationship between spiritism and the doctrine of evolution?

- Discuss the connection made between the belief in spiritism and the evolutionary perspective on life and death.

5. In what ways does the chapter argue that the expectation of eternal life is incompatible with the theory of perpetual development?

- Consider the critique of the theory of perpetual development and how it undermines the hope of eternal, unbroken life.

6. How does the Old Testament conception of death differ from the pagan and modern materialistic views?

- Reflect on the Old Testament view of death as exile from life and light and its implications for understanding the biblical perspective on death.

7. What role does the covenant play in the Old Testament's understanding of life and fellowship with God?

- Discuss how the covenant relationship with God provides a foundation for life, joy, and overcoming the fear of death.

8. How does the promise of the Messiah in the Old Testament shape the hope for eternal life and the future kingdom?

- Reflect on the messianic expectations and how they point to the fulfillment of God's promises for eternal life and the restoration of His people.

9. What does the New Testament reveal about the connection between Christ's first and second comings and the hope for eternal life?

- Consider how the New Testament bridges the prophecies of the Old Testament and the fulfillment of eternal life through Christ's work.

10. How does the chapter explain the final judgment and the renewal of the world in the context of eternal life?

- Reflect on the descriptions of the final judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the establishment of a new heaven and earth.
