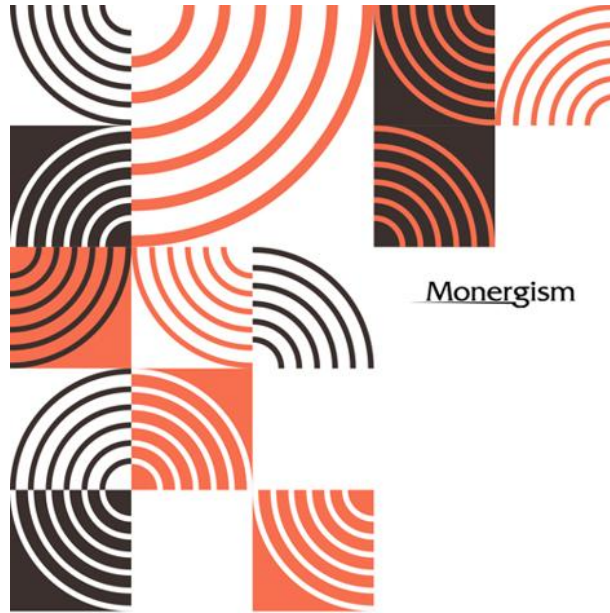




Monergism

# BASICS OF THE REFORMED FAITH

DR. KIM RIDDLEBARGER



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**In the Beginning - God**

The Bible opens with a remarkable statement in Genesis 1:1 - “In the Beginning, God . . .”

This simple assertion is packed with meaning. Some of the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith are found in this short declaration, and it is important to give them due consideration.

The first thing this passage tells us is that before anything was created, God already was. In fact, God always was, without beginning or end. Since God alone is uncreated, we speak of him as eternal. God exists before time itself, and is not bound by the succession of moments (time) as are we.

As the creation account unfolds in the subsequent verses of Genesis 1, we learn that the eternal God creates all things. Whatever now exists, exists only because God created it. There is no such thing as eternal matter. There is no eternal realm of mental forms (or ideas) as Plato led us to believe. There is no eternal convulsing of matter - ever expanding, ever contracting - as taught in much of contemporary science. There is only the eternal God who created all things, and who already was in the beginning. This indicates that nothing exists apart from the will of God, and all created things (the heavens and earth, humans as well as angels) are necessarily contingent, and depend upon God for their existence.

Unlike his creatures who are bound by both time and space, God has no such limitations. Because God is unlike us in this most fundamental way, he must be distinct from that which he has created, and can in no sense be dependant upon created things. God has no needs, as do we. God has no parts, as we do. Although he is personal, he does not have the kind of passions or emotions that we do as creatures. This is the God who gives orders to the sun and the stars, who gives life to inanimate matter (as when he made Adam from the dust of the earth - Genesis 2:7), and who is Lord over death. This God utterly transcends his creatures.

This “otherness” of God - the distance between God and his creatures - is known as Creator-creature distinction. This distinction is one of the most fundamental points of Christian theology, and must be clear to us before we can meaningfully talk about any other aspects of the Christian faith.

How can finite creatures, bound by both time and space, and prejudiced by sin, truly know and correctly understand anything about a God who is so transcendent that he cannot be seen or observed? The answer to this dilemma is that such an infinite God cannot be known by his finite creatures, unless and until he chooses to reveal himself to his creatures in such a way that we can know and understand this revelation. This is exactly what God does through both nature (general revelation) and Scripture (special revelation), when God draws near to reveal himself to us (immanence).

As creatures, we will always be dependent upon God for our very life and breath. But we are also dependent upon his self-revelation if we are to have any meaningful knowledge of him. The realization of this fact is the beginning of a proper understanding of spiritual things. And this is why we must strive to understand who God is by directing our attention to those two places where God reveals himself - through that which has been made (the natural order) and through the supreme revelation of himself in his word (Scripture).

## **The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible**

In Genesis 1:1 we read “in the beginning was God.” Echoing the opening declaration of the Bible, in John 1:1 we read that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But John goes on to say “the Word became flesh and dwelt

among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The fact that God chose to reveal himself in the person of Jesus Christ (the eternal word made flesh) brings us to the subject of the inspiration and authority of the Bible.

It is important to understand what the various human writers of the Bible say about the Bible itself. What kind of book is it? What do they testify about it?

The Bible never claims to be an “inspirational” book which grants its reader some sort of spiritual insight or self-enlightenment. The Bible was not given to motivate us to live better lives, or to motivate us to do great things. As we have seen, the Bible is given by God as a testimony to the Word made flesh (Jesus).

The testimony of the biblical writers is paramount. As Paul says in his second letter to Timothy, “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” Although the term “inspiration of Scripture” is used to describe God’s revelation of himself to us in written form, modern translations of the Bible (such as the ESV) correctly note that the verb which the King James Version famously translated as “inspired” (theopneustos) is better translated as “breathed out” by God. This emphasizes the fact that the various books of the Bible (Scripture) are given to us by God (“breathed out”) through the agency of human authors. This is why in Romans 3:2, for example, Paul can speak of the Old Testament as “the very words of God.”

In 2 Peter 1:16-21, we read, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with

whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." In this passage, the Apostle Peter claims to be an eyewitness to key events in the life of Jesus (i.e., Jesus' transfiguration), and he denies inventing or following myths. For Peter, Scripture is the product of men being "carried along" by the Holy Spirit. Scripture does not arise in the will of man ("I think I'll write a book of the Bible today!"), but only as men are "carried along" by the Holy Spirit, ensuring that human sin and frailty do not rob the Bible of either its divine authority, or its factual accuracy in all that it addresses (inerrancy).

And then there is the testimony of Jesus himself. Our Lord states that Scripture comes from the "mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4), "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35), that it is God's truth (John 17:17). Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit will come, teach them all things, and remind them of all that Jesus taught them (John 14:26). Indeed, says Jesus in John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

Since the Bible is the very words of God (it doesn't merely contain the word of God), it comes to us with the authority of God himself. The Bible is God's word written and must be seen as divine speech through human agency. As one writer (B. B. Warfield) so aptly put it, "It says, God says."



# **The Sufficiency of Scripture**

The sufficiency of Scripture is closely related to the inspiration and authority of the Bible. When we speak of the inspiration of Scripture, we refer to the fact that the various books of the Bible have their origin in the will of God. The books of the Bible have been breathed forth by God the Holy Spirit through the agency of human writers (2 Timothy 3:16). When we speak of the authority of the Bible, we mean that since the Holy Spirit is Scripture's divine author, the Holy Spirit is alone able to bear witness to the truthfulness and divine origin of God's word. The church does not give the Bible its authority. Rather, the church can only recognize that authority which Scripture already possesses because God has breathed it forth.

When we speak of Scripture as "sufficient," we mean that the Bible reveals everything God wants us to know about his will, and how to be saved from his wrath. The Bible was given for a very specific purpose. The Bible does not teach us everything that might be useful or practical to know, nor was it intended to do so. The Bible was not given to satisfy sinful human curiosity, nor will we find answers to all of the mysteries of life. The secret things belong to God (cf. Deuteronomy 29:29).

But the Bible does reveal both the law and the gospel. The law is that which God commands of us and is found in a passage such as Exodus 20 (the Ten Commandments). The gospel is what God gives to us in Jesus Christ which meets the demands of his law, and is spelled out by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 (as but one example). Although the moral law is universal - it is written upon our hearts because we are created in God's image - only in the Bible do we find God's law in written form so that God's will is perfectly clear to all.

While the beauty and wonder of creation powerfully points us to the creator - so much so that we cannot deny God's existence - the story of God's saving work to rescue sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ is not written in the beauty of mountain peaks, nor is it found in the awesome crashing of the seas. The only place where we will find the gospel is in the word of God written.

When we speak of the sufficiency of Holy Scripture, we mean that in the Bible we find the account of our redemption which unfolds in the covenant of works made in Eden with Adam, and which is restated in the Ten Commandments, as well as through the various administrations of the covenant of grace in which we witness Jesus save us from our sins in the types and shadows of the Old Testament, and in the promise and fulfillment of the New. Since this story of redemption is the content of the Bible, what else could we possibly need to know about how to worship God properly? What else do we need to know about how to be delivered from the guilt and power of sin that God has not already revealed to us in his word? Do we need church tradition to clarify the gospel? Do we need additional "holy books," or "revelations" to reveal those things supposedly missing from the Bible? Of course not.

In the Bible we have all that we need to know God's will and to be saved. As justified sinners who are cleansed by the blood of Christ and clothed in his perfect righteousness, we are free to approach the Holy God with thankful hearts, and worship him in the manner he prescribes. But we only know this because the Bible reveals this to us. This is what we mean when we say "Scripture is sufficient."

## **The Holy Trinity**

It is common to hear people claim that Christians, Jews, and Muslims all worship the same God. Not true. Unlike those who worship Allah, or those Jews who claim to worship the God of Abraham, Christians worship the true and living God, who reveals himself in three persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It has been said that the Holy Trinity is Christianity's most distinctive doctrine. Although in many ways the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our comprehension, we believe this doctrine because this is how God reveals himself to us in his word, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are the one true God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a difficult topic to discuss, because it stretches the limits of human language and logic. Despite the difficulties this doctrine presents to us, we must believe and confess that God is triune, because this is how God reveals himself to us in his word. The three persons of the Godhead are revealed as equal in divinity, glory, and majesty. Each of the three persons are expressly called "God" in the New Testament. And to each of them is assigned the same divine attributes, as well as the same glory and majesty which are ascribed to the other persons of the Trinity.

The Scriptures are absolutely clear that there is only one God. In Deuteronomy 6:4, Moses declares "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." In Isaiah 44:6, we read "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god." This same assertion is found throughout the New Testament, even though we learn of three distinct persons in the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, Paul writes, "there is no God but one. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth - as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords' - yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Elsewhere James writes, "you believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe - and shudder!" (James 2:19). The Scriptures are crystal clear, there is but one God.

Yet the Bible plainly teaches that although there is one God, he is revealed in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The three persons of the Godhead are mentioned together throughout the New Testament. When Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist, the Father declares, “this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” even as the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus as a dove (Matthew 3:16-17). In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his disciples to “go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by baptizing them in the name (singular) of three persons of the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

In his benediction in his second Corinthian letter, Paul blesses his readers in the names of the Triune God (2 Corinthians 13:14). “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” In John 14:26, Jesus informs the disciples that “the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things.” As God in human flesh (cf. John 1:14), Jesus mentions both the Holy Spirit and the Father as equals.

Another line of evidence for the Trinity in the Bible is that the same divine attributes, glory, and majesty are assigned to each of the three persons of the Godhead. The Scriptures teach that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are eternal. According to Isaiah, God says, “I am the first and the last,” (Isaiah 44:6) and Paul adds that God is “eternal,” (Romans 16:26) that is, without beginning or end. John records the Son saying, “I am the first and the last,” (Revelation 22:13) and Micah notes that his “coming and going are from everlasting” (Micah 5:2). In Hebrews we read of the Holy Spirit as “the eternal Spirit” (Hebrews 9:14). Father, Son and Holy are eternal, without beginning or end.

The Scriptures also speak of the fact that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, created all things. Paul states, “God who created all

things” (Ephesians 3:9), while the Psalmist declares “Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his” (Psalm 100). Yet, in John's gospel we read of the Son, “all things were made through [Jesus], and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). In Colossians 1:15-17, Paul writes that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” In Job, we read of the Holy Spirit, for “the Spirit of the LORD has made me.” In Genesis 1:1 we read that at creation “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are said to have created all things. What we can say of the Father, we can say of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

As we see from this brief summary of the biblical evidence, this is why we must affirm that there is one God who exists in three distinct persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are equal in glory, majesty and power. This is how God reveals himself in his word.

## **The Deity of Jesus Christ**

Like Jews and Muslims, Christians are monotheists. But unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians are also Trinitarians. We believe that the one God is triune, and is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When it comes to the Son (Jesus Christ), the Bible everywhere affirms that Jesus is true and eternal God, uncreated, and without beginning or end.

Given Jesus' central place in Christianity, no one, of course, wants to say anything bad about Jesus. Non-Christian religions often attempt to co-opt Jesus and make him one of their own. But this is not easy to do since the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ differentiates Christianity from all other religions. If Jesus is true and eternal God, then the Christian doctrine of God is unique among world religions. The irony is that while virtually all religions honor Jesus as a prophet or teacher, nevertheless they all reject (implicitly or explicitly) the main point the New Testament makes about Jesus - that he is God in human flesh, something Jesus clearly believed and proclaimed about himself.

That the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ is not the invention of the early church can be seen by merely scanning the pages of Holy Scripture, with its substantial teaching regarding the deity of Jesus in both testaments. One of the most powerful lines of evidence for the deity of Jesus are those verses in the Old Testament, such as the famous messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." The messiah will be miraculously conceived, and given the title "God with us." In Isaiah 9:6, we read "for to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). This too refers to Jesus Christ.

In addition to the messianic prophecies in Isaiah, we have a number of messianic Psalms (i.e., 8, 89, 110), in which the Father speaks of the Son as highly exalted and equal in majesty and glory. We also have a passage such as Proverbs 8:22-31, which depicts "wisdom" personified (when seen through the lens of New Testament fulfillment, this is clearly a reference to the eternal Son, who is wisdom from God), and Micah 5:2, where the prophet speaks of the one to be born in Bethlehem (Jesus) as eternal. The coming Messiah is repeatedly identified as the almighty God and eternal father, the

wisdom of God, righteous, highly exalted, yet to be born of a lowly virgin. These prophetic verses can only be speaking of one person: Israel's coming Redeemer, Jesus Christ, who is the God of Abraham (cf. John 8:58).

In the New Testament, Jesus is said to be eternal and preexistent. In John 1:1 we read, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Jesus is described by both John and Paul as the creator and sustainer of all things. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3) and in Colossians 1:16-17, Paul says of Jesus, "by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities - all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Jesus is identified as "God" throughout the pages of the New Testament. In John 20:28, Thomas falls before Jesus and confesses of Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" In Titus 2:13, Paul speaks of Jesus' second coming as "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." The author of Hebrews writes of Jesus, "but of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom'" (Hebrews 1:8).

Then there are those attributes predicated of Jesus which can only apply to God. Jesus is the object of worship (Matthew 28:16-17), he has the power to raise the dead (John 5:21; 11:25), and he is the final judge of humanity (Matthew 25:31-32). Jesus has universal power and authority (Matthew 28:18), as well as the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-7). He not only identifies himself as God (John 14:8-9), but calls himself the Alpha and Omega, "the first and the last" - a divine self-designation (Revelation 22:13).

Throughout the Bible Jesus is revealed to us as the true and eternal God, the almighty, the second person of the Godhead, the creator of

all things, and that one whom we must worship and serve. In fact, whatever we can say of God, we can say of Jesus.

## **The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit**

Far too often we hear people speak of the Holy Spirit as an “it,” not a “who.” One reason why this is the case is that the nature of the Holy Spirit’s work is to bring glory to Jesus Christ, not to himself. This is why J. I. Packer calls the Holy Spirit the “shy member of the Trinity.” But this self-effacing role of the Spirit does not mean that the Holy Spirit is impersonal and not God. The Spirit possesses the same divine attributes as do the other members of the Trinity. Even as we speak of the Father as God, the Son as God, so too we must speak of the Holy Spirit as God. He is the third person of the Holy Trinity.

While there is not as much biblical evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit as there is for the deity of Jesus, it would be a mistake to conclude that the evidence is neither clear nor decisive. We start with the Bible’s direct assertion that the Holy Spirit is God. In Acts 5:3-4, we read the story of Ananias and Saphirra, specifically of their deceit and the charge brought against them. “You have not lied to men but to God.” To lie to the Holy Spirit (as they did) is to lie to God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul tells us that the Spirit who indwells us, is God’s Spirit. He makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 6:19. At the very least, both of Paul’s comments are indirect assertions of the deity of the Holy Spirit.

There is significant evidence for the deity of the Holy Spirit found in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 63:10, Isaiah speaks of the Spirit of God, as does the Psalmist in Psalm 95:9. In Hebrews 3:7-9 the author of Hebrews attributes the words spoken by God in Psalm 95



to the Holy Spirit. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test . . . for forty years.” What the Old Testament prophets attributed to God, the author of Hebrews attributes to the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit is said to possess divine attributes. In Genesis 1:1-2 we read that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” Even as John and Paul attribute the work of creation to the Son (who is true and eternal God), so too, Moses assigns the work of creation to the Holy Spirit. In Psalm 33:6, the Psalmist states that the Holy Spirit (the Ruach, the breath of God) creates all things. As the Son is eternal, so too, is the Holy Spirit, who was with God before all things were created.

In Job 33:4, we read, “the Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.” As the Father and the Son are said to give us life, so too does the Holy Spirit. But not only does the Holy Spirit grant us life and breath, he also gives the new birth, something only God can do (John 3:5). We cannot enter God’s kingdom until God’s Spirit gives us eternal life.

Then we have a whole catalog of divine attributes applied to the Spirit. He is omniscient (in Psalm 139:7-10, the Psalmist says that the Holy Spirit is everywhere present). In 1 Corinthians 2:11, Paul says the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. God is omnipresent. The Holy Spirit is omnipresent. Therefore, the Holy Spirit is God. The Scriptures also teach that the Holy Spirit is omnipotent. In Isaiah 11:2, the Holy Spirit is described as possessing the power which God alone possesses. He is, in fact, all-powerful, because God is all-powerful.

The Scriptures mention other divine attributes of the Holy Spirit as well. The Holy Spirit is the author of our sanctification (1 Peter 1:2), he seals us unto the day of redemption (Ephesians 1:13-14), ensuring that the work God has begun in us will reach completion (Ephesians

4:30). It is through the Holy Spirit that the prophets and apostles spoke (1 Peter 1:11). And Peter proclaims “[that] prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (1 Peter 1:21). Finally, there are those verses which speak of the work of the Spirit in uniting believers to Jesus Christ, enabling them to approach God without fear. The Holy Spirit is described by Paul as the “Spirit of prayer” (Romans 8:15-16). It is the Spirit who unites us to Christ and enables us to cry out to God. It is the Spirit’s work to ensure that the saving benefits of Christ become ours.

Given this vast amount of biblical data and the great confusion of our age regarding the God of the Bible, it is vital that since the Holy Spirit is God (with the Father and the Son), we worship God in unity and the Godhead in Tri-unity. For God is one, yet revealed in three distinct persons who are each God.

Since the Spirit is the third person of the Holy Trinity and is true and eternal God, then we must invoke, worship, and serve the blessed Holy Spirit, even as we do the Father and the Son. After all, we are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:9). The apostolic benediction is given in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we must ascribe all glory, majesty and honor to the Holy Spirit, even as we do so to the other members of the Godhead. We pray to the Holy Spirit, we worship the Holy Spirit, we invoke the blessed Holy Spirit.

## **Creation**

As C. S. Lewis was fond of saying, “God likes matter. He invented it.” Although people can easily overlook this important theological

connection, the Christian doctrine of God demands a corresponding Christian doctrine of creation. There are three important elements to consider when reflecting upon how Christians should understand the created order, including things seen and unseen.

First, Scripture affirms that God created all things. Nothing which now exists, exists apart from the fact that God created it. All created things, therefore, owe their existence to God's eternal decree that particular things do exist. The second distinct feature of a Christian doctrine of creation is that since God created all things, God is therefore distinct from all created things and beings. This is apparent from the very opening declaration of the Bible - "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Creation is not part of God (pantheism), nor is creation within the being of God (panentheism). This fact alone sets Christianity apart from a number of religions - especially those of the east, or those with a dualistic heritage located in Greek philosophy. The third aspect to consider is that having created all things, God pronounced them "good," a refrain which is repeated throughout the seven days of creation of Genesis 1. These three facts not only frame a distinctive Christian doctrine of creation, they stand in opposition to a great deal of contemporary opinion to the contrary.

When God created all things, he created them from nothing (creation *ex nihilo*) through the sheer power of his creative word (Hebrews 11:3). The creation account reminds us over and over again that "God said" and it was so (Genesis 1). From the sun, moon, and stars, to the sea, land, and sky, to the various creatures which fill these created realms, all things were created by God who spoke them into existence. "All things" include those things we can see (i.e., the visible world in which we live), as well as those things we cannot see (i.e., the angels and the invisible world). Although the invisible world cannot be seen, it nevertheless is real, and it too has been created by God and filled by spiritual creatures who do his bidding (i.e., the angels).

The Christian doctrine of creation precludes the notion that God formed our universe out of eternal matter, or that there was there a realm of eternal and ideal forms in which matter participates as an indication of its inherent deficiency and inadequacy when compared to the spiritual world above (i.e., Plato). Rather, the Christian doctrine of creation insists that before all things came into being, God was, completely free and independent from his creation. Here, too, there are important ramifications of a Christian view of creation. There are no eternal human souls, nor do we in pre-exist our birth. We are not “divine” in any sense. Yet in the creation account, God pronounces his divine benediction upon Adam, the first man, who was created from the dust of the earth and then given the breath of life by God himself (Genesis 2:7).

It is important to keep in mind the fact that when we speak of God creating all things, we are referring to the triune God, not just the Father. Scripture assigns the act of creation to all three persons of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Although scripture frequently speaks of the Father creating all things (i.e., Genesis 1:1; Nehemiah 9:5-6, Psalm 33:6), the Son and Holy Spirit are also mentioned in connection with the creation of all things. In the prologue to John’s Gospel (John 1:1-14), John affirms that the Son (Jesus) created all things (John 1:3). So does the Apostle Paul (Colossians 1:16), as does the author of the Book of Hebrews (1:2). And then in the creation account, we read, “And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” It is the Triune God who creates all things.

Keeping these things in mind will help us avoid some of the pitfalls of the pagan thinking around us. The Christian doctrine of creation (things visible and invisible) reminds us the Creator is to be distinguished from all things created, and that the common dualism between spirit and matter is fatally flawed. Matter is not inherently evil nor flawed simply because it is material. The creation account is crystal clear that when God created all things from nothing, he pronounced them “good.” And although the world groans under our

feet because of humanity's collective rebellion against God (Romans 8:18-24), let us not forget, that at the end of the age when our Lord returns, he will indeed renew all things which he has created, including the heavens and the earth (2 Peter 3:1-13).

God likes matter. He not only invented it, he will renew the heavens and earth and make them fit for our eternal home.

## **The Covenant of Works**

In Hosea 6:7, the prophet records the word of the Lord as follows: "But like Adam they [Israel and Judah] transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me." Based upon this declaration it is clear that Adam stood in a covenant relationship to his creator while in Eden, and that Adam had indeed violated the terms of that covenant through a personal act of disobedience. In this declaration from the prophet, we find two very important elements of Christian theology as understood by Reformed Christians. The first element is that Adam was created in covenant relationship with God (this covenant was not arbitrarily imposed upon Adam after God created him). Second, Adam's violation of this covenant brought down horrible consequences upon himself, as well upon the entirety of the human race whom he represents and which has biologically descended from him.

The identity and character of this covenant is a matter of long-standing debate. But the covenant of works (or, as it is also known, the "covenant of creation") lies at the heart of the balance of redemptive history both before and after Adam's fall into sin. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the presence of this covenant from the very beginning of human history for a number of reasons. This

undergirds the fact that the covenant of works was not imposed upon humanity after God created Adam. Rather, by creating Adam as a divine image-bearer, Adam was created in a covenant relationship with God because moral and rational creatures are by their very nature obligated to obey their creator. If Adam should disobey the demands of this covenant - -perfect obedience in thought, word, and deed - -then Adam and all those whom he represents (the entire human race) are subject to the covenant curse, which is death.

The presence of this covenant from the beginning of creation means that if Adam and his descendants are to be delivered from the consequences of their collective rebellion against God, then any deliverance from the curse will require God's saving grace and saving deeds to remove the curse and render Adam's fallen race righteous before the Lord, just as Adam was righteous prior to his fall into sin. In other words, the covenant of grace (of which Jesus Christ serves as covenant mediator - 1 Timothy 2:5) only makes sense against the backdrop of humanity's collective fall into sin and the resulting curse (death) when Adam rebelled against his creator and broke the terms of the covenant of works.

Although the term "covenant of works" does not appear in the creation account, all of the elements of such a covenant are clearly present in Eden. First, there are two parties involved (Adam and his creator), with God sovereignly imposing the terms of this covenant upon Adam and his descendants. Second, there is a condition set forth by God as spelled out in Genesis 2:17 - "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Although this condition comes in the form of a specific prohibition (if you eat from the tree you will die), it can also be framed as a positive theological principle which describes the very essence of this covenant: "Do this [i.e., obey by not eating] and live." Third, there is a blessing promised upon perfect obedience (eternal life) as well as a threatened curse (death) for any act of disobedience. If Adam obeys his creator and does not eat from the tree, then he will receive God's promised blessing - eternal life. But

should Adam eat from the tree, then he will come under the covenant curse - which is death.

All three of these elements are present in the creation account, and in light of the declaration in Hosea 6:7, there can be little question that such a covenant exists and that it is founded upon a blessing/curse principle. When we look at these three elements in a bit more detail, we see that not only are the elements of a covenant clearly present in Eden, but we also take note that all of subsequent redemptive history will operate on the blessing/curse principle in which eternal life is promised to Adam and his descendants upon the condition of perfect obedience to the commands of God in all their thinking, doing, and speech. Should Adam perfectly obey the terms of the covenant, God will reward him with eternal life. Adam would not just live on as he had been, but Adam will be confirmed in righteousness and given eternal life.

But once Adam sinned and came under the covenant curse, such perfect and complete obedience was impossible for Adam or any of his descendants to render unto the Lord. Indeed, it will take a second Adam, Jesus Christ, to render such perfect and personal obedience on behalf of those who he presents under the terms of the covenant of grace. And this Savior must not only perfectly obey all the commandments of God, he must provide some means through which the guilt of our sin in Adam, as well as the guilt which attaches to us because of our own sins, can be removed. Not only must the second Adam be perfectly obedient for us and in our place, he must also go to the cross where he will suffer and die for our sins, removing from us the curse which comes upon all of us who are the children of Adam.

And the doing and dying of Jesus (the good news of the gospel) only makes sense against the backdrop of the bad news - the broken covenant of works, in which we all sinned in Adam, but we are given eternal life through Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 5:12-19).

## **The Fall of Adam**

Most Americans operate on the sincere but completely misguided assumption that deep down inside people are basically good. When we compare ourselves to others, we might be able to measure up pretty well. Sure, there are some who we might begrudgingly admit are better people than we are, but we still do pretty well in most of our self-comparison tests against others.

The problem with assuming that people are basically good is that it completely ignores the fact that ours is a fallen race, under the just condemnation from God, awaiting the sentence of death and eternal punishment. The reality is that God is not going to compare me to someone else, who is a fallen sinner like I am. Instead, God will measure me against the standard of his law, which is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). And when God measures me using the standard of his law, it will soon become clear that like everyone else descended from Adam, I cannot meet God's standard of perfection. I am a sinner. I am under the sentence of death. How did this happen?

This immediately raises the question of fairness. Is it fair for God to judge me against a standard I cannot possibly meet? The answer would be "no," if we were to look at this question in a vacuum without any biblical context. The Bible teaches that Adam was not only the first human (from whom all humans are biologically descended), but that Adam was created holy and without sin. Adam was placed in Eden under the covenant of works with its condition, "do this (not eat from the forbidden tree) and live," or "eat from the tree and die." Adam chose the latter, bringing down the covenant curse of death upon the entire human race. People often agree with Ben Franklin's famous adage that the only two things in life which



are inevitable are death and taxes, both of which I might add, stem from human sin. Yet, the fact remains, death is not natural to the human race. Death is the consequence of the fall of Adam.

When Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God immediately pronounced the covenant curse upon him. “And to Adam [God] said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Work became toil. Fruitful fields were filled with weeds and thistles. Child-bearing became labor. And even worse, Adam now faced the sentence of death. And so do we.

Because Adam acted for us and in our place (by serving as our representative in Eden), we are as guilty before God for Adam’s act of rebellion as if we had been in Eden, personally rebelling against God as did our first father. The guilt of Adam’s sin was imputed or reckoned to us (Romans 5:12, 18-19). Not only did the fall of Adam render us guilty before God, we have all inherited a sinful nature from Adam, and it is from that sinful nature that our own particular acts of sin spring (Romans 7:5). We sin because we want to sin. In fact, we like to sin. This is a far cry from the notion that we are all basically good people who occasionally sin. Rather we are sinful people, whose sinful propensities are restrained by the grace of a merciful God.

The Bible teaches that we are sinful by nature and by choice, and that we are not now, and never have been, innocent before God (Psalm 51:5; 58:3). As Paul recounts in Ephesians 2:1-3, we are dead in sin and by nature children of wrath. In Ephesians 4:17-19, Paul speaks of the effects of Adam’s fall upon us in the following terms. “You must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They

are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” The consequences of Adam’s fall are grave. Our thinking is futile, we are darkened in our understanding, we are alienated from God, and we seek to gratify our sinful nature rather than seek to please God.

And all of this stems from Adam’s act of rebellion in Eden. As the Puritans so aptly put it, “in Adam’s fall, sinned we all.” Because Adam sinned, we are born with a sinful nature, already under the sentence of death, and unable to do anything to save ourselves.

This is the consequence of Adam’s fall.

## **The Covenant of Grace**

It has been said that covenant theology is at the center of Reformed theology. No doubt, this is correct. In Eden, all of humanity fell when Adam, the first of our race, rebelled against his creator and plunged the entire human race into sin and death. It will take a second Adam (Jesus Christ) to perfectly obey the commandments of God so as to fulfill all righteousness (cf. Matthew 3:15). It will also take a second Adam to remove from us the guilt of our individual sins, as well as that guilt imputed to us from our first father, Adam (cf. Romans 5:12-19). But in order for a second Adam to accomplish these things, there must be a different covenant than the covenant of works (and its demand for perfect obedience), in which God allows a second Adam to do what is necessary for us and in our place to be saved for us, and to earn sufficient merit to save us. This brings us to the covenant of grace.

The covenant of grace is the historical outworking of an eternal covenant of redemption (the so-called “covenant before the covenant”) in which the members of the Holy Trinity decreed that Jesus was to be the redeemer of those whom the Father had chosen in him, and that Jesus would do this on behalf of, and in the place of, all those sinners chosen from before the foundation of the world (cf. Ephesians 1:3-14). This means that God’s saving grace is not directed to the world in general, but to those specific individuals whom he intends to save. In this covenant of redemption, the Holy Spirit will apply the work of Christ to all those whom the Father had chosen, and for whom the Son will die, ensuring that all of God’s elect will come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of the gospel - which is the divinely appointed means by which God’s elect are called to faith.

As is the case with the covenant of works, the specific terminology “covenant of grace” does not appear in Scripture, although the rich and manifold theme of covenant appears throughout redemptive history and lies at the very heart of God’s redemptive purposes and relations with humanity. As with the covenant of works, God is the author of this gracious covenant and he imposes specific conditions upon Adam and his fallen race. This covenant also includes the promise of eternal life, but is made on behalf of sinners by a gracious God who intends to save his elect from the consequences of Adam’s sin through the work of Jesus Christ - the second Adam. In the covenant of grace, everything hinges upon the sacrificial death and the perfect obedience of Jesus who is the only covenant mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5), yet who can sympathize with us in our weaknesses having been tempted in all ways as we have, yet without sin (cf. Hebrews 3:1-6; 4:14-16).

While the condition of the original covenant of works was full and perfect personal obedience to the commandments of God, the condition of the covenant of grace is faith in Jesus Christ, who undoes the awful consequences of the fall (Romans 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:20-28). The essence of this gracious covenant can be

seen in the oft-repeated refrain first found in Genesis 17:7; “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” If we fast-forward redemptive history to the final chapter, when the new Jerusalem descends out of heaven on the last day, once again we hear these wonderful words which serve as the motto of the covenant of grace. “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, `Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Revelation 21:3). Yes, he is our God, and we are his people.

Therefore, redemptive history, which is the outworking in human history of God’s eternal decree, is essentially the account of the unfolding successive covenants, which are historical manifestations of the one covenant of grace. Immediately after the fall of the human race into sin, God promised Adam that a redeemer will come and rescue him and the human race from the consequences of his sin. In Genesis 3:15, we find the first historical manifestation of the covenant of grace in the first promise of the gospel (the so-called proto-evangelium). No sooner had Adam sinned, the Lord pronounced the following curse upon the devil: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her [Eve] offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” In this first gospel promise, God promises to crush the serpent and to save his people. The coming of the mediator of the covenant was now ensured. Jesus will die on a cross to redeem us from our sins.

Although the covenant of grace unfolds in several historical steps - (i.e., the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis 12, 17, etc., the promises God made to Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 24, as well as on the plains of Moab in Deuteronomy 29:13, the promise of an eternal kingdom made to David in 2 Samuel 7:14, followed by the prophecy of a New Covenant made to Jeremiah in his prophecy [31:33], which the author of Hebrews specifically applies to Jesus

Christ, the covenant mediator in Hebrews 8:1-13) - the covenant is essentially the same throughout the entire course of redemptive history. This can be seen in the simple fact that there is but one gospel in both testaments, just as there is only one covenant mediator (Jesus Christ).

God has promised to be our God, and that we are his people. These covenant promises bookend redemptive history from the fall of our race into sin, until the time of the end, when our Lord returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new.

## **The Incarnation**

At the very heart of the Christian faith we find the doctrine of the Incarnation - Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity and the eternal son of God took to himself a true human nature for the purpose of saving us from our sins. It is this doctrine which marks Christianity off as a supernatural religion, grounded in specific truth claims - i.e., God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18) - and which aims not for the moral improvement, enlightenment, or personal benefit of its adherents, but for the salvation of all those sinners whom God has chosen to save in Jesus Christ.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the proof that God keeps his promises. This event is the key turning point in what is truly the greatest story ever told. At the dawn of human history, God placed Adam in Eden and commanded him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Adam ate from the forbidden tree, plunging the entire human race into sin and death. But even as God was pronouncing the curse upon Adam, Eve, and the serpent (cf.

Genesis 3), God promised to rescue Adam from his sin through the seed of the woman - that is, through a biological descendant from Eve who will redeem God's people from their sin (Genesis 3:15). It will take a second Adam - one who obeys the covenant of works which Adam broke and who alone can redeem us from the guilt and power of sin - to undo the consequences brought upon us by the first Adam. And this brings us to the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the person in whom God fulfills his promises and who is our Immanuel (God with us). The Word must become flesh if any of us are to be saved from the havoc wrought upon us by the first Adam (cf. John 1:17). There is no other way.

The Old Testament is filled with various messianic prophecies, in which God's promise to redeem his people are set forth with an amazing specificity. In fact, there are some sixty-one major messianic prophecies regarding the coming of Jesus Christ found throughout the Old Testament, all of which are explicitly fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ in human flesh as detailed in throughout New Testament. We have already seen that God's promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15 is fulfilled when Jesus dies upon the cross. Jesus not only crushes Satan, but suffers for his people to bring about their redemption. As but one additional illustration of God's redemptive promises being fulfilled in Christ, in Isaiah 7:14 we find this amazing prophecy: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." The coming one is not only supernaturally conceived, he will be God in human flesh. This is why the Old Testament perspective on redemption is one of longing, anticipation, expectation, and hope.

When we come to the New Testament era, we immediately discover that something very dramatic and completely beyond all human expectation is taking place. In Matthew's gospel, we find the historical record of the fulfillment of a number of these ancient messianic prophecies. In Matthew 1:18-23, we read these words: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his

mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)."

In the supernatural conception and birth of Jesus Christ, God fulfills his promise to Adam to send the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. But the birth of Jesus Christ also fulfills the promise God made to Abraham, to bless the world through one his biological descendants (Genesis 22:15-18). This explains why the gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogical record, which traces our Lord's ancestry back to Abraham through the line of Judah and the house of David. God keeps his promises, and our Lord's genealogy chart is the proof.

Why did God send his eternal son, and what does this mean for us? While the mechanics of the incarnation largely remain a mystery - in fact, Paul speaks of the incarnation in 1 Timothy 3:16 as such, "great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: [Jesus] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" - the fact of the incarnation is beyond question. That Jesus is fully man and fully God is clearly taught in Holy Scripture. In, Philippians 2:6-8, Paul says of Jesus, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a

cross.” Jesus is God in human flesh, he has two natures (one human, one divine), yet he is one person.

In the Incarnation, God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. That the Word became flesh to save us from our sins is the very heart of Christianity.

## **Jesus Christ the Covenant Mediator**

Christians often speak of important doctrines in the abstract. People speculate about election and predestination, the extent of the atonement, and so on, without making any connection between these doctrines and the person and work of Jesus Christ. But the Bible does not allow us to do this. If we follow the biblical pattern and language, we cannot even mention the subject of election, without at the same time mentioning that we are chosen from before the foundation of the world in the person of Jesus Christ, who was himself chosen by the Father to be the redeemer of the world (John 17:1 ff.). The seed of the woman (cf. Genesis 3:15) is Jesus of Nazareth, who has redeemed us through his saving work. This is why the eternal son of God became incarnate - to save his people from their sins. And this brings us back to the covenant of grace, and its mediator, Jesus Christ.

It is important to carefully consider the fact that the covenant of grace has a personal mediator - Jesus Christ - who is revealed to us in the types and shadows of the Old Testament through Moses' office as mediator of that covenant God makes with Israel at Mount Sinai, as well as through the kingship of David and his rule over Israel, and even through the sacrifices for sin offered to God by the priests of Israel. All of these Old Testament events foreshadow the coming of



God in human flesh. This is why whenever we speak about election and covenant, we must focus upon the word made flesh. Election, covenant, and incarnation are inseparable, and can only be explained and understood in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, who is “God with us.” This same Jesus is also the mediator of the covenant of grace which progressively unfolds through the pages of the Old Testament, and is fulfilled in the New.

As the promise of redemption begins to unfold, it is clear that God’s promises will be fulfilled in a single person, that one who is the seed of the woman, who will be Israel’s ultimate prophet, priest, and king, and who will also serve as the one mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5). This one person and mediator of the covenant will be truly human, and yet truly God. He will have two distinct natures, yet he remains one person.

The two natures of Jesus Christ points us to the lengths to which a gracious God will go to save us from our sins. Given the fact of human sin, there is no possible way for men and women to be delivered from that sin apart from the incarnation of our Lord. Since it is the eternal Son of God, the Word, who became flesh, we must deal with the two natures of Christ and the way in which they are related in one person - Jesus. Since it was human nature which sinned, it was absolutely necessary for God to come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ so that someone truly human might do what is necessary to save us. The debt we owe to God must be paid by one of Adam’s race. And then the punishment involved in the curse (death) requires the ability to suffer in both body and soul. For such a penalty to be paid, the eternal Son of God must become flesh.

And yet, at the same time, if we are to be redeemed from our sin, the redeemer must himself be without the guilt of sin so that he could in fact make a sacrifice for sins on behalf of those whom he came to save which satisfies the holy justice of God. A sinful man with a sinful nature is not fit to save other sinners. This is why Jesus was miraculously conceived in the womb of the virgin by the power of the

Holy Spirit, so that he was free from the guilt of Adam's sin. This is also why Jesus subjected himself to the law of God (Galatians 4:4-6), to earn a justifying righteousness for his people through his own perfect obedience. This is why Paul calls Jesus the second Adam (cf. Romans 5:12-19). Jesus does not give into temptation like Adam did. He obeys all of God's commands, unlike Adam. Jesus earns the crown of life which Adam failed to do. Jesus did all of those things, perfectly, and he did them as someone who was truly human. This is why Jesus is a better mediator than Moses, with a covenant much better than the one God made with Israel at Sinai.

Yet no human sacrifice can pay the infinite debt we owe to the holy God. The sacrifice for our sins must be made by someone whose death can actually pay the debt. Then, there is the fact that no human can apply their sacrifice or obedience to another so as to pronounce forgiveness. Only God can apply the fruits of Jesus' redemptive work to others under the terms of a covenant of grace, which he alone can establish on his oath. This is why Jesus must also be fully God.

Since Jesus is truly man, he truly redeems human nature - which he took with him when he ascended into heaven after his resurrection. Not only do we have hope that the Son of God will redeem our souls, the two natures united in one person also means that God will redeem our bodies as well. Jesus not only has paid for our sins, and provides for us a perfect righteousness, presently he is in heaven in a body of glorified flesh - a body in which he will return to raise the dead, judge the world and make all things new. Because our Lord has redeemed human flesh, we are certain that our flesh will likewise be transformed so that we might live with him forever and ever.

This is why Jesus Christ must be true God and true man, yet one person who is the mediator of the covenant of grace. Jesus came to save us from our sins and to earn a perfect righteousness by perfectly obeying the law of God. But the Word also became flesh to redeem fallen human nature - and this required him to become like us in every way, yet without sin. When we speak of being saved - we mean

much more than the salvation of our souls. We mean the redemption of our whole person - body and soul. This is why he is true God and true man, and the mediator of a better covenant.

## **God's Attributes**

Much indeed can be known about God from creation. We know that God is eternal, all-powerful, and good (cf. Romans 1:20). Yet, whatever we learn about God through nature (general revelation), will always be limited by the very nature of revelation through finite created things. In addition, such revelation is inevitably corrupted by human sinfulness (Romans 1:21-25). Therefore, whatever sinful people learn about God through nature will be grossly distorted, and ironically, ends up serving as the basis for all forms of false religion and idolatry - a theme developed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-32. John Calvin was absolutely right when he spoke of the minds of sinful men and women as “idol factories” (Institutes, I.11.8).

Since sinful human curiosity often leads finite men and women to speculate about God’s hidden essence, it is important to remind ourselves that God condescends to reveal himself to us in his word (i.e., Scripture), in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In the word of God, we find a number of divine “attributes” (or perfections) ascribed to God. So, rather than speculate about God’s hidden essence, we must worship and serve the God who reveals himself to us through his word.

Christian theologians have long struggled to explain how it is that certain of these divine perfections belong to God alone, while others are also ascribed to humanity since we are created in God’s image.

The former attributes are most often identified as “incommunicable” attributes because these particular attributes cannot be “communicated” by God to his creatures, precisely because we are finite creatures. The latter are called “communicable” attributes because they are in fact communicated to humanity, though in finite measure due to creaturely limitations, and only by analogy. As we take up these divine attributes, we must keep in mind that these are perfections which God alone possesses in all their fulness, and they reveal a great deal to us about God’s divine being.

When we speak of God’s incommunicable attributes we may think of things such as divine simplicity (God is an infinite spirit and not the sum of different parts - cf. John 4:24). Because God is “simple,” his attributes can be said to be identical with his being. God is also self-existent (aseity). He is in no sense dependent upon anything outside himself for his existence, his glory, or his purposes. We can also speak of God as “eternal.” He alone is without beginning nor end. God now is. God always was. God forever will be.

One way Christians have spoken of a number of these attributes is to use the “way of negation.” That is, since we are finite and sinful creatures who depend upon God’s revelation of himself to truly know anything about him, it is much easier (and safer) for us to say what God is not, rather than struggle to state what an infinite and eternal God truly “is.” These are attributes with which every Christian is familiar.

God is said to be “immortal,” because he, unlike us, is not “mortal.” This is but another way to say that God is eternal. He does not live or die as we do - he is life itself. We may also speak of God as “invisible” because he (unlike us) is pure spirit and not visible to the human eye. But this also means that God fills all creation with his perfections. We speak of God as “immutable” because he does not change - as to his essence, or as to his purposes. And then we may speak of God as “impassable.” Unlike his creatures, God is independent from the world he has made, and his divine essence is not subject to external

influences (like suffering or passions), although the persons of the Godhead are indeed affected by the actions of his creatures. Take, for example, the fact that we know that God loves us because his Son Jesus suffered and died for our sins (1 John 4:10).

The so-called communicable attributes are important to mention as well. These perfections include those attributes which begin with the prefix “omni” to distinguish the way in which we as creatures possess these attributes from the absolute fulness in which God possesses them. These include omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, as well as other attributes designated without the “omni” prefix, such as goodness, love, mercy, holiness, righteousness and jealousy.

Although our knowledge is finite and limited (because we are finite and limited creatures), God is said to be omniscient - he knows all things. Although we exercise creaturely power and freedom, God alone is properly said to be all-powerful and therefore sovereign over all things. Although we occupy both time and space, God transcends all such spatial and temporal limitations. He alone is omnipresent. Men and women can demonstrate goodness, love, mercy, etc., as a reflection of being created in the image of God, who possesses these same attributes without limits or measure, unlike the way these attributes are manifest in us.

Since this is how God has revealed himself to us in his word, it is vital that we not speculate about these divine perfections, nor attempt to ignore them when they expose our creaturely limitations. Rather, we worship and adore the God who reveals himself through such wonderful perfections.

## **Divine Image Bearers**

With the language of the eighth Psalm clearly in mind (“you have made [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” v. 5), Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til once declared that Adam was created to be like God in every way in which a creature can be like God. These words sound rather shocking when we first hear them. And yet as Van Til goes on to point out, because Adam is a creature, he will never be divine. Adam will always be a creature. Therefore, Christians cannot talk about the creation of humanity without first being clear about the fact that God is distinct from his creation, and cannot be identified either with the world around us or its creatures.

That said, the biblical account tells us that Adam was created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26), which indicates that Adam is neither divine, nor the product of some unspecified primordial process. Adam was created by a direct act of God in which Adam’s body was created by God from the dust of the earth, while his soul was created when God breathed life into the first man (Genesis 2:7). The divine image extends to Eve as well (Genesis 2:4-24). To be human then, is to be male or female and to bear God’s image in both body and soul, which exist as a unity of both spiritual (the soul) and material (the body) elements. To be a divine image bearer is to be an ectype (copy) of which God is archetype (original).

Because all men and women are divine image-bearers we are truly like God, and we possess all of the so-called communicable attributes of God - albeit in creaturely form and measure. This is what constitutes us as “human” beings, distinct from and superior in moral and rational capabilities to the animal kingdom. In fact, the creation of Adam and Eve marks the high point of the creation account (Genesis 1:28-31), as God pronounced the first man Adam to be “very good.”

The ramifications of the fact that we are divine image bearers are multifaceted and profound. First, the creation reveals that Adam is both the biological and federal head of the human race. To put it

another way, Adam was the first human being, and all humans are his biological descendants. This speaks directly to the question of the unity of the race (despite our different skin colors and physical appearances), and to the equality of persons before God. Second, as the biological head of our race, Adam represented the entire human race before God during the period of probation in Eden when Adam was commanded not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Adam was assigned the role of acting for and on behalf of all those who are his descendants. What Adam did in Eden, he did on our behalf, as our representative. This fact alone implies a number of additional considerations, including the fact that Adam was created in righteousness, holiness, and possessed true knowledge of God (cf. Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10), which means that Adam was righteous before God as created. Adam was not merely innocent before God, but holy and upright, possessing the natural ability to obey all of God's commands and to fulfill the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:28).

The spiritual nature of Adam (as seen, for example, in the fact that the soul lives on after the death of the body) further reflects this element of human nature. Our souls are invisible, indivisible, and immortal. In addition, we are created as rational beings with great intellectual abilities, as well as the moral ability to determine right from wrong (Romans 2:12-16). This also indicates that all men and women are capable of receiving the revelation that God gives through the created order (general revelation) and through his word (special revelation). Reformed theologians have long argued that our bodies are fit "organs" of the soul. And it is especially through the body-soul unity that these communicable attributes are manifest.

As the divine image-bearer possessing such original righteousness, holiness, and knowledge, Adam was given dominion over all of creation as God's vice-regent. Not only did God make all things good, he assigned his unique divine image-bearer the role of ruling over

the world and all of its creatures. Adam was given all the plants and animals for food, and was assigned the task of naming the animals over which he was given dominion (Genesis 2:19). It is because Adam was a divine image-bearer that he was fit and equipped for this task.

This is what the Psalmist means when he says that man is but a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:5). The creation of Adam was the high point of all of God's creative activities, not an after-thought. As the divine-image bearer, Adam is to rule and subdue the earth in the name of his creator. He possesses true righteousness, holiness, and knowledge, and his task is to build the temple garden of God on earth in Eden. And he is fit for the task in every way.

## **Jesus as Prophet, Priest and King**

The diagnosis is not very good: we are ignorant, guilty, and corrupt. But the prognosis is far worse. We are under the curse and face certain death. As fallen sinners ravaged by a threefold consequence of our sins, our hearts are darkened (Romans 1:21) and our thoughts are continually evil (Genesis 6:5). Our minds are clouded by sin and ignorant of the things of God (Ephesians 4:17-18). We labor under the tremendous weight of our guilt - the penalty for our many infractions of the law of God. We may delude ourselves into thinking that we have sinned against our neighbors only; David knew that this was not true. "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). But we also suffer from the destructive pollution of our inherited sinful condition, which infects every part of us from the moment of conception. Born in sin as the Psalmist declares (Psalm 51:5), there is no good residing in us (Psalm 14:1-3). Our bodies, which are fearfully and wonderfully made



(Psalm 139:14), become instruments to act out the wickedness that would otherwise lie hidden in our hearts (Romans 6:13). The bad news is very bad. Sin leaves us ignorant, guilty, and polluted, and therefore miserable.

But there is a glorious and miraculous cure from this disease: The good news of the gospel is that while “this is impossible with men,” nevertheless, with God, “all things are possible!” (Matthew 19:26). It was John Calvin who brought the so-called “threefold office” of Christ into prominence. Utilized by many in the subsequent Reformed tradition, the threefold office presents Jesus Christ as prophet, priest, and king, who in his saving work fulfilled all the anointed offices of the Old Testament. As Calvin pointed out, the threefold office of Christ is one of the best ways to explain our Lord’s redemptive work, which by design overcame our ignorance, our guilt, and our corruption, and which even now provides us with illumination, redemption, and hope in the present.

We start with Jesus’ prophetic office in which he represents God to humanity. Jesus is the light of the world (John 1:4-5), who comes to show us God the Father (John 14:9). It was Moses who foretold of a great prophet that “the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers - it is to him you shall listen” (Deuteronomy 18:15). And it is Peter, who immediately after the birth of the church, applies this passage to our Lord (Acts 3:22-23). Jesus speaks of himself as such a prophet (Luke 13:33), and our Lord expressly claims to speak only what his father has told him to say (John 12:49-50; 14:10, 24; 15:15; 17:8, 20). Jesus speaks of the future (Matthew 24:3-35), and speaks with an amazing authority unlike all others (Matthew 7:29). Indeed, our Lord's words are backed by the power of God, for his mighty works serve to confirm the truth of his message (Matthew 21:11, 46; Luke 7:16, 24:19; John 3:2, 4:19, 7:40, 9:17). In John 6:14 we are told that “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

The priestly office of Christ occupies a major place in the New Testament and includes not only a discussion of the office itself, but also of Christ's sacrificial death to redeem sinners from their sin. The key passage in the New Testament, Hebrews 5:1 and following, lays out the characteristics of a true priest. First, "for every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (v. 1). Second, such a priest is appointed by God (v. 4). Third, the high priest offers "gifts and sacrifices for sins" (v. 1). In addition, the priest makes intercession for the people (Hebrews 7:25), blessing them in the name of God (Luke 9:22). Clearly, Jesus Christ is the high priest par excellence. Although he is the only New Testament writer who applies the term to Jesus, the author of Hebrews repeatedly speaks of Jesus as a priest.

As for the kingly office of Christ, the Scriptures declare that "the Lord has established his throne in heaven and his kingdom rules over it" (Psalm 103:19). Unlike those who argue that Christ delays the full manifestation of his rule in this present age until a millennial age yet to come, Jesus presently exercises full dominion over all things. Jesus is King of kings, and his kingdom is a kingdom both of grace and of power. In his ascension, Jesus Christ ascended to the right hand of his father and even now rules over all of creation as sovereign Lord (the civil kingdom) and over his church as covenant mediator (Christ's kingdom).

The New Testament repeatedly speaks of Christ as "head of the church" (Ephesians 1:22, 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:19). Christ's rule over his church is closely related to the mystical union formed between Christ and the church, which the Scriptures describe as his body (1 Corinthians 12:27). Christ's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, so it has no flag, no world headquarters, and no catchy logo. But it is present wherever Christ's people gather to hear God's word proclaimed and to receive the sacraments (Romans 14:17). This kingdom is identical to that which the New Testament repeatedly calls the "kingdom of God." This kingdom is a conquering kingdom

(Matthew 12:28), but is not tied to cultural, economic, or political institutions (John 18:36). The wicked will not inherit this kingdom (Galatians 5:21), though our own children, seen by the world as “the least of these,” are already members through baptism (Luke 18:16). It is a glorious kingdom (1 Thessalonians 2:12), and despite what some may say, it is a present reality (Matthew 3:2). It is a kingdom, which as the Creed declares, “has no end” (cf. 2 Peter 1:11).

In his threefold office as prophet, priest, and king, Jesus cures our ignorance, he removes our guilt, and he deliver us from our corruption. It is here that we find some of the specifics of what it means for Jesus to be the only mediator of the covenant of grace.

## **The Death of Christ**

As redemptive history unfolds in the Bible, the story of God’s saving purposes takes a number of surprising twists and turns. The New Testament opens with an angel announcing to a young virgin that God’s promised Savior was at long last coming to visit his people with salvation. Jesus was born of Mary, he grows to manhood, and begins his public ministry after his baptism by John (Matthew 3). As we read in Matthew’s gospel, “and [Jesus] went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (Matthew 4:23).

Eventually, Jesus’ public ministry took him to Jerusalem, because as Jesus informed his disciples, “The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death” (Matthew 20:18). As John the Baptist said of Jesus upon first encountering him, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin

of the world!” (John 1:29). Since Jesus came as Israel’s Messiah, the mediator of the covenant, and fulfilled the anointed offices of prophet, priest, and king, the necessity of his death comes as somewhat of a surprise - although this death was remarkably foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) who predicted that God’s Messiah would also be a suffering servant. When Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph on Palm Sunday, it appeared to all as though he would at long last take his place on Israel’s throne to restore the nation to its former greatness. But by Friday afternoon, Jesus was dead, hanging on a Roman cross, having died an agonizing death. Why did the story of our redemption take such a dark and foreboding turn? Why did Jesus need to die?

Throughout the New Testament, the biblical writers tell us why Jesus died and what his death means for us. First and foremost, Jesus’ death is said to be “for our sins,” (a “substitutionary atonement”) and his death effectually and actually turns God’s wrath away from his people, because Jesus takes God’s wrath upon himself (a “satisfaction”). In a fundamental sense then, Jesus’ death satisfies the holy justice of God by making a full and complete payment for the guilt of our sins.

When we look at the terms which the biblical writers use to explain the death of Jesus, the meaning and purpose of his death becomes clear. Jesus is said to die as a substitute for the sinner, in whose place, Jesus is said to die. In Mark 10:45, we read, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In his Epistle to the Ephesians, Paul notes that “Jesus Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). In John 10:14-18, Jesus speaks of his death in the following terms: “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep...the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This

charge I have received from my Father.” Jesus describes his own death as “for his sheep.”

Another term we find in the New Testament is that Jesus’ death is said to be a “propitiation” for our sins, that is, a sacrifice which effectually turns aside the wrath of God toward those for whom he is dying. Paul speaks of the death of Christ as “a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25). John says of Jesus that his death is a propitiation, and that his death shows us the love of God toward sinners. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

In yet another set of verses, Jesus’ death is set forth as the means through which sinners are reconciled to a holy God from whom they are estranged. Paul tells the Christians in Rome, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul adds, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Elsewhere, Paul describes Christ’s death in terms of redemption - the price paid in the Roman world to purchase slaves, granting them their freedom: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13). Peter describes the death of Jesus in much the same way - “knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1Peter 1:18-19).

Although the death of Jesus comes as a bit of a surprise as we follow the course of redemptive history, when we look carefully, we see that this death truly is the “scarlet thread” of redemption. Our Lord’s death for our sins was foretold throughout the Old Testament, and that death fully described and carefully explained in the New. The meaning of the cross is clear. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

## **The Law and the Gospel**

Although often identified as a Lutheran distinctive, the law-gospel distinction has been recognized by the Reformed tradition as well. Reformed theologians such as Louis Berkhof have spoken of the Bible as containing two parts - the law and the gospel. Although people often assume that this means the Bible has two testaments (the Old Testament being identified with “law” while the New Testament is identified with “gospel”), this is mistaken. In making this identification, the Reformed mean that law and gospel are two different things found throughout both testaments.

A definition or two is helpful at this point. The law is that which God demands of us (cf. Genesis 2:17; Exodus 20:1-18), while the gospel is the good news that in Jesus Christ, God freely and graciously gives to us everything which he demands of us under the law (i.e., Romans 5:9; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21). The content of the law is that which God revealed first to Adam in Eden, and then published in the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments were written down on two tablets of stone and given to the people of God (cf. Exodus 24). The gospel, on the other hand, is the content of what God has done in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. The

revelation of this gospel begins in Genesis 3:15 when God promises to rescue Adam from the curse and to crush Satan under the heel of a redeemer, and culminates in God's promise that no longer will there be any curse (Revelation 22:3). The law is what God commands of us. The gospel is what God has done for us in Christ. The law says "do." The gospel tells us it is "done."

When God created Adam and placed him in Eden, Adam was created in a covenant relationship with God (the so-called covenant of works). Adam had the natural ability to obey all of God's commands, not all of which are made known to us (although we can gather much about them). Although these commandments are written upon the hearts of all of Adam's descendants because we are divine image bearers (Romans 2:12-16), the commandments are not published for us until God gives these commands to Israel at Mount Sinai. In this particular covenant (the Sinaitic covenant), we see how both law and gospel are found together in the Old Testament.

When God made his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, that which was inward (written on the human heart) was now made public for all to see and obey. The Ten Commandments are called the "moral law" because they reflect this universal knowledge of God's will which he has implanted in every human heart. Failure to obey these commandments will bring down the covenant curses upon all those who disobey them. Fail to obey a single commandment and we are guilty of breaking all of these commandments (James 2:10). At the same time, God revealed the plans for a tabernacle (where God would be present in the midst of his people - Exodus 25:9), installed Moses as covenant mediator (Exodus 3:15), and gave the nation a priesthood complete with animal sacrifices, all of which are elements of the covenant of grace and which pointed the people of God ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ, whose death upon the cross these elements prefigured (Hebrews 8:1-13).

Although the Ten Commandments reflect the will of God with blessings promised for obedience, and curses threatened for

disobedience, the law is given to Israel within a covenant context in which God provides a means for the guilt of the sins of the people to be remitted, all the while pointing them ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ. The law and the gospel, while to be carefully distinguished, are often revealed together. The commandments serve to show the people of God their sin (Galatians 3:10-14), while at the same time preparing them for the coming of Jesus Christ, their Messiah and redeemer.

As Paul puts it, “for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20), while the gospel is the message of what Jesus Christ has done to save us from our sins (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-8). The law is to be obeyed, while the gospel is to be proclaimed as “good news” - that is, the gospel is the declaration of all that God has done to save sinners from the guilt and consequences of their sin (Romans 10:14-17). The law condemns and gives no power to obey its stipulations. The gospel declares that the law no longer condemns, and at the same time creates faith in the heart. We do not “do” the gospel. We “believe” the gospel.

The irony here is that because the gospel creates faith, it is the preaching of the gospel which leads God’s people into holy living (Ephesians 2:1-10: Philippians 3:2-14). The law is indeed holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), but because we are sinful, when the law is preached to us, we are incited to even greater levels of sin (cf. Romans 7:5-12). But once we trust in Jesus Christ, and are united to him through faith, we will struggle with our sins, we will realize that we have failed to keep God’s commandments, and suddenly we will find ourselves desiring to obey the law (cf. Romans 7:22-23). The law does not change once we are justified. Rather, our relationship to the law changes. Before we were Christ’s, the law condemns us because we cannot keep it. The law inflicts its curse upon us. But once we trust in Christ and have died to the law and its curse, suddenly we come alive to the commandments of God, which now



reveal to us the will of God, and what we may do to please him (Psalm 1:1-2).

This is why the old theologians were correct when they affirmed that the law is both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude. If we are not clear about the law-gospel distinction, we will not be clear about the gospel, and the fact that God has done everything in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins.

## **The Order of Salvation**

When Christians speak of the “ordo salutis” we are referring to the “order of salvation.” While we should qualify any discussion of such an “order” by affirming that an omniscient God does not need to do things in sequential order as we do, nevertheless there is a logical order to the way in which God saves us from sin and its consequences. Since we are described as “dead in sin” (Ephesians 2:1-5) and unable to do anything to save ourselves from our dire predicament (John 6:44), God must act upon us while we are still “dead” in order to save us from our sins. The ordo salutis is simply an attempt to understand what steps God takes to save us, and in what logical order he takes them.

This is not an abstract concept because Scripture itself speaks of our salvation as being accomplished for us according to a divinely-ordained progression. The first of these passages is the so-called “golden chain” of salvation found in Romans 8:28-30. In that passage Paul writes, “and we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the

firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

The passage has been described as the “golden chain” of salvation because Paul not only speaks of an unbreakable order to the plan by which God saves us (the chain), but the apostle is clear that our salvation from beginning to end is the work of a gracious and sovereign God, who having begun the process of our salvation, sees it through the end (the “gold”). There is no sense here that some of those chosen by God are eventually rejected, or that there is something good within the sinner which moves God to have pity on them and then act on their behalf.

Although Paul reminds his reader that God has the power to turn all things to good (v. 28), he quickly goes on to qualify that this applies to only those who are called according to God’s purpose. Therefore, when the gospel is preached to us, God effectually calls his elect to faith in Jesus Christ. And that call involves several important elements (i.e., the *ordo salutis*).

Paul speaks of those foreknown by God as being predestined. Some have erroneously taken this to mean that God looks down the corridors of time and then chooses to save those whom he knows in advance will believe the gospel when it is preached to them. This is not the case, because Paul has already told us that calling of certain people to salvation is not based upon foreseen faith, but upon the purposes of God (v. 28). Furthermore, foreknowledge does not merely mean that God knows what we will do in advance, but rather that God knows us as individuals in the full sense depicted in Psalm 139 - where God is said to know our thoughts before we even think them because it is he who has formed us in our mother’s womb.

According to Paul, all those whom God foreknows, he also predestines. Predestination refers to the particular end for which his elect are chosen - to be conformed to the image of Christ (as spelled

out in the final link in the chain, glorification). Those foreknown are predestined, and those predestined are called. Calling occurs when the gospel is preached, and God's elect respond to that message with faith. Those called through the preaching of the gospel are said to be justified. Justification occurs because the merits of Christ are imputed to those called through the means of faith, and because of Christ's merits, we are reckoned righteous before God.

The final link in the chain is that those foreknown, predestined, called, and justified, are at last said to be glorified. That is, we are fully restored from the effects of sin on the day when the dead in Christ are raised. Paul's point is that God begins our salvation and ensures that it is completed.

In yet another passage, Paul lays out a similar "order" of salvation (1 Corinthians 6:11), when the apostle writes, "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Although some of the particular elements appear in a different order than in Romans 8:28-30, the general idea is the same. For one thing, all the verbs (in the Greek aorist tense) used here by Paul indicate that each of these elements is already a completed act. And just as in Romans 8:28-30, God accomplishes these things for us. His saving work on our behalf is already finished. All those in Christ are washed, are sanctified, are justified.

Washing refers to regeneration, that divine act whereby we are given new life and are cleansed from the guilt of sin, and when sin's power over us is broken. All those "washed" are also said to be sanctified. That is, those regenerated by God's Spirit are now set apart for God's holy purposes and begin the life-long process of dying to sin and rising to newness of life (sanctification). Those set part by God for his own holy purposes are also said to be justified - that is when we are regenerated, we come to life and place our trust in Jesus Christ. When we place our trust (faith) in Christ, Christ's merits are reckoned or credited to us, so we are declared righteous before God.

Paul ends this particular list of benefits by informing us that all of this was accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who applies to us the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The *ordo salutis* is one very useful way to keep before our eyes the fact that Scripture very clearly teaches that from beginning to end, our salvation is God's work, accomplished for us by Jesus Christ. We also see that God doesn't begin the process, only to quit in the middle of it. All those foreknown (in Romans 8:28-30) are glorified, and all those washed (in 1 Corinthians 6:11), are justified. Our salvation is truly of the Lord, from beginning to end.

## **Election**

As Americans raised in a democratic republic, we cling tenaciously to the principle "one person, one vote." It is very easy (and almost natural) to carry over this principle to our understanding of the doctrine of salvation. It is easy to simply assume that God should give everyone a chance to go to heaven, and if people refuse God's gracious offer, then people, in effect, send themselves to hell by refusing God's gracious gift. This makes perfect sense on democratic presuppositions because in the political sphere each individual is assumed to be entitled and empowered to determine their own course in life. And if this is true in American political life, then it should be true when it comes to the salvation of sinner. Right? Well, no. The Bible does not allow us to understand humanity's redemption from sin in such rosy terms.

Because of Adam's sin, we are all sinners by nature and by choice, and we are born guilty for Adam's act of rebellion in Eden. The Bible speaks of this as being dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1), meaning we are

unwilling and unable to do anything to save ourselves. Because we are dead in sin, we cannot even take those first steps toward God that some Christians mistakenly think we should be able to make (John 6:44). It is common to hear Christians describe God's grace in generic, non-specific and medicinal terms such as, "grace is like a medicine which, if we are willing to take it, enables us to come to Christ," or that "grace is a life-ring which we must grab and cling, or we will drown in our sins."

Our problem is not that we are spiritually sick, somewhat impaired by our sin, or that we are morally weak. It is much worse than that. The Bible says we are dead in sin. Dead people do not, and indeed cannot, come to God. God must come to us while we are dead in sin, and then make us alive with Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:1-10). This is where we find the very heart of God's saving grace. God does everything necessary to save us from our sins, when we are so unworthy of such salvation, and completely unable to do anything about our predicament. Democratic presuppositions simply don't apply to matters of sin and grace. Humanity's plight and God's sovereign grace are the proper categories here. From beginning to end God must save us because we are unable to do anything to save ourselves.

The only reason why any one of us presently trusts in Jesus to save us from our sins is because God chose to save us in Jesus Christ from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). God did so, Scripture says, based upon his own sovereign good pleasure and purpose - in other words, for reasons known only to himself, but fully consistent with God's holiness and justice. When addressing this very subject, Paul spells this out in no uncertain terms. "In love, [God] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery

of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:3-7). God chooses us in Jesus Christ, and he does so for reasons known only to himself. But he chooses us nonetheless.

The critical point here is that unless God chose to save us in Jesus Christ, not one of us would be saved! God did not look down the corridors of time and see who would and who would not trust in Christ as is commonly argued. If that were the case, then God’s election would be a response to a human action (a decision to accept Christ) which people who are dead in sin cannot perform. Those not chosen are left in their original condition in Adam, under God’s curse and just condemnation. It is not as though those not chosen are treated unfairly. Rather, they will be dealt with according to divine justice, not God’s saving mercy in Christ. Those not chosen will get what they truly deserve. They we get what we truly deserve, had God not chosen us in Christ.

The Bible is very clear that God’s election is based upon the good pleasure and purpose of God, that election is “in Christ” (which means that all those who trust in Christ were chosen in Christ), and that God provides the merits of Jesus Christ (through his suffering and obedience) to save those whom God has chosen, from both the guilt and power of sin. Those whom God chooses to save will be saved by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, which is applied to us in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is where we find the meaning of *sola gratia* (grace alone).

In love, God predestined us in Jesus Christ to be redeemed from the guilt and power of our sin.

# Justification

Reformed Christians affirm without hesitation that the doctrine of justification is the article of faith by which the church stands or falls. Although the oft-cited comment is attributed to Martin Luther, it was actually the Reformed theologian, J. H. Alsted (1588-1638), who first put these words to paper - no doubt echoing Martin Luther in doing so.

The reason why the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, is so important is because it is so closely tied to the gospel and the saving work of Jesus Christ. If we do not understand how it is that we as sinners are declared right before a holy God (which is what it means to be “justified”), we may not only misunderstand the gospel - and therefore risk standing before God on the day of judgment expecting that our own righteousness will be sufficient - but we will miss out on the wonderful comfort which this doctrine provides for us.

The good news is that as justified sinners - our sin has been reckoned to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness has been reckoned to us (Romans 5:12, 18-19) - we now possess the greatest gift imaginable, a conscience free from fear, terror, and dread (2 Tim. 4:18). The knowledge that our sins are forgiven and that God is as pleased with us every bit as much as he is with his own dear Son (2 Corinthians 5:21), not only quiets our conscience and creates a wonderful sense of joy and well-being, but it also provides powerful motivation to live a life of gratitude before God (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). In fact, understanding this doctrine is the only way we will be able to give all glory and thanks to God, which is the ultimate goal of our justification.

We need to be perfectly clear here - we are justified by good works. Not our good works, mind you, but Jesus Christ’s good works, which just like his sacrificial death, were done for us and in our place. Jesus

Christ not only died for our sins, but through his life of perfect obedience to God's commandments he fulfilled all righteousness (Romans 5:18-19). In Philippians 3:4-11, Paul speaks of this righteousness of Christ which comes from God through faith. "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

But how is it that our sins are imputed (reckoned, credited) to Christ and his merits are imputed to us? This occurs only through the means of faith, which is why we cannot be justified on the basis of anything we have done or even could do since all of our works are tainted by sin and always done from sinful motives. Faith is the instrument which links us to Christ so that all that his righteousness becomes ours. In Galatians 3:23-26, Paul states "before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

It is important to understand that faith is not that one work God expects us to perform. Faith is not something which God sees in our hearts which he then rewards with a status of "justified" - a view widely held throughout American evangelicalism. Rather, as J. I.



Packer so helpfully puts it, faith is “an appropriating instrument, an empty hand outstretched to receive the free gift of God’s righteousness in Christ.” Paul speaks precisely in these terms in Romans 4:4-5 when he writes, “now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

Scripture is clear that faith links us to Christ, and through faith in Christ we receive all that he has to give us - namely the forgiveness of sin accomplished by his death, and the gift of righteousness based upon his obedience. Through faith in Jesus, our sin is imputed to him so that he pays for these sins on the cross and through that same faith his righteousness (his merits and holy works) becomes ours. This is what we mean when we speak of being justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. This is the gospel! God freely gives in Christ what he demands of us under the law. In Romans 3:21-26, Paul makes this very point. “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

If we are not clear about this great doctrine, we have no assurance of our salvation, no foundation for living the Christian life, and we have no gospel to preach to the unbelieving world around us. Apart from this doctrine, ours is a fallen church.

# Sanctification

It is not until we understand what it means to be justified, that we are in any position to discuss sanctification, which is that life-long process through which the old habit of sin (what we call “indwelling sin”) is progressively weakened and the new nature (given us by virtue of regeneration) is progressively strengthened. Why is this the case? The same act of faith which unites us to Christ so that his merits are imputed to us and thereby provides the basis upon which God pronounces us “not guilty,” also begins the life-long process of sanctification, in which our sinful habits begin to weaken, new Godly affections begin to grow, and we begin to obey (however, feebly), not some, but all of God’s commandments. To put it yet another way, every justified sinner is also being sanctified.

In fact, the moment we place our trust in Jesus Christ, all of our sins (past, present, and future) are forgiven. Through that same act of faith which justifies us, Christ’s righteousness becomes ours so that we now rely on the obedience of Jesus Christ crucified which is ours when we believe in him. Because we are justified by the merits of Jesus Christ which we receive through the means of faith (and not through our own good works), our consciences are freed from fear, terror, and dread. Since we are not paralyzed by the fear that God will punish us when we fail, we find ourselves free to obey the law of God, not to earn greater righteousness, nor to become “holier.” Rather, we obey the law of God and do good works because we have already been reckoned as “righteous” and our eternal standing before God has already been settled by the active and passive obedience of Jesus Christ. This is what it means, in part, to be sanctified.

The biblical teaching about sanctification is quite extensive. According to Paul, this struggle with sin is the normal Christian life (Romans 7:14-25). In fact, the holiest among us may be those

struggling with sin the most. The fruit of the flesh (as depicted by Paul in Galatians 5:19-21) gradually begin to diminish, while the fruit of the Spirit (v. 22-23) spontaneously begin to appear in our lives. It is not the struggle with sin, but apathy to the things of God and indifference to our personal sins which are the real signs of trouble.

The new man (who was dead in sin, but is now alive in Christ) is no longer a slave to sin. The old nature (the flesh) has been crucified with Christ and buried with him in baptism (cf. Romans 6:1-7). The new man (the regenerate nature) comes alive through the resurrection power of Christ and has an entirely different orientation than the flesh. The new nature believes God's promises, it embraces Christ through faith, it hates sin, and it desires to please God. This is why everyone who is called through the preaching of the gospel and who then comes to faith in Christ (through the operations of the Holy Spirit) is not only justified through the means of faith, but also has a new set of desires and affections which reflect the new nature.

This is why sanctification is the necessary consequence of the once-and-for-all declaration that we have been justified. Whenever someone claims to be justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone but then continues to live in indifference to sin without struggling against it, something is wrong. No justified sinner can remain indifferent about their conduct nor continue on in sin as they did before they were justified.

In the new birth we are made alive with Christ and the power which sin formerly held over us is broken. But indwelling sin (what our theologians call the habitus of sin) remains in us until we die. Romans 7:14-25 and Galatians 5:17 are very clear about this fact. The new nature must struggle against the three enemies of every Christian: the world (the non-Christian way of thinking and doing), the flesh (the sinful desires within us) and the devil (lies and falsehoods about God). This is why the struggle with sin is the necessary fruit of justification and the new birth. Sadly, this struggle has led many to question their relationship with God, when, in fact,

the struggle with sin is the sure sign that God is at work, molding us, and conforming us into the image of his dear son.

In Romans 6:6, Paul speaks of us as people who were formerly slaves to sin. But once freed from our slavery, we struggle to stop thinking and acting as slaves, and we struggle to start living like the free men and women that we are. The struggle will not produce victory over all sin in this life as Christian perfectionists teach. But the power of sin is broken so that sanctification and transformation necessarily begin. And yet, the habit of sin (indwelling sin) will remain with us until we die or our Lord returns, whichever comes first.

This is why you cannot successfully argue, as certain Christians attempt to do, that someone can “accept Jesus as their Savior,” but not make him Lord over their lives until a later time (the so-called “Lordship controversy”). If you trust in Jesus Christ through faith, you have been crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, and are now alive with Christ. There is no such thing in the New Testament as a two-tiered Christian life, in which there are people who accept Christ as Savior but have not yet made him Lord, nor are there people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit but not yet baptized by the Spirit, nor are there people who are saved, but not yet sanctified.

Therefore, as we die to sin and rise to newness of life on a daily basis, we will struggle with sin. But despite the difficulties which this struggle creates, our sanctification is a sure and certain sign that we are Christ’s and that he who has begun a good work in us, will indeed see it through to the day of completion (Philippians 1:6). And this is what it means to be sanctified.

## **Good Works and the Christian Life**

Closely related to the doctrines of justification and sanctification is the subject of good works. One of the most common objections raised by critics of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone is this: “If we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, what place does that leave for good works?” Even apostle Paul had heard a similar objection from Christians in Rome. “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? (Romans 6:1)”

Questions like this one arise from the concern that if God’s grace is stressed too much, Christians will become lazy and indifferent to the things of God. It is feared that Christians might rely too much upon grace and not demonstrate a sufficient zeal for good works. After all, what incentive remains to do those works God commands us in his word, if our standing before God depends upon the good works of another - Jesus Christ? Even worse, as the critics contend, if the doctrine of justification is true, and we are justified sinners even after we become Christians, then why do good works at all, since they are still tainted by our sin?

Paul’s answer to these questions in Romans 6 is emphatic. In response to the charge that stress upon grace makes Christians indifferent about how they live, Paul writes, “By no means!” The apostle’s explanation is simple. “How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:2-4).

After arguing that sinners are justified by faith alone, and not by works (Romans 3:21-28), the apostle can make the point that those who are justified through faith have also died to sin. Christians no longer desire to live under sin’s dominion because they have been buried with Christ and subsequently raised to newness of life. Instead of destroying the desire to do good works, the doctrine of

justification by faith alone establishes the basis for good works. Those who are justified (having died to sin), will walk in newness of life and begin the process of sanctification. The newness of life and our sanctification is characterized by the doing of good works (cf. Ephesians 2:10), and the presence of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26). As Paul puts it elsewhere, “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).

Since this matter became such a point of controversy, Protestant confessions and catechisms all deal with this issue at some length. Take, for example, the discussion of this in the Heidelberg Catechism. After pointing out that good works are those things done from true faith, according to God’s law, and done for God’s glory, not so as to earn a reward (Q & A 91), and then discussing the Ten Commandments, focusing upon how Christians are to understand them as a revelation of God’s will (Q & A 92-114), the Catechism then takes up the question of why we should do good works, when, even as Christians, we cannot obey God’s commandments perfectly. In question 114 of the Heidelberg Catechism, it is asked, “Can those who are converted to God keep these Commandments perfectly?”

The answer given to question 114 in the Catechism gets to the very heart of the relationship between justification by faith alone and good works. “No, but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of such obedience, yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live not only according to some, but according to all the Commandments of God.”

Because we are sinful from head to toe, and since sin affects us in every aspect of our being (cf. Ephesians 4:17-24; Romans 3:9-20; Psalm 51:1-5), even justified, we remain sinful (Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:21-24). Even those among us who are given much faith, and who earnestly desire to live lives pleasing to God, still remain sinners. Our works remain stained by our sinfulness, so that apart

from Christ these works would only serve to condemn us since such a work is corrupted by sin and not truly good.

Since we are created “in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10), every Christian (who is justified by faith alone) will begin to obey the commandments of God, however hesitantly and flawed that obedience might be. This is true not because we have a divine spark within us which responds to God’s grace, but because “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

Since our sanctification is every bit as much an act of God’s grace as is our justification, all those who have been justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, will (as the Catechism says) live according to all of God’s commandments. Since our obedience (like our sin) is covered by the blood and righteousness of Christ (making even the worst our works truly good), our heavenly father delights in our feeble efforts to do good. And knowing this to be the case creates within us the desire to obey all the more.

## **Marks and Mission of Christ's Church**

The New Testament has no category for someone who is a believer in Jesus Christ but who is not also a member of a local church. The reason is so obvious that we take it for granted. Since all true believers become members of the body of Christ by virtue of their union with Christ through faith, the New Testament assumes that those who are members of Christ’s body will naturally identify with a local assembly of those who likewise believe in Jesus and confess him

as Lord before the unbelieving world. Sadly, many Americans have completely different assumptions.

Given the rugged individualism of American culture and our innate suspicion of authority, many Americans who consider themselves faithful Bible-believing Christians make little connection between their own personal faith in Jesus Christ and membership in a local church. This is one of the most pressing issues of our day and it arises from a general ignorance of the doctrine of the church and the necessity of membership in a local congregation of fellow like-minded believers. In fact, John Calvin writes in his commentary on Isaiah, “We cannot become acceptable to God without being united in one and the same faith, that is, without being members of the church.” These two things, “justification by grace alone through faith alone,” and membership in Christ’s church are inseparable for Calvin, because the Bible clearly indicates that all those whom our Lord justifies through faith, he also gathers together is a visible assembly, a local church.

If it is true that all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ must join with a local congregation of like-minded believers and then submit to the yoke of Christ, then how can we tell which church is like-minded and faithful to the gospel and administers the sacraments according to the word of God? Do we ask ourselves if the people in a church love Jesus and if the church has good programs for our kids? Or do we look to see whether or not the church preaches the gospel, administers the sacraments as commanded in Scripture, and is willing to defend these things through disciplining its members who teach against this doctrine, or who by their lives, demonstrate that they really don’t believe the doctrine taught by the church. The marks of the church are objective (we can see them clearly). These marks do not stem from the piety and sincerity of those who attend (which we cannot determine).

Here is where people often get confused. A church can be a true church - preach the gospel, administer the sacraments and discipline



its members - yet still have sinful members and non-Christians within its midst (people who profess the truth, but who don't believe the gospel). We can think of groups of Christians who call themselves a church, who assemble for worship and to serve Christ, and yet do not possess the marks of a true church. Yet, such a group (while not a true church) may include many people who are truly Christians. The discussion as to whether or not a congregation is a true church or whether it has some of the marks of a false church does not at all imply that all people who attend such a church are not Christians.

The first mark of a true church is the pure preaching of the gospel. This is the foundation for everything else and effectively defines the church's mission. Get this one wrong and nothing else matters! If this mark is not present then a church cannot possess any of the other marks (since, for example, the sacraments draw their efficacy from the gospel, not from the church or the minister). The pure preaching of the gospel entails what Paul calls the public placarding of Christ (Galatians 3:1). It involves the faithful proclamation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners as defined in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. To preach the gospel is to speak of God reconciling sinners to himself in the person of his Son (Romans 5:8-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21). It is to proclaim that through the cross, God manifests his love and his justice, satisfying his just anger toward people who deserve his wrath (Romans 3:20-25). According to Romans 10:14-17, faith comes about through the hearing of the proclamation of that gospel. The pure preaching of the gospel involves very specific content: proclaiming Christ's saving work for sinners through his active and passive obedience, his death and resurrection. To talk about Jesus in some vague way in a sermon is not preaching the gospel!

The second mark of the church is the proper administration of the sacraments. Since we remain sinful, even though we are presently justified by the merits of Christ received through faith alone, we are all prone to hardness of heart and all of us feel the constant pull toward sin. God gives us the sacraments precisely because we are

weak and sinful. Since God promises to rescue us from the guilt and power of sin in the gospel, so too in the sacraments God confirms the promise made in the gospel in a visible and tangible way. In fact, so tangible that we get wet. So tangible that we actually hold in our hands and taste with our mouths those same elements (bread and wine) which Jesus gave to his apostles. And these sacraments are based upon the same covenant promise - "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (cf. Matthew 11:28)!

The third mark of a true church is that it exercises church discipline so as to correct and punish sin. The critical biblical text in this regard is Matthew 18:15-17. In this passage, our Lord establishes both the need and procedure for us to deal with our disputes, in which the highest court of appeal is the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, Paul speaks of excommunicating professing believers whose unrepentant sin brings scandal upon the church. In 1 Corinthians 5:13, Paul commands the Corinthian church to expel a wicked man from their midst - a man who had taken his step-mother as his own wife. To ignore such behavior and not deal with it by removing the offending party is to risk bringing down God's judgment upon the entire assembly. Like church membership, church discipline is also not an option.

These three marks (the preaching of Christ, the proper administration of the sacraments, and church discipline) not only identify a true church (which is faithful to God's word), these marks define the mission of the church.

## **The Sacraments**

Although any discussion of the role of the sacraments in the Christian life seems too “catholic” for many evangelical Christians, the sacraments do play a very important role throughout the New Testament. Summarizing the teaching of Scripture on this topic, the Heidelberg Catechism (Q 65) defines the two New Testament sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as “holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put his seal on that promise.” And what is the promise of the gospel? “To forgive our sins and give us eternal life by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.”

The sacraments are visible signs and seals of God’s invisible grace promised to his people in the gospel (Romans 4:9-12). Because we are weak and struggling sinners, these sacraments are given to us by God to confirm that faith already given us through the preaching of the gospel (cf. Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). This is why the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments are intimately connected. That which God promises to us in the gospel (the forgiveness of sins and eternal life) is then confirmed in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The gospel is proclaimed, and then made visible in a sense when the sacraments are administered - which is why Reformed Christians often speak of the sacraments as the “visible word.”

In the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the biblical emphasis falls squarely upon what God has done for sinners in the person of his son, Jesus, and not upon the strength of a sinner’s faith, or the purity of one’s heart. This is why God is seen as the active party in these two sacraments, since it is he who makes the promises associated with the covenant of grace, and of which the sacraments are signs and seals. To put it another way, through participation in the sacraments, the recipient receives (ratifies) what is promised by our gracious God in the gospel.

In the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, God swears the same covenant oath given to Abraham in Genesis 17:7 - "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you." At the heart of the sacraments then is God's gracious covenant promise to be our God, and that we will be his people - a promise which is re-ratified whenever we receive the sacraments through faith. This is why the sacraments are an essential part of Reformed piety and church life.

There are two sacraments instituted by Jesus in the New Testament. Baptism is the sacrament of entrance into the Christian life and its importance can be seen from the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus instructs his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Disciples are not made by going forward to an altar, or by repeating a prayer after a minister, but by being baptized! This is the biblical way in which repentant sinners and their families publically declare their faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:41; 16:15; 16:31-33). To be baptized means that we have been buried with Christ (Romans 6:4), clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27), and circumcised with Christ (Colossians 2:11-12). Baptism is that sign and seal that our sins are forgiven (Acts 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21) and of the presence of regeneration (Titus 3:5). It is baptism that marks us off from unbelievers. All of these things are promised to us and to our children in the gospel (Acts 2:38-39).

As for the Lord's Supper, Jesus instituted this sacrament on that night in which he was betrayed. Investing the Jewish Passover with an entirely new meaning, we read in Matthew 26:26-28 that "Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" Not only does Jesus tell us that the sacrament is connected to the promise of the gospel - through the

shedding of his blood, our sins are forgiven - but Jesus states that what is offered to us through the bread and wine, is nothing less than his own body and blood, along with all of his saving benefits to be received by faith. In other words, in the Lord's Supper, Jesus offers himself to us through the signs and seals of the bread and wine.

These words also appear in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, indicating that the church's celebration of the Lord's Supper was based on our Lord's words of institution. Paul tells us that the Lord's Supper was celebrated "when you come together" for public worship (1 Corinthians 14:26). This means that the Lord's Supper, as instituted by Christ, is a ratification of the gospel promise - the new covenant in Christ's blood for the forgiveness of sins - and that the Lord's Supper was celebrated whenever the church assembled for worship. We know from Acts 2:42 that the worship of the apostolic church centered in the apostle's teaching, the Lord's Supper, the prayers and fellowship with the Risen Savior.

Since the sacraments confirm the promise of the gospel - that God will save us from our sins - the link between the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments in public worship is firmly established. The biblical manner by which God declares his favor to sinners is through the word, and that promise is confirmed through the sacraments. In the gospel, God promises to save us from our sins, and in the sacraments he swears on his sovereign oath, "I am your God and you are my people!" This is why weak and struggling sinners should not be directed to look within to see whether or not our faith is of sufficient intensity, or if we have achieved sufficient personal holiness in order to participate. Rather, we need to look outside of ourselves and turn our gaze toward God's gracious covenant promise. This is God's way of comforting the downcast, strengthening faith, and conquering doubt. This is why word and sacrament are together essential elements when God's people assemble for worship.

# Baptism

Before our Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, he left his disciples with the following command: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20) Based upon these words of the Great Commission, it is now the mission of Christ’s church to go into the world, preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations. How do we make disciples? We baptize them in the name of the Triune God.

Although many professing Christians today are strangely indifferent to the sacraments in general and baptism in particular, the New Testament knows nothing of someone who comes to faith in Jesus Christ but who is not baptized. While the exception to this is the thief on the cross for whom baptism was not possible (cf. Luke 23:40-43), the New Testament is very clear about the necessity of baptism as the sign and seal of one’s profession of faith in Jesus (cf. Romans 4:9-12). Not only does Jesus command his disciples in the Great Commission to make disciples of the nations by baptizing those who believe in Jesus, the Pentecost sermon preached by Peter ends with the following charge - “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:38-39). Throughout the Book of Acts, heads of households are baptized upon a profession of faith in Christ, but these same individuals also present their entire households, including their children, for baptism (cf. Acts 16:14-15; 31-33; Acts 18:8).

There are several important reasons why all those who come to faith in Jesus Christ are baptized. First, baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant, and as such replaces circumcision which was the sign and seal of the old covenant (Genesis 17:1-14; Colossians 2:11-12). But even as the covenant sign changes from circumcision to baptism, the thing signified does not change - God's covenant promise to be our God, and that are we his people (Acts 2:39; Galatians 3:14). This is why Reformed Christians contend that children of believers are to be baptized, since the children of believers too are members of the covenant of grace, along with their parents (1 Corinthians 7:14). If our children are indeed members of the covenant of grace, how can the sign and seal of that covenant be denied to them? This fits with Jesus' attitude toward children as members of the kingdom of God (Luke 18:15-17), and explains the presence of household baptisms in the New Testament (cf. Acts 16:15; 33, 1 Corinthians 1:16).

Second, in baptism, we are identified with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. In Romans 6:3-5, Paul writes, "do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Similarly in Galatians 3:27-28, Paul ties baptism to our identification with Christ. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." To be baptized is to put on Christ as one puts on new clothes, and baptism unites us to Jesus in his death and resurrection.

Third, we must distinguish between the sign (water) and the thing signified (the forgiveness of sin). The Scriptures do speak of baptism as "the bath of regeneration" (Titus 3:5) and tied to the "forgiveness of sin" (Acts 2:38 ff; 22:16), without also teaching that the water of baptism is the means of regeneration. Regeneration is everywhere

attributed to the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8; Titus 3:5; 1 Corinthians 2:14) and not to the mere presence of the sign itself - the water of baptism, as if the sign somehow magically binds God to act. That being said, we must be very careful not to reduce baptism to mere external sign, or deny that anything at all is signified and sealed unto the one baptized. Claiming God's covenant promise by faith, we believe with all our hearts that the baptized adult or child of a believer is indeed regenerate and has been washed in the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

One of the best summaries of what Scripture promises us in baptism is found in the words of the form for baptism as used in the Reformed churches. These words are a fit summary of these promises we have just considered.

We are baptized into the Name of God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. For when we are baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father witnesses and seals to us that He makes an eternal covenant of grace with us and adopts us for His children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with every good thing and turn aside all evil or turn it to our profit.

And when we are baptized into the Name of the Son, the Son seals to us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God.

Likewise, when we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit assures us by this holy sacrament that He will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, imparting to us that which we have in Christ, namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives, until we shall finally be presented without spot among the assembly of the elect in life eternal.



## **The Lord's Supper**

The Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper is grounded in an important distinction between the sign and seal (bread and wine), the thing signified (forgiveness through his blood, the "blood of the covenant"), and a sacramental union between the two (our Lord's words "this is my body"). This three-fold distinction arises directly from the words of institution spoken by Jesus himself. "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom'" (Matthew 26:26-29).

When Jesus speaks of the bread as his body and the wine as his blood, we take him at his word without resorting to confusing the sign (bread and wine) with the thing signified (Christ's body and blood). Nor should we insert words such as "this represents my body," as in the case of those who believe that the Lord's Supper is essentially a memorial meal and that nothing is received through partaking of the bread and wine. As Paul calls "Christ the rock" (1 Corinthians 10:4), so too, the bread is Jesus' body, not because the sign is miraculously changed into the thing signified (as the Roman Catholic church erroneously contends in transubstantiation), but because Christ can speak of the bread (the sign) as though it were the thing signified (his body) using the language of sacraments. Because a true sacramental union exists between the sign and the thing signified, the bread can indeed be spoken of as Christ's body as Jesus does when instituting the sacrament (Matthew 26:26 ff).

Following Calvin, the Reformed have tried to keep in mind both the reality of Christ's ascension, wherein Christ's true human nature is now in heaven awaiting his return (Acts 1:9-11), and the real presence of Christ in the sacrament (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Though Christ's true human nature is in heaven, the believer receives all of his saving benefits, because, through faith, the Holy Spirit has united the believer here on earth to Christ in heaven. So too, Christ can be in heaven and the believer can receive his true body and blood, because the same Holy Spirit ensures that those already in union with Christ receive his true body and blood when they take bread and wine in faith (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-29).

Therefore, the manner of eating is spiritual, not physical. We truly receive Christ by faith and not by the mouth (John 6:63 may apply here). In the words of institution, the body of Christ is not brought down to us, i.e., localized on an altar "in, with, and under" as Lutherans argue. Rather, the believer is able to feed upon Christ who sits at God's right hand through the power of the Holy Spirit who ensures that we truly receive what is promised. The manner of reception is faith, since it is the soul, not the body, which receives the reality of what is promised, while the mouth receives only the consecrated bread and wine. Nevertheless, when we eat the consecrated bread and drink the wine, through faith, the Holy Spirit ensures that we receive the true body and blood of Christ which is in heaven because we are in union with him. Augustine had it right when he said "believe, and thou hast eaten."

That Christ is sacramentally present with his people through the Supper as they feed upon him in faith then is the heart of the biblical teaching and Reformed doctrine regarding the Lord's Supper. But there is also an eschatological dimension here (Revelation 19:6-9), as the earthly celebration of the Supper anticipates the great marriage supper yet to come. There is a covenantal dimension here as well, as each time the Lord's Supper is celebrated, God himself re-affirms his covenant oath to save sinners by bearing the curse for them. Jesus Christ still enjoys table fellowship with sinners as was typologically

set forth in Exodus 24, and then realized in those churches established throughout the apostolic era, as we see in a passage such as 1 Corinthians 11:23-32.

Given the biblical language of “real presence” in the words of institution, in addition to the biblical practice of connecting the Word and sacrament (Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 11; Acts 20:7), it is hard to make a purely human assessment of our own worthiness to partake as the basis for receiving the Supper. Certain questions haunt us. “Do I have enough faith?” “Have I sufficiently confessed my sins and purified my heart?” Inevitably, the nature of this introspective process depreciates the fact that the essence of the Supper is a spiritual feeding and a covenant meal, in which God reaffirms his covenant oath. It is the Holy Spirit working through the Word, and not a priest or minister that makes the sacrament efficacious for believers. God is the active party (not even the “rememberer”), and this is why we must see the Supper and the elements of bread and wine as gracious gifts from God - manna from heaven, as it were - given to us by God to communicate to us the realities of the blessings of the covenant of grace, through the signs instituted by God. The Supper is, therefore, not incidental to the Christian life, but must be seen as a vital part of our sanctification and growth in godliness.

In this meal, Jesus still invites repentant tax collectors and sinners to join him. At the table of the Lord, our gracious God confirms the promise of the gospel, and through partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, God will strengthen and nourish our faith, renew his covenant, and remind us that we are his. Jesus does this because he is our living bread, who came down from heaven.

## **The Second Coming**

The biblical account of the redemption of our fallen race takes many twists and turns throughout the course of redemptive history. But the story comes to a glorious resolution when we come to the final chapter of the story. There is indeed coming a day when all injustices will be made right, all human suffering will cease, and when every tear will be wiped from our eyes. The great hope of the New Testament for the future is that one day our blessed Lord Jesus will suddenly return from heaven to earth to raise the dead, judge all men and women, and renew the heavens and earth by removing every hint and trace of human sin. In Revelation 21:3-4, John reminds us that the Lord's return is the culmination of God's gracious covenant promise: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'" This is that glorious day for which every believer longs - the day of Christ's return.

Yet for those who know not Christ, the Lord's return is a day to be feared. It will be the most terrible day imaginable. In Revelation 6:15-17, John describes this day in terms of the manifestation of God's wrath: "Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?'" Those who are not Christ's, who are not washed in the blood of the lamb, nor clothed with his righteousness, will face the full fury of God's wrath on the day of judgment.

The Bible teaches that when Jesus returns at the end of the age, three distinct yet related events occur simultaneously. The first event is the resurrection of the dead (Daniel 12:1-4; Isaiah 25:6-9) - including

both those who will live forever blessed in the presence of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; 1 Corinthians 15:12-58), and those who will enter into eternal judgment (2 Thessalonians 1:6, 8-9; Revelation 20:11-14). The second event is closely related to the resurrection of the dead, and this is the final judgment of believers and unbelievers alike (Matthew 13:36-43; 25:31-46). The third event is the creation of a new heaven and earth (Romans 8:21; 2 Peter 3:10).

The Old Testament prophets foretold that human history would come to an end with a universal resurrection of the dead. In Daniel 12:2, the prophet declares, “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” Isaiah speaks of this day in terms of a great messianic feast (Isaiah 25:6-9). God “will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.” With these texts in the background, Paul informs the Corinthians of the nature and the hope of the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15:50-55). “I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’”

That the final judgment occurs at the time when Jesus returns is clear from a number of texts. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes that “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting

vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9). In Matthew 13:39b-43, when explaining the parable of the weeds, Jesus declares, “the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” Judgment occurs when the dead are raised at that time when our Lord returns.

But there is another dramatic event which occurs at this time as well. In 2 Peter 3, we read, “scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.’ For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” According to the apostle Peter, when Jesus returns the natural order will be radically changed, and all

traces of the stain of human sin will be purged from the earth. The dead are raised, all are judged, and creation is renewed.

Therefore, when Jesus returns on the last day, he raises the dead, judges the world, and makes all things new - three distinct but related events all of which occur at the same time. This is why the apostolic church comforted one another with this benediction, "Maranatha" ("our Lord come" - 1 Corinthians 16:22) as well as with our Lord's own comforting words of promise to his people, "look up, your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28).

## **The New Heavens and Earth**

When people speak of heaven, they often use images of their favorite places (i.e., the beach, or Yosemite), or they describe some sort of disembodied existence where their immortal soul will finally be set free from the limitations imposed upon it by the human body. I've heard many people who should know better speak of heaven in terms of pearly gates (manned by St. Peter himself) and streets of gold, where daily existence is supposedly centered upon the pleasurable activities (usually the favorite hobby or activity) the departed enjoyed while still on earth. Sadly, none of these images accurately reflect the biblical teaching regarding heaven.

To remedy this sad state of affairs, whenever we speak of heaven we need to carefully distinguish between the intermediate state (which deals with the question of where, exactly, the soul goes when we die) and the eternal state (which speaks to the nature of human existence after the resurrection of the body at the end of the age).

As for the intermediate state, the question "where do we go when we die?" was answered indirectly by Paul, when, in his second

Corinthian letter he wrote “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). To the church in Philippi, Paul wrote that “my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Philippians 1:23). Jesus told the repentant thief on the cross, “truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). And then, the author of Hebrews describes the church as, “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect” (Hebrews 12:23). Where do believers go when we die? We immediately enter into the presence of the Lord at the moment of death.

As for the related question about the intermediate state, “what is it like for those who have died in Christ, and then entered into the presence of the Lord?” the only description given us is that found in Revelation 4-7. We are told by John that there is one seated on the throne (the Lord God Almighty - Revelation 4:8), surrounded by the twenty-four elders (Revelation 4:4), the four living creatures (4:6 ff), the lamb who had been slain is also present (Revelation 5:6 ff.), there are myriads of angels (Revelation 5:11 ff.), the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel (Revelation 7:4 ff.), and then, finally, there is that great multitude of the redeemed (Revelation 7:9), a multitude so vast they cannot be counted, and who are presently crying out in unison (v. 10), “salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” Of this multitude it is said, “they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” When believers die, we enter into the presence of the Lord, awaiting the resurrection of our bodies at the end of the age. Those who have died in Christ currently behold these glorious mysteries described in these remarkable chapters of Revelation.



When it comes to the eternal state and the resurrection of our bodies, there are several important things to consider. As recounted in Luke 20:27-33, Jesus was asked a trick question about the resurrection by the Sadducees. If a man was married and then died, and each of his six brothers married the man's widow as required in the law, and then each of the six brothers died, who would be married to the woman in the resurrection, since she had been married to all seven brothers? Our Lord's answer to this question tells us a great deal about the eternal state after the resurrection. "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him" (Luke 20:34-40). According to Jesus, we are raised bodily from the dead at the end of the age, but after the resurrection life is completely transformed beyond ordinary sexual and family relationships we know in this life. We are said to be equal to angels and described as children of the resurrection.

When someone in the Thessalonian church was confused about this matter, Paul explained what happens to those already in heaven before the throne when Jesus returns (as depicted in Revelation 4-7). The apostle writes, "but we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will

be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Therefore, those saints depicted before the throne will receive their resurrection bodies when Christ returns.

Finally, when we consider the eternal state, we need to keep in mind that heaven is not disembodied existence in a mythical place. In Revelation 21:9-27, John is given a vision of our eternal home - a new heaven and earth where the saints of God dwell in resurrected bodies. Yes, the heavenly city has streets of gold and is filled with precious gems - a way to describe the New Jerusalem’s unspeakable glory by analogy to earthly beauty and wealth. But what really matters in John’s description is that Christ’s church, that bride which he has redeemed, is present with the Savior in her midst. John writes “`come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Revelation 21:9). And then John sees something quite remarkable. “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day - and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:22-27).

The great panorama of redemptive history has taken us from creation, to the fall of our race, to the redemption which is ours in Christ. But the story ends with a magnificent glimpse of that glory which lies ahead. So let us long for that day, and as we do, look to Jesus “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

