

*Salvation*

*has become*

*Complicated*

**JOHAN BLAAUWENDRAAD**

"But to him...that believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

- Paul (Romans 4:5)

"...whenever they [all believers] receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God for the sake of Christ's merits."

-Olevianus/Ursinus (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31)

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# Salvation Has Become Complicated

*A Plea for Being Simply Reformed*

**Johan Blaauwendraad**

*Translated by Bartel Elshout*

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# Preface

## *Reasons For This Booklet*

Has this ever been your experience? After you have listened to a sermon, you have gone home confused. You could agree with many familiar expressions, but at times you have been puzzled about the exposition or explanation that was given. You were especially puzzled about the difference between contemporary ministers and preachers of a former age in the Reformed churches regarding the doctrine which is taught and the pastoral guidance given to the congregation. Many churchgoers are sitting under a ministry which raises questions. This is not only my personal concern but also that of many consistory members of the orthodox Reformed community. I know this to be the case in the Gereformeerde Gemeenten (sister denomination of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations), and I suspect this to be true within other denominations as well.

It is necessary to think about these matters. There are many members and office-bearers who struggle with questions to which they either receive an unsatisfactory answer, or no answer at all.

It is difficult to address a sensitive issue such as preaching. It is noticeable that no one in our circles is accustomed to doing so, and no one will readily discuss it. Nevertheless, it can become a matter of necessity. And because it has become such for me, I am taking this opportunity to express myself more fully. This booklet began with the formulation of various points of discussion intended for use within a small group, and it developed into its present form.

What follows is the opinion of a concerned church member. It does not pretend to be a significant statement and is not rigidly systematic in its construction. It is the author's wish, however, to invite the reader to think about the issues that will be considered. Their significance justifies this.

## *The Word is Our Guide*

I wish to address primarily all those who consider themselves part of the orthodox Reformed segment of the population – particularly that segment which identifies itself as experientially Reformed.

At the very outset of our explanation we wish to declare that the Holy Scriptures are the only basis for our discussion. We believe the three Forms of Unity to be founded upon them. Within the Reformed community we may hold each other accountable to the Scriptures. It is important that we use only the Bible and the scripturally based Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession of Faith, and Canons of Dort as our benchmark if we are going to determine whether we as Reformed people are on the right path. The Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith were formulated shortly after the Reformation. In order to correctly understand their meaning, we must consult the writings of the Reformer Calvin, and to a lesser degree those of Luther. And, of course, the works of men such as Olevianus and Ursinus, the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, must also be consulted.

Furthermore, the *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Second Reformation) is also significant for us. Whenever appropriate, we will consult old writers such as W. Teellinck, W. à Brakel, J. van der Kemp, and Th. van der Groe. The well-known catechism booklet of A. Hellenbroek can be useful to clarify matters as well. In a unique way A. Comrie will be brought into the discussion also. Finally, whenever a passage of Scripture needs to be examined, the marginal notes of the *Statenvertaling* (the Dutch equivalent of the KJV) will be taken into serious consideration. We esteem them highly.

### *The Administration of Grace*

It is our intention to focus on some very specific issues, which may give the impression, however, that this book is one-sided. Therefore, by way of preface, I wish to define several matters very clearly, particularly the gracious character of faith. It is ultimately an absolutely one-sided work of God to quicken a sinner from spiritual death. We concur unreservedly with all who emphasize the current significance of the *Canons of Dort*. The manner in which it pleases the Lord to regenerate a sinner is also described in the Heidelberg Catechism. When considering all that will subsequently be said in this book, one must keep this in mind.

In the explanation that follows, the *nature* of grace is not the issue, but rather, the *administration* of grace, which the Lord sets forth in His Word. There is a revealed will of God that shows how He is pleased to glorify His grace, how preaching plays a role in this, and what the contents of such preaching is. That is the focal point of this book.

### *Target Group*

The incidental theologian among us will perhaps smile at the naive engineer who is straying from his profession. My request therefore is to give more weight to my intention than my competence.

I have already stated that an earlier version of this book has been circulated as a forum for discussion among a restricted group of people. This group consisted exclusively of office-bearers, and the intent was to restrict its circulation to them. This booklet ended up being read in several places by the common church member. This, in turn, resulted in two types of reactions. The confused church member was surprised to recognize his own concerns and was encouraged. So did some office-bearers, but some of them tended toward denial and are inclined to be on the defensive. Since in the meantime a greater measure of publicity has become a fact, I have decided to publish my discussion notes in a manner I can personally control. The primary objective of this book is to encourage the concerned church member. Nevertheless, I would rejoice if it would also prompt many office-bearers to reflect upon these matters.

One more point. I am acutely conscious of the fact that the significance of this booklet is limited to time and place. If one contrasts the problems to be discussed with the issues that confront the church of God on a world-wide scale, then we are dealing here with only marginal issues. There are certainly more important issues that we need to grapple with. Even if I were to limit myself to the Netherlands, there would be weightier subjects worth considering. However, one is also responsible for his immediate environment, for the congregations to which one belongs. And within that context there are indeed important issues that need to be grappled with. That was the decisive factor for me.

### *Main Issues to Be Considered*

This book consists primarily of two parts. The first part consists of chapters one through five, in which I will present how, immediately after the Reformation, expression was given both doctrinally and homiletically to matters such as the invitation of the gospel, faith, justification, regeneration, and growth in grace. In these chapters I intend to explain clearly what preaching in the classic Reformed sense really is. In chapters six through twelve, the second part, I will demonstrate how the doctrines of faith have gradually changed, and how the manner in which the congregation is presently addressed in the preaching of the Word differs from the past. This will be accompanied with a plea to return to being "simply Reformed." In the last chapter I will

summarize the objective of this book.

Most emphatically, this book does not present my own theology but intends to contrast a very prevalent type of contemporary preaching with the manner in which our forefathers have expressed themselves. The reader can then render his own judgment.

### **Acknowledgments for English Edition**

This English language edition is the first dissemination outside of the Netherlands, apart from Dutch language copies which circulate in North America. Though the occasion for publishing the book has come from concern about the administration of the gospel in my own country, I have readily approved the plan to arrive at an English version. It has not been a heavy task to convince me that a translation may make sense, taking into account so many people having their roots in Holland and/or have intimate contact with churches on both sides of the Atlantic. I am indebted to Rev. Bartel Elshout for the translation and to Rev. Foppe VanderZwaag for checking its accuracy.

I am thankful for the surprisingly broad reception of this book in the Netherlands, the approval it meets with in the congregations, and the comfort and support it appears to offer many people. My sincere wish is that it may contribute similarly to the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ abroad.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Preaching is Proclamation

#### *Promise and Command*

The reason for writing this book is the current confusion about the nature of preaching. What issues must the minister address in sound preaching and what is he permitted to say to the congregation? We will begin by ascertaining how this was done in former days—during and immediately after the Reformation. I will be brief about those matters we probably concur with and deal more extensively with those aspects which presently have either been pushed aside somewhat or appear to have been forgotten.

Sound preaching will in a most penetrating manner address the guilt of the sinner, the wrath of a righteous God upon sin, and the absolute inability of man himself to satisfy the justice of God. The sinner is held accountable in light of his original and actual sins. Sound preaching will also point to the way of salvation: Whoever repents and believes in the Son of God shall be saved. God *promises* that! The Canons of Dort express this in Head II, 5: "Moreover, the *promise* of the gospel is, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified, shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the *command* to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel." And in Head III/IV, 8, we are assured that God is serious about the call of the gospel: "For God hath most earnestly and truly declared in His Word what will be acceptable to Him; namely, that all who are called, should comply with the invitation. He, moreover, seriously *promises* eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him" [emphasis mine]. Preaching is proclamation. It is proclaimed to all hearers that there is a free and general offer of grace, along with the command to repent and believe. The minister must set before his hearers the command of God to believe in Christ. The promises of the gospel must be embraced with a true faith. As for God, offering something is identical in meaning to *giving* or *bestowing*. We will come back to this a bit later. It is a command to believe in Christ, as failure to do so is disobedience. "He that believeth not the Son (Statenvertaling: Die de Zoon ongehoorzaam is, i.e. he that *disobeys* the Son) shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

#### *For John and Peter*

In every sermon the minister must urgently exhort sinners to receive Christ, not hastening from being a pastor (Dutch: shepherd) to follow them (Ger. 17:16). He need not worry about the tension between the offer of grace and election, writes Van der Groe in his famous letter to J. Groenewegen. That is the Lord's business. We may allow our mind to be led captive by the Word of God. We are to deal with the revealed will of God which teaches us that all must come to Christ. "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth" (Isa. 45:22a); "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it?" (Isa. 5:4a). This concerns all hearers. No one is excluded. Everyone may consider himself as being personally called by name. Van der Groe teaches in the previously mentioned letter, "You John, you Peter; you may freely say, 'we poor sinners, by the operation of Thy Holy Spirit, therefore also come to Thee, and leaning upon thy sincere and general offer in Thy holy gospel, we humbly receive Thee.'"

Faithful preaching will always extend the urgent invitation to sinners to be reconciled with God. A minister may do this as compellingly "as though God did beseech by [him]," for the

word of reconciliation has been committed unto him. The minister need not be inhibited by the knowledge that no sinner can come in his own power. The Holy Spirit will take care of this. Olevianus says that He will make this calling so efficacious that sinners will come—and those sinners who do not come will perish because they have rejected this offer, which the Bible considers counting the blood of the Son of God an unholy thing and a treading underfoot of Christ (Heb. 10:29). In another Scripture passage the unbeliever is charged with his unwillingness to have Christ rule as king over him. The issue is faith versus unbelief. The minister's obligation is to offer Christ to all. The Word of grace is not diminished in any way by the ingratitude of men. This is how the old Reformed fathers preached. He who is somewhat acquainted with the writings of our forefathers will know this to be so. I am thinking of the Erskine brothers, Hellenbroek, Koelman, Costerus, Avinck, and many more. The promise of the gospel is that anyone is welcome in Christ, and that promise is addressed to all hearers.

By way of illustration, I will quote a passage from a published sermon of Ebenezer Erskine on Hebrews 10:22:

It (the promise) is addressed to whomever the joyful sound of the eternal gospel comes: "... whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). He who sits upon the throne of grace calls unto everyone that hears Him to come in order to obtain grace and mercy. He assures him that he who comes to Him shall in no wise be cast out. And we who are the heralds and servants of the great king, whose name is "the LORD, merciful and gracious," have the right and the commission to exclaim that to you, the children of men, "is the word of this salvation sent"....There need not be the least doubt that the call and command to believe is extended to everyone. Otherwise someone's unbelief cannot be his sin.... Suppose a letter, addressed to me, arrives containing a check of 50, 100, or 1000 pounds sterling—or even more if you wish...; the fact that the letter has been addressed to me gives me the right to present this check to the bank for payment.... I wish to use this to indicate how near Christ and His salvation are brought to us in the Word of faith or of promise. Its purpose is that we would thereby be encouraged to take refuge to the blood of Jesus in full assurance of faith.

Erskine never tires of testifying that God is sincere—indeed, He has bound Himself with an oath to be gracious to us when we come to Him. The publication of Erskine's sermons, from which this quote is taken, includes an affectionate introduction by Van der Groe.

### *The Scope of the Invitation*

In the preaching of the Word, God offers salvation to all hearers, to both the penitent who have a lively sense of their sins, and the impenitent who are as yet hardened and continue to live carelessly. The gospel promises something to *all* hearers. They all receive the same promise, which is that one will be saved if he believes in the Son. Furthermore, the Lord swears with an oath that He is sincere: "As I live..." (Ezek. 33:11), and He beseeches us to come. Paul says, "...as though God did beseech you by us" (2 Cor. 5:20).

We call this the offer of grace. This offer in the Word is for us the warrant to believe in Christ. This is what Koelman teaches in his *Natuur en gronden des geloofs* (The Nature and Warrant of Faith), as well as Taffin in his *Merktkenen der kinderen Gods* (Marks of God's Children). It is also the doctrine of à Brakel in *The Christian's Reasonable Service*—and nearly every Reformed forefather has expressed himself in like manner. The offer of grace is everyone's warrant to come to Christ and to receive Him. In the gospel Christ is presented to everyone, and it is thus no presumption to receive Him. One may accept a gift; that is no theft. In this light one need not fear too quickly of having a "stolen Jesus." The Lord beseeches us to come. He even

commands it. Simply stated, it is everyone's duty to come to Christ. Ministers must, in Christ's name, command all hearers to believe in Him. The command sounds forth: "And this is his commandment that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 3:23a). He who does not comply with this commandment is disobedient to the Son.

The minister may urge all hearers to go to Jesus and to believe in Him. The measure in which we have experienced our guilt is not of importance in order to come to Christ rightly. Not a single condition is requisite for this coming. The offer of grace is free, sincere, and unconditional. Ministers *must* say more than that: The God who promises is greatly grieved—indeed, provoked to wrath—when we do not come. You are then actually saying with so many words that you neither trust His Word nor believe His promise. The Son of God takes the rejection of His gift very seriously. You are then making Him out to be a liar. Let me repeat: The promise in the Word is both our foundation and warrant to go to Christ, and it also defines our duty to do so.

### *The Reduction of the Offer of Grace*

In our day we have become so rationalistic and intellectually oriented that we no longer quite know what to do with a sincere gospel offer to all. It is therefore often presented in a reserved and restrained manner. A sermon of one hour is at best concluded with the final wish that sinners might yet be converted, along with the reassurance that this is still possible. That is a reduced offer of grace. This is not an offer of grace, and when it is presented in such terms, the offer has not functioned in preaching. The offer of salvation and showing the solemn obligation to receive it may be the backbone of the entire sermon—in fact, it must reoccur in the preaching with great regularity.

Obviously the other extreme is not good either. Kohlbrugge teaches correctly in his *Tale Kanaans* (The Language of Canaan) that if the sermon consists only of the offer of grace, the sheep will suffer hunger; God's people will then not be fed. The hearers may and must, however, be held accountable. It also must not be a matter of indifference to the minister whether there is much or little fruit upon the preaching. He lets God be God, but he also yearns for the salvation of sinners. The congregation will sense this, for she will then be approached with a loving heart and be addressed with an urgent invitation and exhortation to come to Christ. A sermon is more than an instructive *declaration*. It becomes a *proclamation* which persuades men to become Christians. Let me say it once more: The preacher will not hasten from being a pastor to follow them (Jer. 17:16).

Let me repeat what I stated at the outset of this chapter: The preaching of the law as a schoolmaster unto Christ is absolutely not the issue under discussion. In fact, the preaching of the law is all the more reason to preach the full offer of grace, for an awakened, alarmed sinner finds so many reasons to exclude himself. Such a sinner will in his own estimation never satisfy the conditions of humiliation and his sense of guilt. Therefore, both awakened and as yet hardened sinners are warmly invited without distinction. Thus, no one need exclude himself.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Faith and Justification are Inseparable**

#### *Taking Hold of Christ*

The invitation of the gospel is an urgent call to believe in Christ. I am sometimes fearful that very unreformed views are in vogue as to how one is led to exercise such faith.

What does it mean to come to faith? I want to articulate this with the words of an early representative of the Dutch Second Reformation, Willem Teellinck. In his *Huisboek* (House Book), he expounds question 19 of the *Compendium*; "What is a true faith?" A poor sinner who is convinced of his misery and acknowledges that he deserves nothing but hell, death, and damnation is enlightened to understand that the Lord God gives a means unto salvation in Christ the Mediator. By the operation of the Holy Spirit he is driven outside of himself and most earnestly begins to pant and long for the Lord Jesus Christ. Teellinck says, "He stretches his soul so far, and to such an extent, that he takes hold of Christ." This is the true work of faith, for man is thus "compelled to take hold of the Lord Jesus Christ and to bring Him to his heart. In this manner, according to Teellinck, "the Lord Christ, who is universally set before us as the Redeemer and Savior of poor and needy sinners, will specifically be brought and directed to the heart of man by the personal appropriation of faith." This is what our Forms of Unity refer to as "receiving Christ."

#### *Giving Our Hand*

All hearers are called by the preaching of the Word. It is in this way that hearers come under conviction, which occurs as a result of the operation of God's Spirit. Both the elect and the reprobate are initially subjected to this operation. Sadly, this operation subsides with the reprobate. For him it remains a general calling. In the elect God accomplishes His purpose by rendering the calling effectual. Their conviction remains, and a time comes when the sinner flees to Christ offered in the gospel and receives Him with a greater or lesser measure of freedom. This is the first act of faith. The dead sinner is translated into Christ. By faith the sinner is grafted into Him. The actual exercise of faith determines that we have been translated from death to life. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" (John 3:36a).

Is this act of faith always a conscious act? No, for it can be very weak. Perhaps the sinner himself cannot consider it to be faith, but a yearning and longing for Christ is already faith—a cleaving faith. Koelman, in his *Natuur en gronden des geloofs* (The Nature and Warrant of Faith) expresses himself similarly to Teellinck. He begins by saying that "evangelical and justifying faith wholeheartedly delights itself in the way of salvation which God has conceived in Christ. It approves of this way and acquiesces in it. It is a heartfelt turning to Christ as the way, the truth, and the life." Koelman then writes, "Faith is the soul's heartfelt fleeing unto and taking refuge in Christ...; it is a giving of the hand and a willing subscription with the hand of the soul that one desires in all things to come to Christ to receive it as a free gift....In one word, faith is an act of the will."

This short formulation brings us to the marrow of the issue. If ever men knew that the act of faith is a gift of grace, then our forefathers were such men. Ephesians 2 was a precious chapter to them. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate to designate faith as an *act*—as an activity of the sinner. The sinner takes refuge, gives his hand, receives, embraces, appropriates, makes application to

himself—and many other words are used to express this. The forefathers spoke this language without having one thread of Arminianism running through it. Whenever it was appropriate, they would also say that it was the hidden power of the Holy Spirit who moves the sinner to exercise faith. However, they would not do so when they wanted to describe the nature of faith itself.

#### *What is it to be Ingrafted by Faith?*

The Heidelberg Catechism speaks of this in Lord's Day 7, by stating that the sinner is ingrafted into Christ by faith, and thereby receives all His benefits. Who could we better ask what this means than the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism? Fortunately the exposition of Ursinus is available to us. He says that the benefits of which Lord's Day 7 speaks, are the benefits that are offered in the gospel.<sup>1</sup> The benefits of the gospel revolve around the promises of grace, the free forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life through Christ and for His sake. The sinner believes this gospel and applies those benefits to himself. The gospel, including the use of the sacraments, is the mediate cause and the Holy Spirit the moving cause. It is the gift of God. Moved by the Spirit, the soul appropriates Christ as her Redeemer and is thus ingrafted into Him. Passivity and activity coincide in a holy and glorious manner. It is the irresistible power of God that stirs the soul to exercise faith.

In *Het Schatboek*, Ursinus says the following about faith: "The reason why not all are saved by Christ is not to be attributed to the insufficiency of the merits and grace of Christ; ...rather, the unbelief of men who reject the benefits of Christ offered in the gospel is the cause of this." Furthermore, "The reason, therefore, why only believers are saved is that they alone receive the benefits of Christ.... Indeed, believers, and they alone, acknowledge the grace and mercy of God and render Him thanks for it." Ursinus summarizes: "All things taken together we say that, although the satisfaction of Christ the Mediator for our sins is absolutely perfect, not all are redeemed by it, but only they who believe the gospel and by a true faith appropriate the merits of Christ." This is what it means to be ingrafted by faith into Christ. That is Ursinus's exposition of Lord's Day 7.

It is noteworthy that Ursinus's formulation is always in the active voice. Today we would be inclined to say that faith is applied and that it must be *planted* by God, speaking in the passive voice. The old Reformed forefathers, on the contrary, refer to it as receiving and *appropriating*. Believers appropriate the benefits of Christ, take hold of Him, bring Him to their heart, etc. I will come back to this.

#### *Two Sides of One Coin*

As soon as the heart of the sinner is thus led to exercise faith, he *immediately* receives the pardon of sins, justification, and whatever else God offers him unto his salvation in His Son. He receives this by the power of the Holy Spirit, from the hand of God with a true faith and a soul hungry for salvation. Faith and justification belong together as two sides of one coin. In the old Reformed truth these two matters are inseparably united. As soon as the sinner embraces (appropriates) God's grace by a true faith, he at the same time takes hold of and receives with a believing heart the forgiveness of sins and justification. He is thus immediately justified by God. He must be assured of this.

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<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, I will quote Ursinus again and will always use his exposition as it has been passed on to us by his student Pareus. The Dutch version of this, along with the addenda of Bastingius, is called *Het Schatboek* (The Book of Treasures). I will only quote from the original text of Pareus as translated from the Latin by C. van Proosdij, but will nevertheless refer to it under the name of *Het Schatboek*.

Justification occurs immediately upon the sinner embracing Christ by faith. We are justified *by* the act of faith and not *after* the act of faith. This application occurs in two coinciding ways. Ursinus writes about this in his exposition of the twenty-third Lord's Day: "From God's perspective this application is *imputation*. From our perspective this application is an *act of faith*. God applies to us the righteousness of Christ upon condition that we ourselves also appropriate it by faith. *Without our appropriation there is no divine bestowal*. Even though one offers another a benefit, this will neither be applied to him nor be his unless he receives it. Justification transpires simultaneously in heaven and in the conscience of the believer. These two can be distinguished, but may under no circumstances be separated" (emphasis mine). Van der Groe concurs with this in his *De Gereformeerde grondleer van de genadige rechtvaardigmaking door het geloof* (The Reformed Doctrine of Gratuitous Justification by Faith). This can be expressed in these terms without becoming Arminian and making God dependent upon the sinner. God is always first. Ursinus says, "And yet our appropriation is also from God. In fact, God first imputes Christ's satisfaction to us and afterwards works faith in us, by which we appropriate this imputed righteousness. This confirms that the divine application precedes ours [that is, our believing application], it being the cause of faith, although it does not transpire without our appropriation."

#### *If Only I Could...*

The Heidelberg Catechism refers to this intimate relationship between faith and justification, by stating in Lord's Day 23 that "God...grants and imputes to me...the righteousness and holiness of Christ...inasmuch as I embrace such benefit with a believing heart." I have read in Dr. J. van Genderen's *Gerechtigheid als geschenk* (Righteousness as a Gift), that the words "inasmuch as" are the translation of the German words "wenn ich alleine." This means "if only I" or "provided." God's gracious imputation and our believing embrace completely coincide. It does not say, "have embraced," but rather, "embrace." Immediately upon embracing this benefit by faith, our justification is a fact. It struck me that Van der Groe in his *Gereformeerde grondleer* (Reformed Doctrine) almost literally says the same: "These words 'inasmuch as' must therefore be understood by us to mean that they express the absolute and essential relationship between God's gracious imputation and our believing embrace, and that God's imputation truly does not occur in a different or progressive manner, except our believing embrace in actuality coincides with this." The heart in which the Holy Ghost works the appropriation of faith simultaneously embraces Christ and the Father's acquittal. À Brakel says that he who has been acquitted by the Father thereby immediately receives sonship and peace with God. The Heidelberg Catechism also states this in Lord's Day 31, when it deals with the keys of the kingdom of heaven: "According to the command of Christ it is declared and publicly testified to all and every believer, that, *whenever* they receive the promise of the gospel by a true faith, all their sins are really forgiven them of God" (emphasis mine). All their sins are forgiven; that is, believers are justified. God does this for the sake of the merits of Christ *to each and every believer* who receives the promise of the gospel.

I previously quoted answer 60 of Lord's Day 23. Question 61 is also answered beautifully: "Why sayest thou, that thou art righteous by faith only?" The catechumen is then permitted to answer that the satisfaction, justice, and holiness of Christ are his righteousness before God, and it becomes very personal when he concludes "that I cannot *receive* and *apply the same to myself* any other way than by faith only." The catechism repeats this in Lord's Day 28 when it speaks about the Lord's Supper. There we read, "...to embrace with a believing heart all the sufferings

and death of Christ, and *thereby* to obtain the pardon of sin" (emphasis mine).

The well-known catechism book of Abraham Hellenbroek, *A Specimen of Divine Truth*, fully concurs with this description in Chapter 15, Questions and Answers 15-17:

*Question:* How do Christ's merits become ours?

*Answer:* By imputation and reception.

*Question:* Who imputes them to us?

*Answer:* God, by way of a gracious gift.

*Question:* How do we receive them?

*Answer:* By faith.

We had better not get rid of this catechism book too soon, provided we expound it correctly.

### *Faith in the Father*

Something else needs to be said about the views of the Reformers. They teach that to embrace Christ is to embrace *the acquittal of the Father*. However timid our use of the Mediator may be, even if we only dare but touch the hem of His garment, it is an embracing of Christ, and upon this the Father acquits us. God is thereby for the sinner *immediately and simultaneously* a reconciled Judge and a merciful Father.

Calvin states it very boldly. In his *Institutes* he refuses to separate faith from faith in the Father: "For, as Paul attests, faith is not true unless it asserts and brings to mind that sweetest name of Father—nay, unless it opens our mouth freely to cry, 'Abba, Father'" [Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6] (McNeil/Battles Edition, 3.13.5). I believe that traces of this are also to be found in the form prayers in our liturgy. Have you noticed how often these prayers begin by addressing God as Father? Today it would raise suspicion in some Reformed circles if we were to begin our prayers with such confidence.

### *Nevertheless a Poor Sinner*

Perhaps the following question has occurred to the reader: Is this description of faith and justification in harmony with being a poor sinner? Does the believer, as here described, not presume more than he should? Does such a definition not culminate in unfruitful Christians who "run aground at high tide"? The latter is the well-known counter question of ministers and church members who have drifted away from the Reformed doctrine that faith and justification coincide.

The question is not valid, however. To use Bunyan's language, not all the Diabolians have been expelled from the city of Mansoul. This keeps the believer humble. The accuser of the brethren does not cease to render faith suspect and to assault it. Our indwelling corruption continually draws us away from the Lord and a continual battle must be waged against the world. The Lord has many means at His disposal to keep His children humble—and this is indeed their experience. He will look upon and dwell with them that are poor and of a contrite spirit, and who tremble at His Word. All this, however, does not take away from the acquittal and the experience of God's paternal favor. Each time the trembling soul makes use of Christ she has the acquittal of the Father. Olevianus writes in his *Over het wezen van het genadeverbond* (Concerning the Essence of the Covenant of Grace): "Assurance of faith does not contradict the knowledge that the believer is tormented with the various terrors of the flesh, the world, and Satan. The faithfulness of God will not permit that he loses this confidence received by the Holy Ghost from the testimony of the gospel."

### *That is Freedom*

Luther and Calvin also say wonderful things about Christian freedom. To be righteous before God, to partake of the righteousness of Christ, and to be set free from the demands of the law—all this, according to their view is reserved not only for the very advanced in grace, but is particularly significant for the encouragement of troubled consciences.

In his *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther makes it clear that he was acquainted with the old nature which is opposed to a life of gratitude. He is well-acquainted with the necessity of self-discipline required to bring the unruliness of the body into subjection. He writes, "As long as we are upon earth, we will always both start afresh and continue to increase." Nevertheless, as Luther says, the Christian need not succumb when he looks at his imperfect gratitude before the Lord. When he may live out of justification, it is with the knowledge that he need not live in fear because of imperfect works.

According to Calvin, Christian freedom functions in a similar manner. In his *Institutes* (III: 19) he uses a beautiful example, which I will paraphrase: A servant dares not come into the presence of his master when his assigned task has not been completed. A son, however, dares to come before a loving father; A Christian, therefore, is not motivated by the severity of the law, but, as the called of God, by paternal tenderness. Our works have been polluted by the corruption of our flesh, and yet they are pleasing to our most gracious Father. That, says Calvin, is freedom.

### *Summary*

The Reformation has taught that faith and justification are inseparably connected, and that to embrace Christ is equivalent to embracing the acquittal of the Father, though not every believer experiences this in an equally powerful manner. It is noteworthy that faith and being ingrafted into Christ are always explained as an *act* of faith of the awakened sinner who is moved to do so by the Holy Spirit.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **What About Regeneration?**

#### *The Other Side of Faith*

In the foregoing presentation of faith and justification you may have noticed that the concept of *regeneration as being made alive* was not mentioned explicitly. In fact, a search for such a concept in the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith will be almost in vain.

The Reformers and their immediate followers evidently made faith the starting point of their thinking: *sola fide* (faith alone). Calvin does indeed use the word *regeneration* in his *Institutes*, not in the sense of being made alive, but in the sense of the renewal of life, that is, sanctification. Occasionally this is referred to as regeneration in a wider sense. The Heidelberg Catechism also refers to regeneration in Lord's Day 26 when dealing with baptism, as well as in Lord's Day 33 where it is called "true conversion," within the context of gratitude. The Belgic Confession of Faith also refers to regeneration as such in Article 24 which deals with sanctification.

I am, however, not here referring to this meaning of regeneration. When stating that the concept of regeneration is not mentioned in what we have presented thus far, I am referring to regeneration as the act of quickening—regeneration in its narrow sense. The Heidelberg Catechism speaks about this only in answer 8, when it discusses our incapability to do any good, "except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God." The greater emphasis upon regeneration as a quickening act surfaced when Arminian sentiments became so strong that the Synod of Dort I became a necessity. In the Canons of Dort the doctrine of regeneration as a one-sided divine gift of new life was forcefully defended. It was not presented as a new doctrine, but as the other side of the act of faith.

The relationship between regeneration and faith is pointedly expressed in the conversation between the Lord Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3), is a well-known text and the subject of many sermons. Quite recently my attention was drawn to the fact that in the same chapter, in fact, during the same conversation with Nicodemus, the Lord Jesus says, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (v. 16). I cannot remember ever hearing a sermon preached about this text in my circles. Then follows: "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (v. 18). The Lord, so to speak, expounds His earlier statement. To be born again is—I repeat—the reverse side of the command to believe. I had never noticed that before, for this had never before been pointed out to me. Regeneration and faith are seldom explained within this context.

The Lord exercises His elect with the promises, and faith is the active instrument. The sinner is not to be exercised with regeneration, is he? I believe that you and I are not commanded to be regenerated, but rather, to repent and believe. I would put it this way: God's Word teaches the *necessity* of being born again and the *command* to repent and believe. This prompted Augustine to say, "Lord, give what Thou commandest, and then command what Thou wilt."

#### *Obstacles*

What dawned on me personally is far more eloquently expressed in Spurgeon's *All of Grace*. I will quote at length from his exposition of the words, "Ye must be born again." He writes:

This word of our Lord Jesus has appeared to flame in the way of many, like the drawn sword of the cherub at the gate of Paradise. They have despaired, because this change is beyond their utmost effort. The new birth is from above, and therefore it is not in the creature's power. Now it is far from my mind to deny, or ever to conceal, a truth in order to create a false comfort. I freely admit that the new birth is supernatural, and that it cannot be wrought by the sinner's own self. It would be a poor help to my reader if I were wicked enough to try to cheer him by persuading him to reject or forget what is unquestionably true.

But is it not remarkable that the very chapter in which our Lord makes the sweeping declaration also contains the most explicit statement as to salvation by faith? Read the third chapter of John's gospel and do not dwell upon its earlier sentences. It is true that the third verse says: "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." But, then, the fourteenth and fifteenth verses speak: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." The eighteenth verse repeats the same doctrine in the broadest terms: "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

It is clear to every reader that these two statements must agree, since they came from the same lips, and are recorded on the same inspired page. Why should we make a difficulty where there can be none? If one statement assures of the necessity to salvation of something, which only God can give, and if another assures us that the Lord will save us upon our believing in Jesus, then we may safely conclude that the Lord will give to those who believe all that is declared to be necessary to salvation. The Lord does, in fact, produce the new birth in all who believe in Jesus; and their believing is the surest evidence that they are born again.

We trust in Jesus for what we cannot do ourselves: if it were in our own power, what need of looking to Him? It is ours to believe; it is the Lord's to create us anew. He will not believe for us, neither are we to do the regenerating work for Him. It is enough for us to obey the gracious command; it is for the Lord to work the new birth in us. He who could go so far as to die on the cross for us, can and will give us all things that are needful for our eternal safety.

I can fully subscribe to this exposition.

### *Two Accounts*

In Acts 16 it is clearly expressed that we need not set regeneration and faith against each other. In Philippi, Paul was privileged to be the means for two converts, Lydia and the jailor. It is interesting to note the difference between the accounts of these two events in this particular passage. The work of God is preeminent in the conversion account of Lydia "... whose heart the Lord opened." Subsequently it is said of her, "... that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul" (v. 14).

In the account of the jailor, it is expressly the duty to believe, which is the central focus. Paul and Silas exhort the trembling man, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (v. 31).

The author of the book of Acts focuses on two matters in one and the same chapter. He sets before us the necessity of the Lord's work, as well as the *command* that man believe. If Luke keeps them in such immediate proximity to each other, let us then continue to do likewise.

### *"And Do Actually Believe"*

I might just as well refer to the Canons of Dort. There we find an inimitable formulation of

the relationship between regeneration and faith in article 12 of Head III/IV: It is "a new creation: a resurrection from the dead, a making alive, which God works in us without our aid." This regeneration, however, remains closely linked to faith and its exercises: ... so that all in whose heart God works in this marvelous manner are certainly, infallibly, and effectually *regenerated, and do actually believe*" [emphasis mine). The will of man is thus renewed, and being moved and prompted by God, becomes itself active. It continues, "Wherefore also, man is himself rightly said to believe and repent, by virtue of that grace received." It strikes me that the Canons keep "regenerated" and "do actually believe" together. In regard to the order of salvation, one may indeed let regeneration take precedence, but in time it coincides with faith. The doctrine of regeneration is not isolated, but remains connected to the justification of the ungodly by faith. I deliberately call attention to this, because we shall subsequently see that in a later period these matters are dealt with differently.

### *No Curious Probing*

The question is raised at times when the actual act of quickening—a change of one's state—occurs. The Reformers do not raise this question at all (they leave this secret alone), but it is raised by à Brakel. His answer is: upon the initial exercise of faith. He immediately adds, however, that not everyone needs to know when this occurred. It is easy to be mistaken here: "If he [the believer] were to begin with the first serious conviction, in all probability he did not have faith as yet. If he were to begin with the moment when, for the first time, he exercised faith consciously and in a most heartfelt manner, he would reckon too late, for in all probability he already had faith" (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*, II, 245). Many a sinner believed at an earlier date than he could perceive. Conversely, the first serious unrest he experiences need not yet be a fruit of regeneration.

According to theologians such as à Brakel, the act of quickening is a doctrine which needs not be curiously probed into. In any case, it need not have a dominant doctrinal position, and certainly not in the preaching. It matters little, for the focal point of the doctrine of salvation is *faith*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Confusion Concerning Spiritual growth**

#### *Daily Increase*

Another question: Does the foregoing description of faith and justification sufficiently express that there is growth in the life of grace? In that definition there is not a single reference to *steps* in grace. How are we to view this?

Let me make very clear: The Bible expressly teaches that there is spiritual growth. Paul writes in his epistle to the Ephesians that children who, tossed to and fro and carried about, may grow up into Him, even Christ (Eph. 4:14-15). In his first epistle Peter expresses the wish to Christians that they may grow up as newborn babes. He concludes his second epistle with similar language: "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." It is obvious that the Lord does not teach His children everything in one day.

Olevianus writes in his *Over het wezen van het genadeverbond* (Concerning the Essence of the Covenant of Grace), "Union with Christ, according to God's wisdom, has steps as to its beginning and progression, whereby it *slowly but surely* is brought to perfection" (emphasis mine). The Holy Spirit is the initiator who also grants gradual increase in proportion to the growth of faith. Theodore à Brakel (father of Wilhelmus à Brakel) uses the word "gradually" in his well-known book *De trappen des geestelijken levens* (The Steps of Spiritual Life). Olevianus writes that from God's side there is neither decrease nor increase, but that this is true for the sensible awareness of our faith. He continues by stating that faith takes possession of the *entire* Christ; however, it *enjoys* Him in proportion to the increase of faith; that is, in proportion to the clarity of the revelation from God's side and our knowledge. According to Van der Groe, there is strong and weak faith, but gold is gold whether it is a large or small nugget. When the apostles asked the Lord, "Increase our faith," He responded in Luke 17:6, "If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you." That there is growth in the life of faith is also beautifully expressed in the *Form for the Administration of the Lord's Supper*. The Christian must first examine himself whether he believes the faithful promise of God, that all his sins are forgiven him only for the sake of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. That is quite something! Nevertheless, it says a bit further on in this form that this Christian must strive daily against the weakness of his flesh and desires to fight against unbelief. The hearts of believers can be so burdened and dejected that they are in need of being strengthened. And after the administration of the Lord's Supper the church asks: "Grant, we beseech thee, oh faithful God and Father that...the commemoration of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ may tend to the daily *increase* of our faith" (emphasis mine).

#### *The Nature of Spiritual Increase*

"Increase" is a synonym of "growth," and growth occurs gradually. Plants, animals, and children do not grow by leaps and bounds. No, increase is a growth process. And it is precisely the word "increase" which the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible writers to use. As God Himself teaches His servants how to deal with His church, which He calls feeding the sheep, it reminds us of daily nourishment and growth. Spiritual birth actually transpires as a natural birth does. It is not an adult which is born, but a baby—a baby which is, however, fully formed. For example, he

has ears, but by way of hearing he will increase his learning and thus gradually develop into an adult person.

The Lord also has appointed *means* for spiritual growth. This green pasture is the preaching of His Word and the ministry of His Spirit. In condensed form, I will quote what Van der Kemp says in a letter to a friend about justification:

A beginning Christian who has made little progress, cannot discern very well within his soul what is from God and what is from man. Such a soul will still be tossed to and fro. When God grants sensible grace, the soul rejoices and her mountain seems to stand fast. However, if this occurs only rarely, she will be alarmed. Such a soul must be directed to the excellent way of the continual exercise of faith (by way of a repeated act of the will) and receiving the offered Mediator and His righteousness, as well as a surrender of himself to be the Lord's. For such a soul this would be its breath, nourishment, and life.

By acquainting itself with the Lord, the heart could become assured and the soul would no longer doubt. Once faith has become stronger and has been brought to an established state, he or she will be assured that the Lord forgives sins daily. The believer, however, must repeatedly take hold of the Mediator, the Strength of God, and thus be at peace with Him.

A beginner in grace focuses particularly upon the stirring of his affections, and the more advanced believer receives more illumination in his understanding. The Spirit of truth leads him more and more into the truth. He is filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding to "walk worthy unto the Lord in all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:9,10). (*Drie bevindelijke brieven over de rechtvaardigmaking* [Three Experiential Letters About Justification]).

### *Spiritual Growth or Regression?*

I wish to address a possible misunderstanding. It is a favorite expression among us that growth in grace essentially consists in a person decreasing in his own estimation. We are fond of saying that increase in faith comes down to being increasingly broken down in one's self. Does this not contradict what has been stated about spiritual growth?

The answer is, "No." This is a false contradiction that can be cleared up easily. The spiritual growth we have just discussed pertains to justifying faith and the life proceeding from justification. In contrast, the dying life of the believer in which he is increasingly broken down, is an aspect of conversion in sanctification. In the life of gratitude the old man must die and the new man must be quickened. The child of God continually regresses in order to progress, and must repeatedly start afresh. This does not change the fact, however, that God's people can increase in the life of faith proceeding from justification. The believer can increase in the use he makes of the Mediator and in laying hold of the Mighty One of God. The Reformers did not hesitate to call *that* growth in grace—that is, an increase in Christian liberty and growth in faith. The Reformers have placed this growth side by side with the equally true fact that the believer must increasingly be exercised in true humiliation. We have observed in chapter two that it is indeed the doctrine of justification that encourages troubled souls. It appears to be very experiential to emphasize only this humiliation, but in doing so an important string of the instrument is missing—the string of increase. The instrument of experience has multiple strings.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Conversion ... But How?**

#### *The Usual Way is Not a Requirement*

We were informed earlier that the offer of grace comes to all hearers. All have the same right to come to Christ and have an equal warrant to believe in Him. Nevertheless, not all hearers come to faith. The common view of the forefathers is that generally only people with a sensible view of their sins will truly come, since only they perceive the value of the Savior and have need of Him. That is the *way* in which the Lord generally is pleased to work; however, that way is *not a prerequisite*. Reformed forefathers expressed themselves very cautiously in this respect. Conviction of sin is not a condition, but without conviction of sin the Mediator has no value. How reluctant the forefathers were of putting unnecessary, indeed, even wrong obstacles in the way. I will demonstrate this by way of some quotes, again from Koelman, à Brakel, and Erskine.

#### *Warning Ministers?*

Koelman exhorts us earnestly in his *Natuur en gronden des geloofs* (Nature and Warrant of Faith) not to foster a wrong notion of the appropriation of salvation. The first quote is as follows:

Beware of thinking and believing that a sinner can go to Jesus by faith too soon to receive everything from Him, through Him, and for His sake—that one must for a long period of time be burdened by his sins and be of a broken and contrite spirit, being sensible to his emptiness, insignificance, and lost state, until one arrives at a heartfelt and sincere intention and firm resolution to turn from all sin with abhorrence—that one must be willing to obey Christ as King and only Sovereign—and until one has an earnest desire and unquenchable thirst for Jesus, a thirst which cannot be quenched except through Christ alone and which yields such a high esteem for Jesus Christ that one esteems all of no value apart from Christ.

Koelman continues his warning as follows:

This is an erroneous opinion and proposition which at first glance has an appearance of soundness, but which is very harmful and troublesome for the many who exercise the act of cleaving [to Christ] by faith. Experience tells us that many, upon the command of the gospel, lack the freedom to embrace Christ and to request all grace through Him. Many wait here, having the notion that neither the offer of grace can be received immediately nor Christ may be embraced. They are of the opinion that they must first be subject to the spirit of bondage for a season, have a truly broken and contrite spirit, be fully wounded by a sense of their sins, and be sensitive to the wrath of God and its unavoidability. Furthermore, they must have sincere intentions to depart from evil and to do good, accompanied with a very earnest hungering and thirsting after Christ and His imputed righteousness. This view causes these souls to be in such darkness and surrounded by such a fog, that they cannot see clearly how they can yet come to Jesus. They are fearful that proper preparation is lacking in them, and that consequently the offer of the promises and of Christ, along with the entire covenant, is not yet made to them and that they would come too soon to Christ to embrace Him as their Savior—something for which some ministers may perhaps have warned them.

### *Many Are Hindered*

The second quote from Koelman's fine book reads as follows: "Beware of subscribing to this erroneous principle in your heart, namely, that there must first be a proper relationship between your sorrow over sin and your sins as such." Koelman explains that as follows:

Many refrain from exercising faith and the embracing of the Mediator, since they do not find within themselves a measure of sorrow which is proportionate to the great measure of their wickedness. However, this is entirely wrong and erroneous, for it is impossible that there could be a proper relationship between your sins and your sorrow over these sins. Every iniquity and transgression is in a sense infinite relative to its object, the infinite God, against whom they are committed. The sorrow of the soul cannot ascend to that level. Therefore, you must know these four things and consider them carefully:

(1) *God reserves to Himself the freedom in what measure He will afflict the consciences of sinners either prior to or after conversion.* The one sinner he fills with greater degrees of fear and distress and permits him to be subject to this for a longer period than another sinner, according to His sovereign good pleasure. Observe this in the examples of Lydia, Zacchaeus, Paul, Matthew, the jailor, and the Jews (Acts 2:37).

(2) *Nowhere does God demand that a sinner, before he turns to Jesus, must first attain to a certain measure of sorrow.* The first demand made to a rebellious soul and wretched sinner, who has been at enmity with God, is that he receive the Mediator and thus come to God by the Mediator (1 John 3:23; John 6:29).

(3) *God does not take more delight in a certain sinner who is very despondent and deeply grieved about his sins before he receives the Lord Jesus than any delight He had in him prior to having this sorrow.* All his weeping, supplicating, and mourning will not prevent God from viewing him as an enemy, rebel, and traitor while he still refuses to receive Christ.

(4) *The proper relationship between sorrow and sin follows and issues forth by way of, and upon, the receiving of Christ by faith.* Such was true for the sinful woman who washed the feet of Christ with her abundant tears (Luke 7:38), which did not proceed from a view of her sins prior to having embraced Christ by faith. Instead, they proceeded from the Lord Jesus having received such a wicked and despicable sinner as she was. The cause of her bitter weeping was the consciousness that the Lord had forgiven her and had been merciful to her. She perceived Christ's infinite and inexpressible love, and His incomprehensible mercy, which moved Him to be ready to wash and purify her redeemed soul. In response to this, she expressed her love by weeping, as is evident from verses 47 and 48. Therefore, do not entertain such wrong thoughts, but in faith go to Christ and He will give you the tears that He will gather in His bottle.

Isn't this different language from what we usually hear? I believe that we have drifted far away from this. There isn't anyone who suspects this forefather of superficiality, is there? We know better than that.

### *God's Ways Are Mysterious*

I assume that most readers know that à Brakel in *The Christian's Reasonable Service* also speaks with diversity about the manner in which the Lord converts His children. He states that the manner of regeneration (conversion) varies greatly:

(1) *Some* are converted in a very sudden manner, as in one moment. Such was the case with Zacchaeus, the thief on the cross, many on the day of Pentecost, and the jailor. With others this

transpires less rapidly.

(2) *Some* are converted by way of great terror and consternation caused by being confronted with the law, death, and condemnation, such as was the case on the day of Pentecost, and with the jailor (Acts 16:27).

(3) *Some* are converted in a very evangelical manner. The salvation and the fullness of the Mediator Jesus Christ overwhelm the soul, and the sweetness of the benefits of the gospel so fill their souls that they have no time to think upon their sins with terror. They are, as it were, swallowed up by the gospel, and as a Zacchaeus they receive Jesus with joy (Luke 19:3, 10).

(4) *Some* the Lord converts in a very quiet manner by granting them a view of the truth. Quietly they perceive their sins and their state of misery outside of Christ, the salvation of the partakers of the covenant, as well as the veracity of the offer of Christ by means of the gospel to them. In thus observing the truth they are gradually and imperceptibly changed, become obedient to the truth, believe in consequence of knowing the truth, and their heart is purified (1 Pet. 1:22). They do not experience much grievous sorrow or ecstatic joy, but find a delight in the truth and there is a sweet approbation of it. This is true in reference to their misery, salvation in Christ, as well as to their receiving of Christ and their trusting in Him. These are generally the most consistent and steadfast Christians.

(5) *Some* are converted in a very gradual fashion, with much vacillation between sorrow and joy, faith and unbelief, strife and victory, and falling and rising again. This is the common method which the Lord generally pursues in the conversion of most people... (II, 238-239).

We no longer hear this language very often from our pulpits. The evangelical and quiet way of conversion is particularly held suspect among us, since it does not harmonize with the views that are presently dominant in preaching. After this description, à Brakel, our esteemed forefather, focuses on what he calls God's common method. However, he first states the following:

We wish to preface this, however, by stating that no one ought to be concerned about the manner of conversion because he has not been converted in such and such a fashion which he prescribes to himself, or in which others are converted. If your conversion is a reality, all is well. Therefore, do not reflect with alarm upon the manner in which it has occurred, even if the manner of your conversion is such that you have never read or heard of anything like it. The ways of God are mysterious and even in the common way of conversion one experiences something with which another is not acquainted. One must, however, frequently reflect upon all the providences and ways whereby God has led us. This will give reason for adoration, for glorifying God, and for confirmation of one's spiritual state (II, 239).

### *Waiting for Preparation*

The Erskines speak the exact same language. In Ralph Erskine's sermon on Galatians 4:28 we read:

But you may possibly say, "Must not I first be humbled and convicted to such and such a degree before I come to Christ who is offered to me in the promises of the gospel, and before I may apply that promise to myself?" My answer is that you must be humbled to such an extent that you perceive that Christ could be of use to you, and that you could be helped by Him if He were your portion. If such is the case, I beseech you, for the Lord's sake, do not stay away from Christ by waiting for a measure of preparation, for then the law will get such a hold of you that it will not permit you ever to apply the promise of the gospel to yourself. The law will say, "You must first have such and such a qualification before you may come to Christ and apply the promise to yourself." If you then would have such a qualification, the law would speak

again, "Give up, for you are a sinner; you must be perfect before you come." And thus there would never come an end to it. You will never come to Christ if you listen to nothing else but the voice of the law, and to the legalistic inclination and bent which are natural to you. The voice of the gospel says, however, "Let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17b). Let him be then whatever he may be, but let him come. Every qualification you need is found in the bosom of the promise. Therefore, come without fear of being brazen, and freely receive what you need.

### *The Diversity of God's Wisdom*

I conclude that the forefathers spoke cautiously about the aspect of misery in conversion. They respected the diversity of God's wisdom in the conversion of men. The sovereignty of God was fully acknowledged but they did not teach a rigid method. There is indeed a way in which the Lord generally leads His people, but this was never viewed as a benchmark. In fact, Koelman and Erskine go so far as to state that true sorrow emanates from beholding Christ and His willingness.

I believe that to some degree we have departed from this path. I fear that we keep awakened souls unnecessarily away from Christ, and that we hinder gracious souls from acknowledging what God has granted them long before.

I conclude this chapter with a quote from an interview with a minister of the orthodox Reformed community in the Netherlands, which fully concurs with what I have attempted to say. Upon a question concerning the manner of conversion, he replied, "This is not something that can be satisfactorily, let alone systematically, described. The Lord Himself used the example of a germinating field. In that field thousands of seeds are germinating without a single sound being heard ....Likewise, the work of God is an almighty power, while at the same time it is not usually something spectacular. If someone has been able to put (his conversion) in writing, it must have been something extraordinary. However, if he is not able to do so, then his conversion is certainly no less genuine. The diversity of conversion, as taught by the forefathers, has in some measure been relegated to the background. Quite often only one way is prescribed. The *Afscheiding* (Secession of 1834) has also contributed to this, since ministers had a limited theological training and primarily preached their own conversion. However, if we take that which is true for the one and impose it on another, our approach is radically amiss." Such were the words of Rev. W. Pieters in *Het Reformatorisch Dagblad* (Reformed Daily Newspaper), and I believe he is correct. In any case, he has the forefathers on his side.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Salvation Has Become Complicated

#### *How About the Steps of Grace?*

In chapters two and four we have demonstrated that faith and justification belong together and that spiritual growth must be understood as growth through means. Presently, not everyone continues to subscribe to this Reformed view. Some are now instructing us to speak differently about the life of grace. They believe and preach that there are several special events in the life of the believer; that is, by way of a special experience, the believer progresses from the one *stage of grace* to another. Such teaching posits that there are "milestones" in the believer's spiritual experience. In order to articulate this view, I refer to *Genadeleven en genadeverbond* (The Life of Grace and the Covenant of Grace) by the trendsetting minister of the *Gereformeerde Gemeenten*.

In this view, regeneration, the act of quickening, has preeminence in the life of grace. The sinner is first quickened, but for the *already quickened* (take note!) soul, Jesus is initially a hidden Person. One is only confronted with a demanding and condemning law. By means of a first *unveiling of the way* one is led further. According to this view, however, beholding Christ is not having Christ. This is followed by the *revelation of Christ*, that is, of His Person, but the beginning believer still receives no comfort from the doctrine of justification.

Upon the quickening of the believer, imputation did occur, but this gives him no immediate comfort when he begins to exercise faith. A decisive *transaction* must take place. It is only later, when he consciously experiences *justification* that he knows himself assured of his acquittal. I once heard, as an explanation, the example of a money transfer. At regeneration the money has already been transferred (by God), but this transfer becomes known only when I receive a statement from the bank (the conscious experience of justification). According to this way of thinking, the believer initially has a religion governed by feelings and is at bottom yet an enemy of sovereign grace and a suffering Mediator. He must still be fully stripped and learn to despair of all his own righteousness. Only then does he partake of conscious justification. Only from that moment forward is God a reconciled Judge. Even at this point, the believer does not yet know Him as a loving Father. *Being led into the heart of the Father* would again be another benefit of the life of grace. I need to be cautious, but I believe that I have expressed the essence of the doctrine of "milestones" as accurately as possible.

#### *New Expressions*

We observed in chapter two that during the era of the Reformation it was understood that faith, justification, and knowing God as Father belonged inseparably together. In our day, these matters are chronologically separated and isolated from each other. The one thing no longer naturally means the other. We now have concerned and established believers. Time and again a new benefit must be bestowed on the believer. New experiential milestones must be reached.

It is surprising how many new expressions have come into vogue; an entirely different vocabulary has come into use today. We must now distinguish between *implantation into Christ* and *embracing Christ*—between *the revelation of the Word* and *the revelation of the Person*. Also the *embracing of Christ* by faith must be distinguished from the believing embrace of the

*acquittal of the Father.* According to this new view you must distinguish between *taking refuge to Christ or the revelation of Christ* and *justification in the court of conscience.* Another distinction is made between *actual* and *passive* justification.

The reader himself will have observed how all this differs from the previously stated doctrine of the Reformation concerning faith, justification, and growth in the life of faith. Ministers who follow this new approach when preaching about the life of grace (and its steps), do not quite know what to do with the Heidelberg Catechism which clearly speaks the language of the Reformation. In any case, they cannot apply the answers to all believers. In fact, it has happened that I heard a minister in his catechism sermon ascribe the questions to a concerned soul, a beginner in grace, and the answers to an established believer.

### *Big Steps, and a Quick Homecoming*

What must we think of this? Does this complicated teaching find support in God's Word and our forms of unity? In not one single answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, in not one article of the Canons of Dort, nor in one article of the Belgic Confession of Faith will you find such ideas and concepts—nor the many distinctions. You will look for them in vain in the catechism book of Hellenbroek. Where does this change have its origin? The intent of this system is to accommodate the concerned church, but does it result in comfort? Our old Reformed forefathers neither knew of such a system nor did they teach it. Nowhere will you find that they place great distances between faith, justification, and assurance. He who seeks support for the doctrine of "milestones" in Calvin or Olevianus attributes matters to these men which were foreign to them. They do indeed use the idea of *step-by-step growth*, but it is always recognizable as referring to growth in grace, nourishment by the Word, and the strengthening of faith.

Fortunately, present-day ministers frequently exhort young people to read the old writers. They must realize, however, that young people can become very confused by this and that it can preoccupy them with many searching questions. They will read about a doctrine which differs from what many current ministers are preaching. How is this possible? Was the experience different at that time? Are we not fond of saying—and rightfully so—that the Lord converts His people today as He did in earlier days?

After careful consideration I can only conclude that the preaching of steps or stages in a "milestone" manner finds no support in either God's Word or the Confessions. That is thought-provoking. Understand me well, I do not doubt the sincerity of the ministers involved, nor do I render them suspect in any other way. The result, however, is that the guidance God's children are receiving deviates from the simplicity of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. *Salvation has become complicated.* It troubles me that in many congregations this preaching in particular is considered to be of the most experiential and faithful sort. We have become so accustomed to this that a minister who does not speak in such terms will be held suspect, and will soon be labeled as being superficial and not experiential. He will be accused of promoting, "big steps, and a quick homecoming." But I would rather say, "a *good* homecoming." Unfortunately, preaching of a more Reformed nature is referred to as being shallow preaching, and it is now referred to as preaching under which God's concerned people receive little more than a whipping—a false charge.

In the next two chapters I will elaborate upon and support the argument why one cannot find support for the doctrine of "milestones" in the forefathers, and that its common claim of biblical support is unfounded.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **How Can God's Child Know His Acquittal?**

#### *Courtroom Scene*

In Smijtegelt's and Van der Kemp's expositions of the Heidelberg Catechism, the explanation of Lord's Day 23 about justification is given by using the analogy of a courtroom scene. Comrie does likewise in his sermon on Romans 5:1, in his *Eigenschappen des geloofs* (Marks of Saving Faith). The illustration of the courtroom is used to explain to the congregation what forgiveness of sins is (justification). God the Judge is angry with the sinner and demands the satisfaction of His offended justice. The law, Satan, and the sinner's heart are the accusers. The sinner must acknowledge his guilt but does not have a single penny to make payment. Christ the Advocate intervenes, however, and offers full restitution, upon which God acquits the sinner. This is the sentence of acquittal.

#### *The Court-of-Conscience Experience*

We must now consider the crucial question: What does the sinner himself experience of this, and how? Is this a special moment at some point in his spiritual life, a crisis experience perhaps? The soul will experience the following to a greater or lesser degree. Under the preaching of the law he becomes broken and contrite of heart. He confesses his guilt earnestly, and begs for grace and pleads that God will not enter with him into judgment. In the offer of grace, that is, the preaching of the willingness and loveliness of the Mediator, he becomes acquainted with the Advocate, and by faith receives Christ. This is equivalent to being acquitted. The question is, however, how is this acquittal, this sentence of acquittal, communicated to the believer? Is this a very special event? A sensible declaration in the soul? An experience in the court of one's conscience?

I will quote Comrie about the pronouncement of that sentence of acquittal in his sermon on Romans 5:

[This occurs] externally by means of God's precious Word in which the way of justification is clearly and plainly taught, as well as revealed; namely, that he who believes in Christ has life. For all the prophets bear witness that whosoever believes in Christ will receive the forgiveness of sins in His Name. Nevertheless, this sentence is also made known sooner or later internally to the justified sinner by means of the mediate or immediate operation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does this mediately when He illuminates the soul to discern the marks God ascribes in His Word to those who are justified, causing them to see those marks in their own soul. This is what the apostle teaches in Romans 8:16: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." The Spirit does this also immediately, apart from the marks, impressing this acquittal sometimes in such a powerful manner upon the soul, that she can believe it fully and her heart is enlarged with joy.

Not one word is mentioned about a "milestone" to be encountered, nor is any mention made of a requirement that everyone must know of such a court-of-conscience experience. On the contrary, Comrie refers to the testimony of God's Word and to that which God's Spirit will do *mediately*. Sometimes the Spirit will take a soul aside, but that is no more than a *different* method of pronouncement; it is more powerful and *immediate*.

### *The Scriptures as the Letter of Pardon*

In Van der Kemp's exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism we also observe that the believer is directed to the Scriptures. He expresses himself in nearly identical terms about the pronouncement of the sentence of acquittal in the soul: "This occurs either externally or internally. Externally God announces to the sinner by His Word that He has justified him. The Scriptures are his letter of pardon." A bit further he states, "The ambassadors of Christ invite, call, and beseech the sinner, as though Christ did beseech by them, that he be reconciled with God. When, however, the sinner acquiesces in receiving the Mediator, then ministers are authorized to assure him that he is reconciled with God.... And in this manner ministers justify many sinners." Beautiful, isn't it?

Van der Kemp continues, "Since, however, the reflex act of faith is still very weak, and the heart is still too distraught about the sentence of death the sinner had within himself, this external assurance does not have much hold upon his heart. The Judge therefore gives him also His Spirit as an earnest and seal, whereby he is powerfully sealed, as Paul demonstrates journey after journey."

How does this occur? "It is the work of the Holy Spirit to teach the believing sinner to draw a conclusion (syllogism) from the Word and his heart...and He gives clarity to the soul, causing him to know the things God has granted him: faith and its fruits. Thereupon He convinces the sinner to conclude, "Thus I am justified." Additional quotes could be furnished. Although Van der Kemp acknowledges a higher sense of acquittal, one with much light and sensible grace, that is not the normal way. That way is one of child-like simplicity.

### *To Hold Before God the Righteousness of Christ*

I wish to quote two passages from à Brakel's *The Christian's Reasonable Service*. This representative of the Dutch Second Reformation, like Calvin, makes no mention at all about a court-of-conscience experience.

The first quote deals, with the intimate relationship between faith and justification. À Brakel writes:

The nature of faith consists in entrusting oneself to Christ to be justified, sanctified, and glorified on the basis of the offer and the promises. The person who has received Jesus by faith, and who has entrusted himself to Him, continues to be active with the promises unto justification and sanctification. In justification faith functions as follows: Faith *first of all* receives the righteousness of the surety, Jesus Christ. This occurs on the basis of it being offered by Christ to the sinner, together with many exhortations to receive it and to make use of it with boldness. The believer, having thus received perfect righteousness in Christ, having put Him on (Gal. 3:26-27), and having been robed with the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness (Isa. 61:10), *in consequence of this* comes to God with the received and appropriated righteousness [listen to the language of the Reformation], displays this righteousness before Him, and desires to be judged and justified accordingly. Thus the believer, with a good conscience, asks God, on the basis of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:21) whether or not his sins are paid for by Christ's suffering, and whether he has a right to eternal life by virtue of His obedience. The believer then *immediately* turns to the promises made to those who have received Christ and His righteousness, namely, that such have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life (II, 357).

### *Acquittal for Those Who Are Hard of Hearing*

In the second quote, à Brakel states that this justification is communicated to all, though it be not equally powerful for every believer:

When man is grievously troubled and perplexed about his sins, and by means of the gospel believes in Christ, thereby being united to Him and being a partaker of His righteousness, God then actually justifies him and pronounces the sentence of acquittal upon him from His Word, which is the voice of God. This is even so if the believer as yet is not aware of a peace in his conscience as a result of this declaration. This may be due to ignorance of the voice of God, to objections arising in his mind, or to doubts regarding the veracity of his faith. It may also be that upon hearing this pronouncement in the Word, he believes this by faith and finds peace. It may also be that this is sealed by the special operation of the Spirit, causing him to taste and perceive immediately what it means to have the forgiveness of sins, to be reconciled with God, to be an heir of eternal life, and to enjoy the fruits of all these (II, 377).

A bit further he writes:

This pronouncement is made by the Holy Spirit to the heart of a believer when He either impresses a special text upon him, addressing this to his heart, or when He holds before him the gospel in a general sense and applies it. Believers to whom this pronouncement is made are not all in the same condition. Some hear this pronouncement very clearly and distinctly, believe that they are justified, experience peace in their conscience, and have free access to the throne of grace, exclaiming, "Abba, Father!" Others do not hear this pronouncement as clearly, and therefore do not also enjoy the fruits of this with as much clarity. Again, others are so full of trouble and anxiety concerning their spiritual state and the forgiveness of their sins, so that they do not give heed to the pronouncement of the Word nor to their feelings, be they feelings of comfort and peace. He who is hard of hearing in the court of conscience is acquitted as well as the one whose hearing is exceptional; the one who is weak in faith is acquitted as well as the one who is strong in faith (II, 383).

Is this not a comforting doctrine?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Continue to Read God's Word in Simplicity**

#### *Peniel: A Pivotal Event?*

As proof for the notion that justification marks a new milestone in the life of the believer, the experience of Jacob at Peniel is used as an example. After wrestling with the Man of God, Jacob said, "I have seen God face to face, and my life [in the Dutch Bible: soul] is preserved" (Gen. 32:30). The preservation of his soul is then placed within the framework of Jacob having experienced the benefit of conscious justification in his conscience.

One would think that such a pivotal event would have been given special attention in the marginal notes of the Dutch Bible (*Statenvertaling*). But, this is not at all the case. We find something else in the marginal notes. Jacob anticipated a great difficulty, for he had to face Esau. The Lord wants to assure Jacob of a favorable outcome, but also injures Jacob physically to cause him to feel his own weakness. The change of name from Jacob to Israel would always serve to remind him of this. "I have seen God face to face," does indeed mean that God did reveal Himself to Jacob more clearly than ever before, but it does not fit in the milestone pattern—that is, the pattern of a conscious court-of-conscience experience.

The marginal notes explain the phrase "and my life is preserved" as follows: "A Jew knew that he had to die when he saw God. The people said to Moses, 'Let not God speak with us, lest we die.' Gideon also said, 'Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face. And the LORD said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die'" (Judges 6:22-23).

#### *The Old Reformed Fathers Were Unacquainted With This*

The same situation occurs with the announcement of the birth of Samson by the Angel of the LORD. Manoah says at that occasion, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God," upon which his wife puts him at ease by making the observation that if they were to die, the Lord would not have accepted the sacrifice (Judges 13:22-23). Now this same amazement was present in Jacob's heart. God had revealed Himself in a very special manner, and his life (his soul) had been preserved. This is what the authors of the marginal notes observed here, which surely is what is sometimes read into it today. According to some, Jacob had seen an open door of deliverance at Bethel but did not receive assurance of his forgiveness until he came to Peniel. Supposedly, it was not until he had wrestled with God that he came to an end with his own works, surrendered fully, and lost all his self-righteousness. Supposedly, too, it was then that his spiritual state was established before God. The fact that from now on he would have a different status before God would then have been confirmed by a new name.

You will now understand that it is my opinion that there is no basis for all this. Without denying that this view contains some interesting thoughts, it is and remains eisegesis (adding to the text what is not there). The old Reformed fathers as well as the authors of the marginal notes were unacquainted with such an interpretation.

On the other hand, it may be well to state at this point that we need not go to the other extreme as if one could never make use of the Peniel analogy. I can readily imagine that the experience of Jacob would come to mind when a minister preaches about a child of God in

distress—or about an awakened sinner who is in darkness, and for whom light dawns for the first time. He will then obviously be able to say in a figurative sense, “And as he passed over Penuel, the sun rose upon him.” This would then be an appropriate representation of what transpires in the soul. Does this mean, however, that we must make this experience part of the framework of experiential milestones? Certainly not.

#### *Adding to the Text Rather Than Drawing From the Text*

In Isaiah 38 a description of Hezekiah's serious illness is given. After his recovery, Hezekiah expresses his experience in song. His prayer, "O LORD, undertake for me" (Dutch: be a surety unto me) had been fulfilled. Ministers who teach milestones in the life of grace explain this text as referring to a special benefit. For them it is one of the key texts of the Bible. According to their view, Hezekiah has learned here to "pronounce death upon all his experiences," has been brought to an end, and has been established in his state of grace by God. Consulting the marginal notes, we do not find any foundation for this either. If this were such a key text in Scripture, we could expect that the authors of the marginal notes would have drawn attention to this. But this is not the case. They relate this oppression to Hezekiah's serious illness. His cry that the Lord would undertake for him simply means that Hezekiah is supplicating for deliverance from this disease so that he would be permitted to complete his work. He is in distress.

One must draw the same conclusion from reading the German translation of Luther. For the phrase "undertake for me" he uses the German word "lindern," which means "to soften" or "to relieve" from pain or sorrow. This is of course the language of the King James Version. In the margin of my English Bible it says, "or ease me"; that is, put me at ease, give me relief. And, to mention one more, what must we think of Abraham Hellenbroek? He wrote four volumes bearing the title, *De Evangelische Jesaja* (The Evangelical Isaiah), in which he deals with the key texts of the book of Isaiah. If the text, "undertake for me," would have had a deeper meaning, Hellenbroek certainly would not have overlooked it. Not a single text from the entire chapter about Hezekiah's illness is expounded, however.

I conclude that Hezekiah is made to say things of which he himself had no knowledge. The explanation that Hezekiah's words represent attaining a new step in the life of grace must be rejected. You can add it to the text but you cannot draw it out. I believe there is a different explanation. I believe that Hezekiah indeed experienced forgiveness, but it was in the manner of 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." This is not a faith which leads to justification, but what Van der Kemp refers to as a living out of justification.

#### *Saved from Death and Woe Appalling*

A portion of Scripture which seems to lend additional support for preaching clearly defined milestones in the life of grace is Psalm 116. David was compassed about by the sorrows of death and the pains of hell had gotten hold of him. He cried out, "O LORD, I beseech thee, deliver my soul," and also, "Thou hast delivered my soul," and "the LORD hath dealt bountifully with me." A favorite quotation from the metrical version of the psalm is, "Thou Jehovah...hast saved my soul from death and woe appalling." The translators of the Dutch Bible expound this Psalm entirely in light of David's deliverance from the hand of Saul. In the marginal notes one cannot find any reference to steps of experiential life. The focus of this Psalm is the great need of David when Saul's mighty army was approaching. David's life was in danger. "Deliver my soul" is identical in meaning to "save my life." This is evident from verse 8. There David says that the Lord has delivered his soul from death, and he rejoices in this.

In verse 9 he proceeds, "I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living." He may continue to live and will return to the temple. The primary emphasis here is not on deep spiritual experiences. Rather, David is being threatened by people. Furthermore, it is difficult to place the phrase, "All men are liars," within the context of a spiritual experience. But the phrase does fit a period being pursued and persecuted; and that is the subject of this Psalm. Therefore, I repeat, to read more into this portion of Scripture is undesirable eisegesis.

Again I hasten to add that abuse need not keep us from proper use. Biblical expressions and lines from the Psalter can be a good representation of the condition of the soul. "I cried, deliver Thou my soul, O Lord!" can certainly be the heartfelt prayer of a soul who hungers after God and the righteousness of Christ. Let ministers quote freely, and not be hindered by any inhibition. But then we are no longer speaking of a systematized doctrine of steps of grace.

### *The Tenth Hour*

In the first chapter of the gospel of John we are told how the first disciples came to Jesus. John the Baptist pointed his two disciples, John and Andrew, to the Lamb of God, and they decided to follow Jesus from that moment forward. To this is added, "And it was about the tenth hour." It is obvious that this particular day meant a great deal to John and Andrew. Andrew said to his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah." In our day, many ministers are fond of designating this event as a further benefit in the lives of these two disciples. Until then Christ was supposedly a hidden Person for them, but now He was fully revealed to them. You will hear it said that John experienced something new, and that he never forgot it. At the age of ninety John still knows precisely what happened: It was about the tenth hour.

I have a fair bit of difficulty with this presentation for the following reasons: If it is true that the disciples until their encounter with Jesus had no knowledge of what the full life of faith was about, would this then not hold equally true for all the elect who lived prior to Christ's incarnation? We know better, don't we? Hebrews 11 states, "These all died in faith... having seen [the promises] afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them." All the believers of the Old Testament have longed intensely for the coming of the Messiah, but they were not privileged to experience this. Yet they died having a full measure of faith, trusting the substance of the things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Scripture does not yield any evidence that this was any less true for the disciples of John the Baptist. We read nothing of the sort. But they did receive a great privilege—the privilege of experiencing the coming of Christ personally, for they lived during a turning point of history. Is it any wonder that John still remembers when he met the Messiah for the first time? It was about the tenth hour.

### *Speculation Prevented*

I need to say one more thing about the tenth hour. We must guard against attaching too much significance to the fact that the evangelist still knows the exact moment. You will find more often in John's gospel that he identifies the time quite precisely. In John 4 we read that Jesus spoke with the Samaritan woman, stating that "it was about the sixth hour." When Jesus encountered the sinful woman in chapter 8, John writes, "early in the morning." He proves that in his old age he remembers very well details of many years ago. I conclude therefore that you must embellish the passage in John 1 in order to find support for the doctrine of experiential milestones. One wonders who began to attach such significance to the tenth hour. When reading God's Word we must continue to read simply what it says. That will prevent speculation.

We must not resort to extremes. Who would challenge a minister in his use of the concept

"the tenth hour" in order to designate a special occasion? When he does so, it will be in a figurative sense. It then becomes a metaphor to give expression to the impressiveness of a certain event. This no longer has anything to do with the teaching of experiential milestones. In fact, it is questionable whether an unprejudiced use of this phrase is still possible. I fear that it has become too loaded a term.

### *Is the Way of the Disciples the Way of the Church?*

I wish to consider another point. There is perhaps another reason why we must guard against explaining the way of the disciples too readily as the way of the church. There certainly are attractive features in the lives of the disciples which are both comforting and instructive for God's people. We must, however, guard against using their experiences and manner of conversion as a model. There is hardly any reason to make their lives exemplary for Christians of all times.

Instead, there is more reason not to do so. They belonged to the few who were present when Jesus walked upon earth and called men to repentance or made them His followers. After many centuries, it is now God's normal way to bring sinners to faith by the preaching of law and gospel. But during His sojourn here upon earth, Jesus spoke with extraordinary authority, and the era which immediately followed was also extraordinary. We must not be too quick to establish this sovereign, extraordinary ministration as today's model for the experiential life of the Christian.

I also wish to refer to the opinion of Ursinus in *Het Schatboek* relative to Question 58 of the Heidelberg Catechism where he writes that eternal life is granted to us by faith, by means of the preaching and the internal operation of the Holy Spirit: "This is the normal way in which God initially grants us eternal life, namely, mediately by the administration of the Word. The manner in which God converts the children of the church differs from the wondrous conversion experience of the thief on the cross, Paul, Cornelius, etc. The reference here [in the church today) is to the normal way traversed by adults."

### *Strong Disciples*

Upon the question whether the way of the disciples is the way of the church, let us consider what Matthew Henry says in his commentary on Matthew 16:21, "From that time forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things..." There are ministers who integrate this in the notion that God's people are initially blind to the suffering of Christ and their enmity against it. Thus, much contemporary preaching will teach that God's people are initially blind to the suffering of Christ, and that the Lord, in leading His people more deeply, will uncover this to them. Let me state again, I believe that this can be so, but never as a rule or blueprint.

Matthew Henry comments as follows: "Hitherto He had not touched upon this [His suffering], because the disciples were weak, and could not very well bear the notice of a thing so very strange, and so very melancholy; but now that they were more ripe in knowledge, and strong in faith, He began to tell them this." The Lord waited for this moment. After they had become strong, He began to prepare them for His suffering. And in which way did they become strong? Henry also comments upon this: "Christ reveals His mind to His people gradually, and lets in light as they can bear it, and are fit to receive it." In how calm and balanced a manner this is stated!

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **Progressive Insight?**

#### *What About Four Centuries of Church History?*

After all the preceding, one question remains. The idea of milestones in experiential life may indeed be foreign to the authors of the marginal notes of the Dutch Bible, the Reformers, as well as the theologians of the Dutch Second Reformation. But is that all there is to be said? Is it not possible that there has been some development, so that certain matters now are understood better and more fully than four centuries ago? Is it correct to ignore four centuries of church history? Is it not possible that what is at stake here is progressive insight, more in-depth understanding, and continued reflection?

Yes, I do believe that we can gain more insight. I can accept this as far as the knowledge of the original languages of the Bible is concerned. This can also be true for the ethical interpretation of the Bible for the age in which we live. I could also concur that presently we have a better understanding of which Old Testament regulations were binding to the Jewish people but are no longer binding to us who live after the incarnation of Christ. There are many other similar issues. But, does this pertain to something so fundamental as faith in the Christ of the Scriptures? Is that open to multiple interpretations? I cannot believe it.

The ministers themselves also do not believe this. Those same ministers who preach these "milestones" in the life of experience time and again exhort their people to search the forefathers. As stated earlier, they do so to show that God converts His people as He did in former days. Indeed, I believe this to be quite true. Our character, as well as the time and environment in which we live, may influence our personal spiritual experience to some extent, but when it comes to the essence of the matter, we are dealing with the same great need and the same deliverance from it. Referring to the forefathers goes hand in hand with referring to the three Forms of Unity. Reformed office-bearers obligate themselves to subject their views to the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. By urging the congregation to search the forefathers, the "milestone" ministers are implying that their views are in line with the forefathers. As we have observed in chapter six, this is simply not true.

#### *Doctrinal Regression*

We are nevertheless realistic enough to conclude that preaching during various ages can differ considerably. The sermons of Augustine differ from those of Calvin. Then again, there is considerable difference between the sermons of Calvin and of Luther. Even in the theology of the Dutch Second Reformation there is a variety of emphases. However, in regard to faith and justification they (Hellenbroek, Van der Kemp, Smijtegelt, Van der Groe, Teellinck, à Brakel) essentially spoke the same language as did the Reformers, including Olevianus and Ursinus. The notion that growth in the life of grace proceeds by way of a series of milestones has, in my opinion, been in vogue in the Netherlands for roughly 100-150 years. I suspect that the conventicles (*gezelschappen*) are responsible for this. It is very understandable that this notion has become deeply ingrained in our circles. Nevertheless, it is a regretful deviation from old Reformed doctrines. I fail to see that this has been a progression in insight. In my opinion it has been a regression in doctrine.

### *Don't Let the Forefathers Be Ventriloquists*

I wish to refer again to the Dutch Second Reformation. It is my perception that there is indeed a noticeable difference between the Reformation and the time thereafter. This pertains to the manner in which one deals with the assurance of faith. Calvin, as well as Luther, calls assurance an essential mark of faith. They do know about strife and doubt, but at the same time they maintain that there will always be an assured confidence.

It seems that later theologians have written about this in greater detail and have made growth in assurance and confidence a more important element of growth in grace. The Westminster Confession also speaks of degrees of assurance. This growth is always one that occurs by the use of means.

Under such preaching the soul who is weighed down by many questions will hear what the exercises of true faith are. He will hear that he who with his burden of sins takes refuge in Christ and embraces Him may be certainly assured that he is just before God. However timid this embrace may be, he will then enjoy the grace of acquittal. The faithful preacher will proclaim to such a soul that the forgiveness of sins is his lawful portion. The Holy Spirit is pleased to apply such words because it is God's own Word. In this manner the soul can increase in assurance, and thus "the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16).

As stated earlier, it pleases the Holy Spirit at times to deal in a powerful manner with the soul and to grant him a great measure of peace and joy in the heart. The Lord, reverently speaking, takes the believer on His knee. The ministers of the Dutch Second Reformation did indeed teach this. They referred to it as immediate assurance. Nowhere, however, do you read that the congregation is exhorted that one must strive for this. The Holy Spirit can sovereignly grant such extraordinary assurance. But He binds us to the use of means, to the preaching of the Word. That is the way in which He is pleased to work growth in assurance.

Let me repeat, the forefathers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries most certainly taught that there was growth in grace, but they did not do so as it is presently done. We must quote them honestly, for when they use the word "steps," they are not referring to today's notion of steps. They were unfamiliar with the notion of a sequence of milestone experiences. Whoever attributes this to the forefathers, lets them speak his own language.

### *Is the Life of Faith Always a Smooth Pathway?*

Having presented my case that gradual growth in grace is God's normal way, I realize that one can easily be misunderstood. It can easily leave the impression that all believers are stable persons who have a smooth and tranquil life of faith. However, that is not my intention.

There is a great difference between the children of God, if only due to a difference in disposition and character. But apart from this the Lord can cause His children to have special experiences which sometimes even qualify as a crisis experience. We know the exact nature of this from the accounts of some, such as Augustine, Luther, Kohlbrugge, and Pascal, and this can still be the experience of God's people at times. The Lord indeed does use a way in which he completely cuts the soul off and brings him to the place where renewed grace will be highly esteemed. It is the sovereign way in which God can lead people. But this does not need to be formed into a preaching of steps and systematic milestones. I believe preaching is much richer when this is not done.

## CHAPTER TEN

### A New Doctrinal Pivot

#### *Faith and Regeneration Disconnected*

All things are interconnected. One thing leads to another. In chapter two we observed that the Reformers and their immediate descendants considered the personal appropriation of Christ to be the essential act of faith, upon which they declared the soul righteous before God. It is the Holy Spirit, by making the gospel call effectual, who works in the soul to so commit itself. It is the same Spirit who is pleased to assure the soul of this, be it mediately or immediately. The exact moment of regeneration does not play a significant role in this doctrine. We ought to leave that secret rest. In all things faith is the essential matter.

Subsequent to the Reformation, assurance was addressed in a more diversified manner. When Koelman, à Brakel, Hellenbroek, Van der Kemp, and others speak of this, it is always connected closely to the doctrine of faith and justification as taught by the Heidelberg Catechism.

Comrie is a separate case. This minister lived in an age when Arminianism surfaced afresh. Furthermore, it was also a time when the assurance of faith was the subject of much controversy, the issue being whether it belongs to the essence of faith. It was Comrie's desire to mediate this conflict and to reconcile the parties involved, while at the same time safeguarding the doctrine of free grace. He wanted to preach salvation to souls who lacked assurance. He therefore introduced a distinction which, though it was in some measure already familiar, was not yet a dominating element of doctrine. It had been discussed before his time in a similar vein, but from then on it comes to the foreground more distinctly. What distinction is this?

Comrie distinguished the concepts of *faith* and *believing*. He distinguished between the noun and the verb. According to his view, God plants *faith* in the heart of the sinner at the moment of regeneration. From the side of the sinner one cannot yet speak of believing—of the act of faith. According to this view, the soul receives at a very early stage *the ability to believe* (the propensity, the habitus) without exercising faith. At that moment the sinner is incorporated into Christ and is *unconsciously* ingrafted into Him. The first fruit of this is self-knowledge. The soul's wretched state becomes an experiential reality. Only later will the soul actually exercise faith (*actus*), and will arrive at the act of faith with a greater or lesser measure of personal assurance. In this manner Comrie wished to preach that salvation is not dependent upon assurance but only upon being in Christ. His theological view to a large extent runs parallel with the beginning of chapter six. But you will search Comrie in vain for the many and complicated distinctions mentioned in chapter six, and which most likely are the fruit of the conventicles of a later date. The unhinging of regeneration and faith is a theological construction, however, which was introduced principally by him. Father Brakel rejected this resolutely, since he did not find it in Scripture. God's Word does not distinguish between faith and believing: "Believe... and thou shalt be saved," "Thy faith hath made thee whole," "This is the work of God that ye believe in him whom he hath sent," and "He that believeth in Him is not condemned." The noun *faith* and the verb *to believe* (and its conjugations) are used interchangeably in Scripture and are identical in meaning.

### *A Shift of Meaning in Lord's Day 7*

Comrie's solution is attractive insofar that it was his intent to comfort weak believers; however, it is less Reformed than he himself steadfastly believed. To all appearances Comrie the philosopher interfered with Comrie the theologian. The Reformers and their immediate descendants have always connected the ingrafting into Christ with the *act* of faith. As stated, Comrie disjoins ingrafting from the act of faith, which would give rise to placing it at an earlier moment. In Comrie's own preaching this did not have significant consequences, as we will see, but it does with present day ministers who claim him for support. After Comrie's time, *faith* is no longer the pivot upon which doctrine hinges, but rather *regeneration* or *spiritual quickening*, the transition from life to death apart from the act of faith. In much of present day teaching and preaching everything begins with passive regeneration, the unconscious ingrafting into Christ. As a fruit of this, the soul becomes unhappy and a sinner before God. As stated earlier, Christ is then still a hidden Person. After this comes the revelation of Christ in the Word, and thereafter the revelation of Christ to the soul. After all this comes the court-of-conscience experience and the assurance of the Father's acquittal. And so we could go on. We have already enumerated this in chapter six.

This represents a shift in meaning to the words, "being ingrafted into Christ by faith" of Lord's Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism. This shift in meaning is foreign to the authors of the Catechism. In chapter two we observed how Ursinus explained this ingrafting, stating that by the *act* of believing in Christ the sinner is ingrafted into Christ and receives all His benefits. The real danger of this new way of speaking is that there is excessive or exclusive stress placed upon being passively ingrafted at regeneration. There is then an increasing emphasis that God must be the first and that the sinner cannot do anything. He must be *brought* to God and cannot come himself. He neither needs to nor can receive anything, for it will *be applied* to him.

The minister who expresses himself this way does indeed say true things, but he is not really preaching—or at best is *preaching* in a very one-sided manner. Such preaching is an absolute death blow to the preaching of the free offer of grace together with the command to repent and believe. Experience proves this to be the case in many congregations. Such a minister exchanges the requirement of faith for a declaration concerning regeneration. His ministerial commission, however, *mandates* that he must preach the promise of the gospel. This means that he must persuade men to believe. His ministerial commission, however, mandates that he must compel men to come in, and in holy wrath must thunder against the God-dishonoring sin of unbelief. He must preach in such a manner as if conversion depended upon him, while beseeching God at the same time to do so graciously by His Spirit.

### *On the Wrong Path*

We are entirely on the wrong path with the current exposition of Lord's Day 7 as to how "sinners are ingrafted by faith in Christ." Today it is often explained to mean that the sinner, without his knowledge, is passively ingrafted when new life is infused. Present teaching is that man has no knowledge of this. We have already observed that Ursinus teaches us otherwise. The author of the Heidelberg Catechism explains in his own exposition preserved for us what we are to understand by the words, "who are ingrafted into Him, and receive all His benefits, by a true faith." He understands this to refer to those "who believe the gospel and by a true faith appropriate the merits of Christ"—they who *make application themselves*. This is thus the act or exercise of faith. Ursinus says furthermore, "The reason, however, why only believers are saved is: they alone receive the benefits of Christ [offered in the gospel]." Again the word receive

occurs. This is in contrast with unbelievers who *reject* it.

### *Was Faukeel Careless?*

I also investigated how three present day ministers explain "being ingrafted into Christ" in Lord's Day 7. Rev. G. H. Kersten, a great admirer of Comrie, quotes in his catechism sermon first the words of the Catechism itself, "who are ingrafted into Him, and receive all His benefits, by a true faith," and then proceeds, "we must closely adhere to these words.... Ingrafted into Christ by a *true* faith.... There is but one faith that is saving in nature: faith that ingrafts us into Christ, and whereby we receive His benefits.... This ingrafting is accomplished by the Holy Spirit who works faith." Kersten does not yet say a single word about regeneration. He remains within Reformed parameters. In his *Reformed Dogmatics* he does state that the ingrafting takes place first, and that faith is a fruit of this. Differing with the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, Kersten, as does Comrie, makes a distinction between being ingrafted and receiving.

Then I investigated how Rev. F. Mallan speaks about this in his sermon on Lord's Day 7. He does the same thing. He also states with emphasis that there must first be ingrafting before one can speak about receiving. We now know that is expressly not what Ursinus had in mind. He keeps divine imputation and the sinner's act of receiving together. One gets the impression that Rev. Mallan has difficulty with this. At least he honestly expresses his regret that H. Faukeel, minister at Middelburg, shortens Ursinus's answer in Lord's Day 7 in the Compendium to "they are saved by Christ who receive Him with a true faith," and thus does not give the answer of the catechism in full. Rev. Malian considers it rather careless that Faukeel has left out the phrase "who are ingrafted," for this it is his settled conviction that the Heidelberg Catechism first speaks about ingrafting, from which proceeds in time the act of reception. If that is your view, then the phrase "who are ingrafted" cannot be left out. But I believe that the Synod of Dort knew very well what it was doing when it approved the Compendium. The members of the Synod still understood what Ursinus meant. In a compendium you include only the main issues—which is what Faukeel did. We do not need to suspect the fathers of Dort of Arminianism, do we?

The third present day minister to be quoted, will be Rev. A. Moerkerken. In "his" periodical *De Saambinder* he proves himself to be the interpreter of Comrie's views par excellence. Among other things, he uses the example of an embryo. He posits that in regeneration faith is planted in the soul in one moment. This is being ingrafted into Christ and, as is true for an embryo, everything is comprehended in this. Only at a later time will the birth follow, when there is a believing reception of Christ. Rev. Moerkerken is pastorally motivated to use such language so that the little ones in grace will not be discouraged. However, he goes quite far in drawing conclusions. As far as he is concerned, Comrie's exposition of Lord's Day 7 is determinative for the language of the pulpit. He maintains that he who has not thoroughly grasped this reasoning "will have great difficulty in understanding the preaching of the (Netherlands) Reformed Congregations." To this I respond: Let us hope that this will give food for thought.

### *Declaration to Rebels*

During Comrie's days it was still common to speak freely about the offer of grace and receiving Christ, and Comrie himself did so in his preaching. The unfortunate distinction between faith and believing for the comfort of timid Christians did not keep him from offering grace freely. Comrie clearly held his hearers responsible. He translated from English into Dutch *The Marrow of the Gospel* by Edward Fisher, published in 1645 in London, which the Lord used to set Thomas Boston at liberty. Fisher in turn quotes again from an even older book of the early Reformation,

*The Benefits of Christ*, published in 1525 by the Reformed Italian preacher Benedetto of Mantua in Venice. Fisher writes:

Forasmuch as the Holy Scripture speaketh to all in general, none of us ought to distrust himself, but believe that it doth belong particularly to himself....Let us put the case, that some good and holy king should cause a proclamation to be made through his whole kingdom, by the sound of a trumpet, that all *rebels* and *banished persons* shall safely return home to their houses... certainly, none of these rebels ought to doubt, but that he shall obtain true pardon for his rebellion. God does likewise.... Even so, our good King, the Lord of heaven and earth, has, for the obedience and desert of our good brother Jesus Christ, pardoned all our sins, and made a proclamation throughout the world, that everyone may safely return to God in Jesus Christ: wherefore I beseech you make no doubt of it, but "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22).

Comrie not only translated this work, but preached in the same fashion. In his sermon on Hebrews 11:13 he almost literally says the same. He also concludes his exposition of Lord's Day 7 this way. Then it is like hearing Erskine speak; it is also the teaching of Boston.

#### *Proclamation of Forgiveness*

Matthew Henry, in his exposition of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, uses a similar example of rebels and the offer of pardon. We read:

(1) God's giving his only-begotten Son was an instance of His love to the whole world, because through Him there is a *general offer* of life and salvation made to all. It is love to the revolted rebellious province to issue out a proclamation of pardon and indemnity to all that will come in, plead it upon their knees, and return to their allegiance. *So far God loved the apostate lapsed world* that he sent his Son with this fair proposal, that *whosoever believes in him*, one or other, *shall not perish*. Salvation has been *of the Jews*, but now *Christ is known as salvation to the ends of the earth, a common salvation*.

(2) Here is the great *gospel duty*, and that is *to believe in Jesus Christ* (whom God has thus given, given *for us*, given *to us*), to accept the gift, and answer the intention of the giver (emphasis mine).

The imagery of a general pardon for rebels and exiles appears to be a frequently used illustration. Jean Taffin, court preacher of William of Orange, uses it in his *Merktekenen der kinderen Gods* (Marks of God's Children). Did Taffin and Henry possibly read the book of Benedetto of Mantua?

But we have drifted away from our main theme. Let us return to Comrie.

#### *It Appears to Be Experiential*

Fisher's *The Marrow of the Gospel*, has recently been republished in modern Dutch. To my knowledge this republication is awaiting announcement in the periodicals of our circles. In fact, *The Benefits of Christ*, by Benedetto, has been translated again into Dutch and published subsequently. Neither has this been publicized as yet.

Many ministers who view themselves as true heirs of Comrie no longer speak with the same freedom as did Comrie, Henry, and others. They have become preachers in bondage. They now preach that a sinner may not approach God unless He speaks to the sinner in a very personal manner, otherwise a preacher may be thought superficial or to be misleading his hearers. One no

longer dares to speak of Christ as being given in the Word. Preaching which strongly emphasizes the necessity that the Lord must first work (however sacred a truth this is), has the appearance of being experiential and God-glorifying preaching, but it is not so. It is ultimately a self-willed religion. One can only glorify God by obeying His Word, which tells us something different.

### *It Only Sounds Different*

Comrie states at the conclusion of his exposition of Lord's Day 7:

We understand this *granting*, *offering* and *giving* with this distinction, that the things thus offered to us, have truly been given and granted us of God in the promise of the gospel, and believe that these three words, though differing in sound, have one and the same meaning. In this respect, the entire salvation which God grants to us poor sinners is...called a gift which God sets before us in the gospel, and offers and grants to us out of free grace....The free offer or bestowal of Christ is made to all to whom the gospel is preached, to the end that they would make use of it and receive God's gift, setting a seal to God's testimony that it is true (emphasis mine).

Van der Groe takes the same position in a letter to Groenewegen. He adds that he knows himself to be of the same mind as the old Reformed fathers: "For them to offer, to present, to give, and to promise, etc., were all identical in meaning according to the manner of the gospel."

We do not overstate the case when we note that Comrie and Van der Groe were still unfettered. The fact that the sinner is so blind and insensitive that he neither does give nor can give the least attention to the gospel offer, does not take anything away from the genuineness of this gift. The Lord commands that this be preached. It is His will that the shepherd urgently beseech the congregation to let themselves be reconciled to God. The outcome must then be left in the hands of the Lord who, according to His sovereign good pleasure, will cause the offered pardon to be efficacious with the one and not with the other. *This*, in my opinion, is God-glorifying. The more extensively the passive act of ingrafting is emphasized, the less free one will be in extending the offer of the gospel. This is not necessary, as we observed with Comrie. It appears, however, that today these matters often seem to exclude each other. The forefathers knew of no such restriction, for they placed the call to faith on the foreground and left the hidden things to the Lord. This makes the old Scottish writers so precious. Presently we must often do without this. Regretfully, there is hardly any room for it any more.

### *Rationalism in the Church*

I have stated earlier that the theology of the last 100-150 years has changed and that these new thoughts have been transmitted through the conventicles. Perhaps we must go back even further into our history, as I learned from an office-bearer during a conversation about these matters. During the eighteenth century an increasing role was ascribed to reason in the doctrines of the faith. More and more room was given to the intellect, to reason. Rationalism made its entry into the church, which could be observed in a changing theology. The experience of God's children was mapped out and systematized. That which was formerly a mystery, now received a label. That which belongs together was disconnected. The order of salvation became more detailed and deterministic.

It can be demonstrated that theology did not change for the better. Nevertheless, the Lord was pleased to continue working by His Spirit. Through the centuries many ministers have known how to present both faith and regeneration without being tied down, and there are

ministers who demonstrate that it can *still* be done, contrary to popular sentiment. What a blessed inconsistency! But gradually I am becoming more concerned. Aren't our ministers being molded and trained more and more toward a style of preaching which promotes a rigidly patterned life of faith and an inhibited proclamation of the Word? If this is indeed the case, it would be disadvantageous to the congregations.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **Let Lord's Day 23 Be the Primary Issue**

#### *Is the Way of the Mediator the Way of the Church?*

Ministers who greatly emphasize the steps of grace in their preaching will use the special days of the church calendar to focus on the "milestones" in the life of grace. It is a favorite expression to state that "the way of the Mediator is the way of the church." They maintain that a believer experiences the redemptive events. In this style of preaching, Christmas aligns itself with the beginning Christian to whom Christ is revealed for the first time, and Easter with the Christian for whom an angry Judge has become a reconciled Judge. At Pentecost the focus is upon the benefit of assurance, and for the first time, as it is said, the believer returns into the Father heart of God and may call upon the Lord as a loving Father. It is then that the sinner is acquainted with a Triune God.

During the Reformation era this sort of exposition was unknown, which is peculiar, to say the least, since God now converts His people the same way as He did in earlier days. We know that Calvin did not even want to recognize feast days. On those days he simply preached about the next passage in his verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture.

I do believe that the feast days are indeed suitable for giving extra attention to certain exercises of faith. Good Friday is particularly suited to humble the Christian, to remind him how difficult it is not to continually fabricate his own righteousness, but to deem everything null and void, and instead esteem the suffering of the Mediator.

Easter sermons lend themselves to exhort the believer to live out of the power of Christ's resurrection. And His ascension is of great comfort, knowing that Christ has gone before us and is the heavenly earnest of the eternal salvation of the believer. And so we could go on. However, let us not read more into it than is there. We ought rather to adhere to what the Heidelberg Catechism says about the states of the Mediator, and align ourselves with that in our preaching. I find that to be a safer way.

#### *A Sensitive Question*

The reader could counter by stating that I must certainly have met those who can testify of a conscious transition from the one step of grace to the next, people who can speak of definitive milestones in their spiritual life, old Christians who can speak of the instruction they have received from the preaching of the redemptive facts. You may ask, "How can you now doubt all this?"

That is indeed a rather difficult question, not because I think that the answer is difficult, but because the subject is a sensitive one. I would like to suggest the following for your consideration. First of all, I do believe that God can indeed grant some of His children a special experience which they deem to be one of these milestones. We need not limit the Lord in that respect. He is free in how He leads us. At the same time, however, I believe that the preaching can greatly influence us in that respect. If the preaching continually emphasizes that more needs to be experienced, in fact, that it must be in order to be sound, the soul will strive and long for this. If it then pleases God to instruct the soul further by causing him to see more of his lostness or to grant a precious manifestation of His favor in Christ, one will readily designate it as the

experience which the minister has repeatedly urged upon his hearers. People will then be inclined to view such dealings of the Lord with them as one of the milestones the minister sets before them in his preaching, whereas it is, in fact, an immediate assurance of the Father's acquittal as taught by the Dutch Second Reformation.

### *No Pattern or Yardstick*

There are indeed people who have had a special experience. I think of what I have read in Van Genderen's *Gerechtigheid als geschenk* (Righteousness as a Gift) concerning Rev. H. H. Middel's account of how he personally experienced the Father's acquittal in a powerful way. But then Middel adds: "Do not consider the way in which God has led me as a pattern or yardstick for yourself, for the Lord is free in how He leads. Let Lord's Day 23 be the main issue for you." We can wholeheartedly concur with this.

Ministers have a great responsibility. To a certain extent they can let the people experience what they preach. What delicate work it is to lead souls! I have known people who felt they were missing something because they had not been "led further." Yet, they were open epistles of Christ's work who aroused a holy jealousy in those around them. But, according to the prevailing preaching in those circles, something was still missing. For years I was not able to understand this. I now see that such souls are hindered due to erroneous guidance.

There is also another category of people: those who can speak at length about their special experiences—people for whom it is not uncommon to think highly of themselves and to be harsh toward others. Regretfully, this does occur as well. Such people can at any given time speak about how they have been led and how they have been justified. It is the unintended by-product of preaching the experiential milestones of the life of grace.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **Souls Hindered on the Way of Salvation**

#### *Back to the Sources*

Perhaps you were also raised in an environment in which the preaching of spiritual milestones and the steps of grace are considered particularly sound preaching. Perhaps your interest has been aroused to read the works of Luther, Calvin, Olevianus, Ursinus, and others. Let me share something from my own experience. The first thing I observed is that these writers speak a different language; however, I suppressed the idea that there was a fundamental difference with my own circles. To think that there could be such a difference was too confusing. Later, and gradually, this possibility became more real. Yet I was still inclined to fool myself. This could not be true, for then so much of what I had formerly defended as truth would have to go overboard. Then it began to dawn on me, however, and I heard ministers who preached differently, a most earnest preaching about a black bride and an all-sufficient Bridegroom—preaching in which, however, the familiar clichés were absent. That was a revelation to me.

They are ministers whose preaching is equally experiential and yet simple. That results in an experience which is difficult to describe. I was given to see clearly that to embrace Christ by faith is the same as receiving the remission of sins and the Father's acquittal. It was a rediscovery of gold which had been obscured by complicated teaching. All this became clearer to me when I again sat for years under such complicated preaching.

I realize that some are now disappointed with me, and that others no longer recognize me. So be it. It gives me great peace and freedom. I recommend such a journey "back to the sources" to everyone, to the source, in harmony with the confessions, that is, to be "simply Reformed."

#### *The Truth Can Be Stated as It Is*

When discussing these matters with office-bearers, I have been asked whether I am conscious of the fact that people who listen to evangelical radio broadcasts would probably very much agree with my sentiments. That would make it a very dubious matter in our circles. I must add that I rarely, if ever, listen to radio broadcasts, and therefore I find it difficult to respond to such a question. But even if such an allegation would prove to be true, I wouldn't be altogether too dissatisfied with such broadcasts.

I do wish to point out, however, that the preaching I promote is not only characterized by promises, but also by threats. It is a preaching in which man is rendered absolutely guilty and in which he is depicted in his total lostness. It is also a preaching which exposes man's enmity. In God's normal way, the grace He promises becomes valuable for a guilty sinner. Such preaching, however, will also expound the one-sided work of God as set forth in the Canons of Dort. Is that also the language of these evangelical broadcasts?

I am conscious of the concern of many that my approach can lead to a Christianity that has found "the venison" too quickly. Indeed, it is understandable that there is such concern. Comrie already knew that erroneous views about faith exist, and that for some, faith consists only in a superficial receiving of Christ. But abuse can never cancel out proper use. Ministers should not hold back on their mandate due to a misplaced fear. I am confident that preaching will

accomplish its proper objective when it is also preached how the Lord glorifies His grace, how man is humbled by God's Spirit, seeing and acknowledging God's judgment upon his life, and thus takes hold of God's strength. Let us venture upon it. The truth can be stated as it is.

### *One Foundation—Two Schools of Thought*

Let me ask a final question. Let's suppose that we agree that indeed there has been a shift of emphasis in both doctrine and preaching. Is this significant, or are the changes we have observed of secondary importance? It is good to realize that there have been considerable differences of opinion throughout church history. That enables us to relativize matters. The Scottish church (the Erskines, Boston, M' Cheyne, and others) preached the offer of grace freely and experienced much blessing. The English Baptists (Philpot, Warburton, and others) denied the free offer of grace and also experienced a blessing upon their ministry. Calvin and Luther are undoubtedly rejoicing together before God's throne, but here below they did not see eye to eye. Yet, there is a difference. Calvin and Luther were separated by different confessions and they belonged to different churches. This was also true for M' Cheyne and Philpot.

We, however, are presently discussing two schools of thought within churches with the same Reformed foundation, and even within the same denomination. Both schools of thoughts lay claim to the same confession, yes, they even subscribe to the same Forms of Unity. Both claim that they desire to be truly Reformed. There lies the confusion. In the meantime, however, pulpits remain mutually closed for representatives from either side.

### *Does It Make a Difference?*

I have also carefully considered the option whether this detected shift of emphasis can possibly be traced back to the use of a new arsenal of concepts which, in essence reflects the old Reformed truth. That would be a relief, for we would then, so to speak, only need a glossary of terms. But this is not so. The truth of the matter is that one party thinks and teaches differently about fundamental issues than does the other. The conceptual apparatus is fortunately shared in part, so that a good dialogue remains possible. Furthermore, the separation between the two schools of thought is not equally distinct and consistent with every minister, at least not in ministers who have already served a bit longer. That puts us somewhat at ease again. But that does not take away the fact, however, that these two rather divergent views are in conflict with each other.

In other words, it does make a difference. You cannot remain neutral. I am therefore convinced that I must choose to be classically Reformed. I am concerned that the spiritual direction given in many congregations is an obstacle to proper spiritual growth. Souls are exhorted by ministers to strive for things which will only hinder them. Doesn't this cause unnecessary darkness? Is this possibly the reason why there is so much complaining about so little breakthrough in the work of grace? A minister is authorized to proclaim acquittal to every believer. Would this not lead to much more liberty? Doesn't the church in our day unnecessarily live below her privileges?

### *Suggestive Questions*

It should be obvious that all this is in no small measure related to the training of ministers. As stated before, I am truly concerned about the youngest generation of ministers in the Netherlands Reformed Congregations (*Gereformeerde Gemeenten*). Are the many and complicated distinctions in the life of grace part of the curriculum? As a matter of fact, I find it noteworthy

that they who propound such views make the power of their message contingent upon traditional experiential terminology rather than sound exegesis. Getting to the point consists essentially in asking a suggestive, rhetorical question such as, "Did not the salvation of their fearful soul become an impossible matter when their Savior died?" It usually gets no further than unproven suggestions of this sort: "Peter experienced significant matters in his life." I have not been trained in the discipline of theology, but I did receive sufficient analytical ability and critical discernment to observe that such views are more often imposed on Scripture rather than drawn from them. Is this perhaps denominational theology?

#### *Do We Subscribe to It in Practice?*

In the training of ministers the doctrine of regeneration has clearly become the hinge upon which the truth turns. There is evidently great kinship with Comrie "to whom the Netherlands Reformed Congregations are so greatly indebted." I am aware of the fact that Rev. G. H. Kersten and Rev. A. Vergunst were also strongly oriented toward him. They did not do so, however, at the expense of the offer of grace. At least, this was certainly not so with the "young" Kersten, and certainly not with Rev. Vergunst. But now some ministers rarely follow Comrie in preaching the gospel freely. Now a sensible knowledge of sin has again become a *de facto* condition attached to the offer of grace. Has it not become nearly normative among us to dwell extensively upon the necessity of a thorough, sensible knowledge of sin? For many ministers who describe the way of God's people, the punitive justice of God plays an exceptionally large role. Only those who have learned to bow deeply to the demands of this justice may come to Christ, have a true conversion, and may trust that they are the recipients of saving faith. One must first experience the reality of a God who is very angry and executes justice (knowledge of God) before there will be room for the Mediator (knowledge of Christ). The problem is that in this way one unintentionally introduces a conditional gospel by way of the back door. Officially we may claim not to agree with such teaching, but in the final analysis do we not subscribe to it in practice? As we have observed, our forefathers were wary of this and frequently warned against it. Do we share their concern?

#### *Predictable Preaching*

It is also a matter of genuine concern that one has lost sight of God's manifold wisdom in converting sinners. Though à Brakel and Koelman still subscribed to the diversity of God's sovereignty, it seems that presently the training of ministers is governed by only one method of conversion. At times it can become rather tiring to listen to uniform and predictable preaching. It is not very good, is it, if you can frequently finish the thought? Your heart leaps for joy when a minister, having completed his training, becomes himself and begins to preach more scripturally. The New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 has gates on four sides. In earlier days it was said that God saves sinners through the north-gate as well as the south-gate. In fact, there is an entrance from the four corners of the world.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### **The Substance of our Message**

In this last chapter I wish to recap all the subjects about which I have expressed my concern. The main issues are the preaching, the relationship between faith and justification, and the steps of the life of grace. A significant portion of this book deals with the shift of emphasis in doctrine, since there is little preaching about faith. Instead, regeneration has become the starting point of thinking.

#### *The Administration of Grace*

We have compared the truth of the Reformation and the Dutch Second Reformation with the teaching of today. The gracious character of faith has been established as a non-negotiable truth. It is a one-sided work of God to quicken a dead sinner. We wholeheartedly concur with this, and this is always presupposed in all that has been said. But that is not the subject matter of this book. This book deals more with how the Lord *administers* grace in time and what He has revealed about this in His Word, and what His will is, as to how these matters function in preaching.

#### *The Reformation Trio*

Concerning the Reformation and the Dutch Second Reformation we have said the following: The offer of grace, faith, and justification constitute an essential trio. In preaching, all hearers are called to repentance and faith. This call consists in the proclamation of a general divine pardon. Salvation is offered to anyone and everyone. Our forefathers taught that the offer of grace is the warrant for coming boldly and freely to Christ. In fact, faith in this offer is mandatory, for unbelief is a disobedient rejection of Christ.

At the same time faith is a gracious gift. Only when the Holy Spirit renders this call efficacious shall the believer actually receive Christ. Upon doing so, God will immediately impute the righteousness of Christ to him or her. Thus one believes *unto* justification. Embracing Christ results in the *immediate* acquittal by the Father. This is even true for the one who is most "hard of hearing." The believer therefore becomes the recipient of sonship, peace, and joy.

He who speaks this language is Reformed, thoroughly Reformed, "simply Reformed." Two things will attract attention in such preaching. First, there is the manner in which it addresses the act of faith. The act of faith is placed in the foreground. It is to receive, to take hold of, to embrace.

The second thing that draws our attention is the emphasis upon the fact that faith and justification occur simultaneously. These two matters are not separated. In our time we are very much in need of a dash of Luther, a teaspoon of à Brakel, and a cup of Van der Groe.

#### *Spiritual Growth*

One person has a strong, and another a weak faith. There is growth in grace and assurance. The Lord grants this growth under the preaching, by the witness of the Holy Spirit. To some He grants a stronger joy, which may be a special circumstance, and is not a rule for others. As he

matures, the believer learns to live by faith rather than by feeling. This faith is a daily fleeing to the blood of Christ for forgiveness, because the believer remains a poor sinner. In this way he lives *out of* justification. This is growth in faith along with a dying of the old man.

### *No Superficial Preaching*

The preaching of the free gospel offer is not superficial when the minister also preaches how the exercise of faith actually takes place. When the scriptural exercises of the soul are addressed, the congregation will be able "to identify with it." The Holy Spirit will convict the soul of sin and cause it to despair of itself. This will drive the sinner out to Christ, and it is this free offer of grace that will remove all inhibition to come to the Mediator, and all who will not hear will perish because of their own unbelief, having counted the blood of Christ an unclean thing. So the message comes with urgency to the congregation. This was the language of the old Reformed fathers.

### *A New Arsenal of Concepts*

In the preaching and teaching of many current ministers, the Reformed trio of offer-faith-justification has been replaced with a different arsenal of concepts. The emphasis is now on milestones, essential experiences whereby one is led from the one stage of grace to the next. Those things which were inseparable in Reformation teaching are now divorced from each other. Regeneration and faith are now preached chronologically. Faith and justification also have been separated chronologically. Many new distinctions have been introduced. According to this teaching, one may have experienced certain matters which others must still experience. Preaching these "critical experiences" is different from what the Reformers and their immediate descendants meant by growth in grace. These various ideas find little or no support in God's Word. You can add them to the Word, but you cannot draw them from it. Neither do the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort support such notions.

### *A Perceptible Shift of Focus*

This new teaching usually coincides with a shift of emphasis in preaching. Regeneration and the exchange of states by way of infused grace (at a very early stage, and without the sinner being conscious of this) now has a dominant position in preaching. Regeneration rather than faith has now become the pivot upon which everything turns. Viewed from a biblical perspective, the fact that faith is a gift of God and that faith is a holy obligation is simultaneously true. Today, one rarely hears of the duty to believe as an act of the sinner. The sincere offer of grace almost disappears. The term is still used, but it is usually preached in an inhibited and conditional manner, and only to sensible sinners. This teaching is accompanied by a view of preaching which was foreign to our forefathers. There has been a perceptible shift of emphasis, a shift that is detrimental. It is my opinion that this does not constitute progressive insight or advancement. On the contrary, I deem this development to be an aberration of the old Reformed truth. It is regression. How wonderful it would be if the original Reformed views of the Reformation would again be designated as orthodox and experiential. Presently there is so little room for this. Is it not true that God's children are now hindered by these complicated distinctions? I think it would be beneficial if we would orient ourselves not just toward Comrie but also would consult à Brakel, Koelman, and others more often.

### *Is There No Cause?*

We complain in our circles about the lack of breakthrough in the work of grace, and say rather frequently that the Spirit is so quiet. We ought to ask ourselves whether we are not grieving Him with all our detours. We are also very quick to say that our young people want an easier religion. Could it be that they sense intuitively that we are not on the right track? Who knows whether the undesirable attraction of evangelical circles would diminish if we would again become fully Reformed in our preaching. How sad it is when lengthy synodical reports about departure from the church does not, or barely subjects the preaching to criticism. My question would be, "Is there no cause?"

### *There Are yet Good Things in Judah*

Let me add one more remark. As stated earlier, in a certain sense this book is one-sided. That stems from the nature of the subject. The reason for writing it was especially the changed view concerning regeneration, faith, and justification, in both preaching and teaching, and its consequences in the pastoral guidance given to the life of faith in the congregation. Therefore, little or nothing has been said about other aspects, for example, sanctification. Not having addressed this does not imply that we consider this a matter of lesser importance, but rather, that there is no difference of opinion about this. The value and necessity of sanctification are beyond dispute, but the reader already understands this. Neither did I deal much with the gracious character of faith. I already mentioned this fact at the beginning of the book. Again, I have not done so to attribute ability to man or espouse an optimistic view about man, but because it is a matter upon which we all agree. Neither were our forefathers in doubt about all this, and yet they had the courage to speak as freely as they did. That is what I wanted to demonstrate. Considering the seriousness of the subject and the evident concern, one could easily get the impression that there is only room for criticism. But, that would do injustice to the fact that the Lord has granted us so much that is good. I think, for example, about all that is being done for the young people. Happily, "There are yet many good things in Judah." God is pleased to continue to dwell among us in spite of all our deficiencies. At times He is pleased to graciously supply for our deficiency. In our congregations there is still a simple life of faith which knows little about our concerns. This is also true among our young people, and that is truly encouraging.

### *There Is Hope*

Let me conclude by saying that in order to make things clear, certain issues have been presented in a rather black-and-white fashion. The objective was not to polarize, but only to bring clarity. When things seem to have gone awry, one must at times push in the other direction. I have done so without apology, at the risk of exaggeration. Therefore, wherever possible, I have sought to indicate how certain expressions and doctrinal elements can be inserted into preaching in a positive manner. I hope that thereby I have encouraged our congregations and their office-bearers not to dismiss or to silence the issues that have been broached, but to think them through and benefit from them. I will be grateful if those who, by divine appointment, are in a position of preaching, catechizing, and counseling, would give scriptural instruction.

## **Text of Back Cover**

Members of orthodox Reformed churches in the Netherlands and North America can be reluctant to evaluate preaching in their own circles. In this book, Dr. Johan Blaauwendraad\*, a concerned member of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten in the Netherlands, addresses several pertinent issues about preaching in his own circles. He shows how that preaching has strayed pastorally from its scriptural, confessional, and historical moorings. At present, much preaching leads to confusion, Blaauwendraad asserts. Regeneration has replaced faith as the focal point of preaching. That difference in emphasis has important consequences. The author also addresses how preaching the steps of grace in the experience of salvation has undergone significant changes.

The issues Dr. Blaauwendraad raises are equally pertinent to North American churches of Reformed, experiential persuasion. It is the author's wish that office-bearers in particular reflect upon the issues he raises and that confused members will be able to more clearly understand and articulate the simplicity of the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

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