

The Divine Purchase

Douglas Vickers

The authors of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* (1658), following those of the earlier *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), encapsulated the meaning of redemption in their statement that “Christ has *purchased* for believers . . . freedom from . . . the curse of the law and . . . [from] this present evil world.”¹ My objective in what follows is to reflect on the significance of that statement as it is clarified by the threefold proposition: First, Christ actually *purchased* the blessings indicated for those for whom he died; second, the blessings entailed freedom from the world in the full sense of that word; and third, the curse of the law was removed for both the Jews and the Gentiles in order that one church might be established, constituted of both Jews and Gentiles under the terms of the new covenant.

The atonement involved

It is of foremost significance that in his substitutionary life (in what is frequently referred to as his active obedience) and his penal suffering (in his passive obedience), Christ actually *purchased* the blessings we now have in view. We shall see that involved in that statement is what has been referred to as the “ransom theory” or the “satisfaction theory” of the atonement. To clarify what is at issue, refer firstly to the apostolic statement in Acts 20:28 – “the church of God, which he hath *purchased* with his own blood (KJV).”

The word “purchased” is preserved in the NKJV and the NASB (which also gives a

¹ *Savoy Declaration of Faith*, (1658), various editions, XXI:1, italics added. The same statement is included in the *Second London (Baptist) Confession* (1689), Ch. 21. It appears in chapter 20 of the *Westminster Confession*, which also inserts the word “moral” before the word “law.”

marginal reading of “acquired”), but the ESV at that point has preferred the word “obtained.” My concern in that connection is to say that of course, in the totality of his piacular work, Christ “obtained” the church, as the ESV has it. But the question arises whether, in the light of larger contextual considerations, a “purchase” rather than an “obtaining” was operative in the redemptive-messianic work of our Lord.

I note in passing that the relevant Greek word *periepoiē/sato*, the aorist middle form (meaning an act performed once-for-all at a specific time) of the verb *peripoieō/w*, has been translated as “purchased” in certain interlinear translations. Those include the earlier nineteenth-century work of George Ricker Berry,² and the recent translation by R. K. Brown and P. W. Comfort.³ Other interlinear translations use such words as “acquired”⁴ and “procured.”⁵ The relevant Greek word, as already referred to, is common to the different manuscripts underlying the KJV and the ESV translations. The standard Greek lexicon (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich) references the text we are at present addressing, Acts 20:28, as sustaining the meaning of *periepoiē/sato* as to “acquire, obtain, gain for oneself.”⁶ It is clear, then, that in view of these variations of translation it is necessary to reflect on the larger contextual meaning of the relevant text and its significance for the doctrine of the atonement. What in fact was involved in the saving work of Christ?

That those whom God the Father gave to his Son to redeem (John 17:6 – “thine

² George Ricker Berry, *The Interlinear Translation of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: Handy Book Co., 1897), republished by Zondervan, 1958.

³ Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, 1990).

⁴ Alfred Marshall, *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1958).

⁵ Charles Van der Pool, *The Apostolic Bible Polyglot* (Newport, OR: The Apostolic Press, 1996).

⁶ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, n.d.), 655.

they were and thou gavest them me”) were “purchased” is liberally stated on the pages of the New Testament. At Ephesians 1:7 it is said that “we have redemption through his blood,” and the Greek word that is translated there as “redemption,” ἀπολυτρώσιν, carries the clear meaning, as the Greek lexicon states, of “buying back . . . by paying of a ransom.”⁷ The underlying Greek word λυτρόν, along with its cognates such as the verb form λυτρόω, means the “price of release, ransom” or again, “making free by paying a ransom.”⁸ The apostle Paul has emphasized the same reality when he cautions the Corinthian church: “ye are not your own; for ye are “bought with a price,” ἡγοράσθητε ἀγορῆ τιμῆ=ἵ” (1 Cor 6:19–20, 7:23). And in direct language our Lord himself said that he came “to give his life a *ransom* [λυτρόν] for many” (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45).

What has just been said contributes to the larger context in which our text at Acts 20:28, stating that Christ “purchased the church,” is to be read. The New Testament pages are redolent with that statement of fact. But further light is thrown on the matter by reference to God’s relation to his church as that was expressed in its Old Testament form. In writing Acts 20:28 Paul may well have adapted the language of Psalm 74:2, where the notion of purchase is clearly in view: “Remember thy congregation, which thou has purchased of old.”⁹ At Psalm 74:2 the word “purchased” appears in both the KJV and the ESV translations. If Paul at that point has in any sense recalled Psalm 74:2, he has adapted the word “congregation,” “συναγωγῆ/ ἵ” in the Septuagint (LXX), to “church.” But again the concept of ransom is clear in Psalm 74:2, where the verb

⁷ Ibid, 95.

⁸ Ibid, 483–84.

⁹ My attention to the citation of Psalm 74 has been drawn by the work of R. J. Knowling in his commentary on the Greek text of *The Acts* in W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), vol 2, 436–37.

“ $\epsilon\omicron\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\omega/\sigma\omega$ ” in the Septuagint, meaning “to ransom,” is used in the aorist tense. In the same connection we may reflect on God’s promise in Hosea 13:14, where God says that he will *ransom* his people. The Septuagint at that point employs the word $\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\omega/\sigma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ which, as we have seen, conveys precisely the fact of ransom.

The earlier New Testament scholar and exegete, R. J. Knowling (d. 1919), has observed with reference to Paul’s usage in Acts 20:28 that he “adapts the language of this Psalm [74:2] [and] in comparing his language with that of the LXX we can see how by the use of the word $\epsilon\omicron\kappa\kappa\lambda\eta\sigma\iota/\alpha$ [church] instead of $\sigma\upsilon\nu\alpha\gamma\omega\gamma\eta/$ [congregation] in the Psalm he connects the New Christian Society with the ancient $\epsilon\omicron\kappa\kappa\lambda\eta\sigma\iota/\alpha$ of Israel, whilst in employing $\rho\epsilon\iota\epsilon\pi\omicron\iota\eta/\sigma\alpha\tau\omicron$ instead of $\epsilon\omicron\kappa\theta\eta/\sigma\omega$ (LXX) [from $\kappa\tau\alpha/\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$, meaning “to acquire”] and retaining the force of $\epsilon\omicron\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\omega/\sigma\omega$, LXX, by reference to the $\lambda\upsilon/\tau\rho\omicron\eta$ [ransom] of the new Covenant, a deeper significance is given to the Psalmist’s language; a greater redemption than that of Israel from the old Egyptian bondage had been wrought for the Christian Ecclesia.”¹⁰

At issue in the preceding comments is the fact that the larger context, not only of the New Testament Pauline literature but of the anticipatory Old Testament revelation, contributes to the interpretation and translation of the New Testament Greek. That larger contextual translation suggests quite firmly that Acts 20:28 is to be read as stating that God *purchased* the church. That, in turn, lies behind and justifies the statement of the Savoy Declaration that Christ *purchased* for believers certain freedoms that now engage us. The authors of the Savoy planted their feet on firm doctrinal ground.

If, then, we hold that Christ *purchased* the church and thereby purchased the

¹⁰ Knowling, *op. cit.*, 437.

liberty to which the Savoy has referred, and that he actually paid the price of redemption and did not in some not-clearly-stated way merely *obtain* the church, the question follows as to what in fact was the price that was paid for the ransom in view. Again the answer is copious in the New Testament literature. It was Christ himself who “*his own self* bore our sins in his own body on the tree” (1 Pet 2:24, italics added). It was Christ “who through the eternal Spirit *offered himself* without spot to God” (Heb 9:14, italics added) to “purge our sins” (Heb 1:3). The letter to the Hebrews rehearses at length the fact that Christ was the priest who made the definitive offering for sin, and that in doing so he was himself the sacrifice. Christ gave himself for our redemption.

But two further things are to be said. First, the *person* of our Lord was such that he appeared in this world as one Person in whom two natures, the divine and the human natures, were joined in union. In the early church the dogma on the Person of Christ was settled, the so-called Christological settlement, at the council of Chalcedon in the year 451. The two natures were joined in union in Christ, it was said, “without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation.” The first two of those defining characteristics established that there was no communication of properties between the two natures. The human remained completely human without receiving any properties of the divine, and the divine remained divine. The last two of the defining characteristics established the reality of the union. Our Lord was in possession, that is, of the full capacities and faculties of a human soul, in intellect, emotion, and will. But that involved that in the Person of Christ as he walked this world there were two minds, a divine and a human, two capacities for affection, a divine and human, and both a divine and a human will. It is to be held carefully that Jesus Christ was the eternal second Person of the

Godhead, that he was not always Jesus Christ, and that he came into the world to *become* Jesus Christ for our redemption. As he was in this world he was not, that is, a *human* person. He was a *divine* Person who took unto himself a human nature.

The reality of our Lord's Personhood requires it to be acknowledged that it was in his human nature that he accomplished our redemption. He was our substitute in every respect relevant to our redemption. Sin had entered the world in human nature (Rom 5:12) and the requirements of God's holy justice meant that the law we had broken must be satisfied in human nature. Christ died in his human nature. He could not die in divine nature. He had been tempted in every point like as we are in his human nature. Satan could not tempt him in his divine nature. Satan had at one time attempted to do that but he was cast out of heaven as a result. Christ paid the penalty for our sin in his human nature. In doing that he completely fulfilled his redemptive mission in that he did for us what we were obligated to do under the covenant of works but what, because of our captivity to Satan and sin, we could not do for ourselves. The remarkable result, so far as it bears upon our own position and as a result of Christ's substitution, is that God now looks on us as though we ourselves had fulfilled the law and as though we ourselves had paid the penalty for having broken the law. Such is the profound significance of the imputation of the guilt of our sin to Christ and the imputation of his forensic righteousness to us.

But in the second place it must be equally carefully held that it was the *Person* of Christ himself who redeemed us by his substitutionary life and death. We say, that is, that it was the *divine Person* of Christ who died *in his human nature*. Paul's argument to the Corinthians has eloquently made the point. For as to the identity of Christ, "none of the

princes of this world knew; for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). It was the Lord of glory who died for us. And that reality, of course, enabled Paul to state in Acts 20:28 that it was “God [who] purchased the church with his own blood.”

While that is so, it is at the same time necessary to say that the divine nature of our Lord was engaged in his messianic accomplishment. There was, of course, a communication between the divine and the human minds (without, as has been said, a communication of properties) of our Lord, and he was at the same time supported in all that he did by the Holy Spirit who had been given to him “without measure” (John 3:34). Indeed, it is to be held that all that Christ did in this world he did in the strength of the Holy Spirit. We have it in Hebrews 9:14, further, that it was “through the eternal Spirit” that he “offered himself without spot to God.” In the history of commentary a difference of view has been held as to whether the reference to the Spirit in that text is to be taken as referring to our Lord’s divine nature or to the Person of the Holy Spirit. (I suggest the latter). An expansive discussion on the point is contained in John Owen’s exposition of the letter to the Hebrews.¹¹

But what is to be said as to the disposition of the price of redemption that was paid? If, as has been argued, a ransom was paid, to whom was it paid? It is not necessary to refer at any length to the fatuous suggestion that the ransom price was paid to the Devil. The simple but profound reality is that the price was paid in satisfaction of the wrath of God against sin. That is precisely what is involved in the statement in the first epistle of John that “God loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1

¹¹ See John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), vol. VI, 303–307.

John 4:10. See also Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, and 1 John 2:2). Again there has been some divergence among theologians as to the translation of those texts. Some have preferred to translate the underlying Greek at 1 John 4:10, *ἰϋλασμοῦ*, to state that Christ was the “expiation” for our sins. It is apposite to state that the word “propitiation” refers explicitly to setting at peace, in the case in hand the setting at peace of the wrath of God. “Expiation,” on the other hand, refers to the erasure of guilt. And of course, Christ was both the expiation and the propitiation for our sin. But textual analysis supports the doctrine of propitiation at the point stated.¹² It is for that reason that Paul could say to the Romans that “being justified by faith we have peace with God” (Rom 5:1). At issue in that text is the fact that God is now at peace with his people.

But what are we to say of the transaction between the Father and the Son when, on the cross, Christ completed the purchase of our redemption and thereby there accrued to us the liberties to which the Savoy Declaration refers? We recall that our Lord, while, as we have said, it was the Lord of glory who died, actually died for us *in his human nature*. But we hold in view at that point that our Lord was in possession of the full capacities of human nature, in soul and body. We hold, therefore, in holy reverence before the mystery involved, that in his dying Christ suffered in human soul and human body. As to his suffering of soul it is to be understood that in agony of soul he passed through eternal death on our behalf. He suffered the very pains of hell for us. But he passed triumphantly through that eternal death and emerged victoriously. At that point Satan knew he had been definitively defeated. He saw and knew that those whom he might have attempted to destroy had been definitively rescued by Christ from his possible

¹² See the extended discussion on the point in Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 125–85.

grasp. They now belonged to Christ. They were forever beyond the Devil's grasp. He might henceforth disturb their peace, and harass, and to a degree confuse them for a time. But now they were eternally secure in Christ.

Now that our Lord had passed triumphantly through eternal death he could lay down his human life in his temporal death. He was qualified to do the latter because of his triumph in the former. In due time he would commit his human soul to the Father. When he had said "It is finished" (John 19:30), reflecting what he had prayed in his high priestly prayer, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4), he could say "Into thy hands I commend my [human] spirit" (Luke 23:46). He committed his human soul to the Father. It is clear, then, that the reference to the shedding of blood, as that encapsulated the accomplishment of redemption, is in a significant sense a metonymical statement that brings to awareness the fact that the redemptive act of Christ involved a suffering of soul as well as of body. In that connection John Owen, referring to the meaning of the sacrifice that Christ offered as "a matter of great importance" to the extent of involving the suffering in his full human nature, has commented judiciously: "Those who look only on the outward part of the death of Christ can see nothing but suffering in it."¹³ More was involved than the suffering perceived by those who look "only on the outward part." Owen goes on at length to consider the fact that "the principal consideration of it is his [Christ's] own offering of himself a sacrifice to God, as the great high priest of the church, to make atonement and reconciliation for sinners, *which was hid from the world by those outward acts of violence which were upon him.*"¹⁴

¹³ John Owen, "A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit" in *The Works of John Owen* (London: Banner of Truth, ed. William H. Gould, vol. 3, 1965), 176.

¹⁴ Owen, *idem*, italics added.

Freedom from the world

The statement of the Savoy Declaration that “Christ has purchased for believers freedom from this present evil world” recalls Paul’s introduction to his Galatian letter. “The Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world” (Gal 1:3–4). There again, at the center of Paul’s salutatory introduction, we have a clear linkage to what we have already examined. Our redemption was accomplished, the apostle says, because Christ “gave himself.” Again the reality of divine ransom enters.

It is necessary now to examine at least briefly two aspects of what is involved in the Savoy statement. First, what are we to understand as the “world” from whose domain the believer in Christ has freedom, considering the “world” in all its intellectual, moral, and ethical dimensions; and second, what, as a result, is to be the Christian believer’s relation to the world as its claims continue to press upon him? Let us take the first point first.

Foremost importance is to be attached at this point to the respects in which certain developments in intellectual history have led to the condition at the present time in which the doctrinal theology of the church, and thereby the security of the ordinary life of the Christian, is under heavy attack. It is not necessary (though the exercise would be highly relevant and profitable) to digress to take notice of certain theological heresies that have provided intellectual background to the present state of things. The early Arian and Sabellian heresies are capable of recurring recrudescence; Pelagian digressions raise their head; and various forms of human autonomy squeeze their way into the church. There is, of course, a genuine biblical philosophy, as there is a biblical philosophy of history. But the urgent warning of the apostle continues: “Beware lest any man spoil you [take you

captive] through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men and not after Christ” (Col 2:8). But that is the point at which the church continues to be troubled. There is a true “philosophy after Christ.” But the conclusion appears unavoidable that the view of Christ has become too low in modern times because the view of man has become too high. Let us look at some minimal details.

The assumption of human autonomy, as that has come to expression on the level of intellection, has been historically prominent. Consider our father Adam’s position. He was confronted by the mandate of God which he knew clearly in his prelapsarian state. He was not to eat of the forbidden tree. Also, he was confronted by the claims of the tempter. Now the question arose in his mind as to whom, and which of the respective statements submitted to him, he should obey. Was it to be God, whom he clearly knew as his Creator and gracious communicator, or the Devil? In the upshot, Adam decided that he would believe neither of the claims before him simply on the grounds of the identity of the presenter. Rather, Adam would make up his own mind and decide for himself. At that very point, it is of principal importance to note, the false and damning assumption of human autonomy had entered. Fallen man has assumed his autonomous competence ever since. The truth and validity of what he knows is adjudicated against the criteria proposed by assumedly competent unaided human reason. At Adam’s fall, human intellection was shifted decisively to the track of autonomy and it has continued to explain the essence of the sinful state ever since.

The assumption of autonomy entered philosophic thought decisively at the hands of Descartes in the seventeenth century. After confining himself in seclusion for a day, as history has it, he decided that he would base his belief-system only on what he had reason

to hold were “clear and distinct ideas.” The clear and distinct idea he came to realize was that of his own existence and intellection. His famous “I think, therefore I am,” *cogito ergo sum*, immediately elevated the human mind to the level of autonomous deliberation regarding the locus of truth. That highly significant step in intellectual history having been taken (and leaving aside for the present the subsequent development in rationalism and also the unique British trends in empiricism, notably as in Locke’s epistemological theory), it is important for our present discussion to take note of the contribution of Immanuel Kant at the end of the so-called eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Kant had made a uniquely important step forward, as he saw it, in his epistemological theory, the theory of the origin, processes, and validity of knowledge. The essence can be stated briefly, the grasp of which is necessary to understanding the state of the church’s theology at the present time.

Two principal elements of Kantian thought call for notice in our present context. First, Kant argued that reality was to be understood as divided into two so-called realms, the phenomenal realm on the one hand and the noumenal realm of the other. Knowledge, then, was confined or limited to what was observable in the phenomenal realm; or more particularly, it was confined to an individual’s perception of what was existent in that realm. For it was not the “things in themselves,” the *ding an sich*, but the phenomenal representations of them, that were knowable. We shall see in a moment how, in fact, such possible knowledge came to exist. But what might or might not exist in the noumenal realm was not knowable. For theology, Kant’s critical step at that point was that he consigned God to the noumenal realm. God, Kant therefore said, might or might not exist. It was not possible to know. At the same time as Kant concluded that it could not

be known or proved that God existed, it was equally true, he charitably said, that it was not possible to prove that he did not exist.

Before we move to the second important element of Kant's thought, the element that has been referred to in the history of thought as Kant's "Copernican revolution" in the theory of knowledge, let me indicate briefly Kant's stated position on the possible existence of God. The upshot was that Kant argued that the existence of God could not be demonstrated as an element of "pure reason," but could conceivably be a usable assumption of "practical reason." In his *Critique of Practical Reason* he argued that "It is morally necessary to assume the existence of God [but] this moral necessity is *subjective*, that is, it is a want, and not *objective*."¹⁵ That conclusion follows from Kant's earlier argument in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: "These remarks will have made it evident that the ideal of the Supreme Being, far from being an enunciation of the existence of a being in itself necessary, is nothing more than a *regulative principle* of reason . . . it exists merely in my own mind, as the formal condition of thought, but not as a material and hypostatic condition of existence."¹⁶ Kant's influence on doctrinal theology has continued to the present time in its liberal and non-Reformed expressions, and the critical element has been that of the unknowability of God.

But that very development has meant and implied that the ground of reason and knowledge is not to be found in the revelation that God has given, but in the assumption of the competence of unaided human reason. That, in a sentence, is the continuation, in many parts of contemporary theology, of what we have already identified as the

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (New York: Barnes & Noble, translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, 2004 [originally published 1788]), 109.

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Barnes & Noble, translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn, 2004 [originally published in 1781]), 306–307.

pervasive assumption of human intellectual autonomy. It could be argued, if larger space were available at this time, that corresponding assumptions of the competence of unaided human reason inform certain Reformed-evangelical apologetic arguments.

The elevation of the virus of assumed autonomy in Kantian thought is clear in the second element we anticipated in Kant's epistemological philosophy. What the individual perceives in the phenomenal realm is transformed into knowledge, Kant claimed, by the application to those perceptions of certain so-called "categories," or "forms of understanding" resident in the mind. A rehearsal of those "categories" is not necessary, except to say that their use in the determination of knowledge means in effect that the individual does not see or know reality as it is, but that reality is, for him, how it is constructed by his own mind. Every man determines his own reality. One historian of thought has put that by saying that for Kant "the world is not an objective fact independent of us, to be defended and criticized as such. It is the product of the laws of our own understanding."¹⁷ That is the assumption of autonomy come to its fullest expression.

Now the Savoy Declaration has rightly stated that the Christian believer is delivered from the world. What we have said to this point is the first and highly critical sense in which that is true. For the Christian, contrary to the dictates of every form of non-Christian argument, does know that God exists and has spoken in the revelation of himself and his purposes that he has made. Christianity is a "we know" religion. The contents of what the Christian knows can, of course, be stated at length beyond our present scope. But it is all, in a sense, summed up in our Lord's statement in his high priestly prayer: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God and

¹⁷ A. K. Rogers, *A Student's History of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1932). 378.

Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

But what, it is still necessary to ask, is “the world,” from the domination and realm of which the Christian now has liberty? First, the world is fallen human nature that is fashioning human society in accordance with its own tendencies, the presuppositions and prescriptions of the “carnal mind” that is “enmity against God . . . not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom 8:7). The world is the deliberate rejection of God. It, and life within it, is anthropocentric, man-centered, in the ultimate degree. It is the realm in which the intellectual autonomy against God has come to expression in moral and ethical autonomy. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul referred to the state of the Gentiles before the doors of the kingdom of God were thrown wide open to them (see Gal 3:14). They were (i) without Christ, (ii) aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, (iii) strangers from the covenants of promise, (iv) having no hope, and (v) without God. And then, in order to summarize and drive home the meaning of all that as it applied to the Gentiles and the hopelessness of it, he says that they were (vi) “in the world” (Eph 2:12). That is the strength of the indictment against all those who are outside of Christ. They are “in the world,” and the world is the realm in which God is deliberately shut out.

Further, “the world” from which the Christian is to be distinct conjures a cast of mind that is not only in fact, but with a conscious deliberateness, opposed to God. It will have nothing to do with God. God is excluded from all its thought-systems. As to the occupants of “the world,” “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom 3:18). Those who are still “in the world” live with the display of the reality of God and the display of his goodness before their eyes. But they have deliberately placed blinkers on their eyes so that they cannot see. Every man knows that God is, the apostle to the Gentiles has told us

in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, and the consciousness of God, the *sensus deitatis*, is inherent in the soul of every man by reason of his creation as the image of God. But the reality is that whenever that awareness of God rises unbidden to the level of consciousness it is suppressed again (Rom 1:18) and man chooses to live outside of God. If any cognizance of God should be admitted, those “in the world” instinctively react by setting out to “prove” the existence of God on the grounds, as we have seen, of the presupposition of the competence of unaided human reason. The declarative statements of the Scriptures that *God is* and that *he has spoken*, are deliberately rejected. “god” for the world that still lives in darkness is a god made in the image of human imagination.

To expand briefly on what has already been said we may remark further on the state of man “in the world.” We have taken note indirectly of the assumption of *metaphysical autonomy* (metaphysics, or ontology, has to do with the nature and essence of being). That amounts to the assertion that man has not come from the hands of a sovereign Creator-God. Our first parent, it is then argued, was not the unique creation of God who had said “Let us make man in our image” (Gen 1:26). He may be thought to have evolved from lower forms of life; or he may have emerged as a representative of a certain tribe or community of man-like entities. But in whatever form such notions may be held, man, in the characteristic thought forms of the world, is what he is, morally and culturally, because he claims autonomy against God. All that amounts to the fact that man has denied his creaturehood. To the extent that the thought forms of the “world” are adopted, man has no explanation of himself. Contrary to the fact that God has spoken all things into existence and that all things happen according to his providence, a widespread assumption of contemporary postmodernism is that all that happens happens by chance,

But if that is claimed to be so, then man himself is a chance phenomenon, the reality of individual responsibility and accountability is destroyed, and there is no longer any grounding for personal ethics. Such is the meaning of “the world” from which the Christian and his fellowship with the Father is distinct in being, knowledge, and behavior.

Further, a critically important implication that warrants careful explanation is the projection from metaphysical autonomy to the epistemological autonomy that we observed as leading from Kant. We should now see that the common assumption of man in the world is that the real criteria of truth and validity in knowledge are not those that God has set forth in his law and revelation (see Gen 3:8, where God “walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day” and conversed with him). Rather, the false assumption is made that man can establish his own criteria of truth by observing moral and cultural norms as they exist in society around him and by bringing his own thought into confluence with them. Or he may derive his knowledge criteria simply from his own cogitation and imagination as to how he should live.

But what we have observed as *metaphysical* and *epistemological autonomy* points clearly to the fact that on the level of behavior and socio-cultural conduct, the natural person claims for himself also *ethical autonomy*. That is, the criteria of right conduct and behavior are again not those found in the moral law that God has delivered to us, but, it is supposed, are to be found within man himself or culled from contemporary social and cultural behavior. Or once again, as the criteria of belief and of truth are for the natural man excogitated from within man himself, or are found in the social nexus that surrounds him, it follows that for the natural, unregenerate person, his true status is what it is because, denying God, his life, knowledge, and conduct are determined by false

assertions of metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical autonomy.

Such are the characteristics of life “in the world,” from which the Christian is to separate himself in being, knowledge, and behavior. He is not to “love the world, or the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15). The apostle John draws a clear dichotomy between the Christian and the man of the world. “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” That is to say, such a person has no love for God within himself, nor, of course, can he, apart from the renewing work of the Holy Spirit within him; and the love that the Father bestows on his children “is not in him”; he has no part in it, in that he is altogether outside the range and scope of the Father’s paternal love; for God is not the “Father” of all men, as John had conceived that truth clearly in his epistle.

“The things that are in the world,” which should never claim the love of the Christian, are characterized by John as, *first*, the lust of the flesh. That phrase does not refer most immediately to things themselves that are the object of desire. The reference, rather, is to the respects in which they are capable of having deleterious effects on the soul. Lust includes any inordinate desire or affection that displaces from the Christian mind the priority and the all-comprehending character of the love of God. To confine its meaning to the level of the physical, or the literal flesh, would diminish what the writer has in mind at this point. For anything, including those things which, in their proper place, might be legitimately glorifying to God, that absorbs the interest of the person to the displacement of the love of God and thereby becomes inordinate, is here condemned as contrary to the character of the “fellowship with the Father” of which John speak at length. In that sense, and addressing the danger for the Christian of inordinate desire for any thing, or entity, or person, or thought-system that takes the orientation of the

Christian soul away from priority of love for God and the things of God, is to be brought under the condemnation of the lust of the flesh.

To make the statement in another way, anything that is taken to cater to the selfishness of personal pleasure, satisfaction, or imagined psychological fulfillment, to the extent that it is lusted after for its own sake independent of any possible God-glorifying aspect in it, is condemned in what the apostle has said. That is because what is in such a way lusted after, even though, if held in proper proportion, it may be legitimately glorifying to God, connotes a turning of the person and his affections on to himself and away from God. The Christian should be prepared to acknowledge that the lust that is here condemned may find expression even within the church and the activities and practices of the church. That can occur when activities that in their proper place might be engaged for the glory of God and thereby be perfectly necessary, become matters of individual exhibitionism and detached from their sacred significance. The Savior's call to us for humility in our serving him clearly points in a very different direction.

John repudiates also the "lust of the eyes." The eyes, of course, provide a gateway to the soul. In addition to what has just been said of the lust of the flesh, the apostle's statement here refers to all that engages the inordinate interest of the person because of its outward show, or because of its ability to cater to passions, and even actions that in themselves can lead to sin that is unworthy of the Christian. It includes the vanity of pomp and splendor, what appeals simply and only to the affective or emotional faculty of the soul and precipitates in the individual a love of mere impression. That applies to many things that the Christian is tempted to do and to agree with as it exists in the world

and might be imported into the Christian's life. It may be clothing, the mere fad of fashion, or the exhibitionism of material things, or conformity to the mores of the world in various ways, in patterns of conduct, language, music, or entertainment for its own sake.

Again, John condemns and warns the Christian against "the pride of life." This is perhaps the most subtle of all. It can be summed up as self-glorification, inordinate ambition beyond the wish to please God by legitimate personal development, or the contempt of others in supposed climbing through social strata, pride of family, of name, or of social status, income, or anything that causes primary focus on the individual and not on the fact that he has a place in the kingdom of God. The pride of life can be expressed in a boasting of one's brain or imagined intelligence or developed gifts and skills, or of the school or college one attended. There are many dimensions on which absorption in the pride of life stands in stark antithesis against the love of God the Father. But against all that, Christ has laid down the perfect direction for us: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness" (Matt 5:6).

But there is a further reason John has in view for not loving the world. "The world passeth away and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (1 John 2:17). If one is foolishly, sadly, shortsightedly committed to the love of the world and the things in it rather than to the love of God, it can only be said of him that he will never find peace or fulfillment or satisfaction, and that he has been deluded into forgetting that his end is coming, the world is passing away, and the day of glory on the one hand and judgment on the other is soon to dawn.

History laughs at the sinner. He imagines that the world provides him with the

stability he seeks. But that is his highest and saddest fallacy. The world is passing away. History moves on the linear trajectory of divine intent. The day is coming, the great eschatological terminus, when “in the dispensation of the fullness of times [God will] gather together all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth” (Eph 1:10). Then those who by the grace of God have learned the joys of the privilege of fellowship with God in this life will rise to the “inheritance . . . predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will” (Eph 1:11).

The curse of the law

The Savoy Declaration at the point we are examining it states thirdly that Christ has purchased for the Christian’s liberty from the curse of the law. We anticipated the fuller meaning of that statement by observing that what is at issue in the freedom from the curse of the law is the establishment of the one church in which both the Jews and the Gentiles are included. That is contemplated in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians where he says that by reason of the redemptive work of Christ, God has “broken down the middle wall of partition” between the Jews and the Gentiles and has made “of twain one new man” (Eph 2:15). The Savoy Declaration, in some editions in which proof texts are referenced, cites Galatians 3:13 in support at this point. It will be useful, therefore, to consider the relevant text at least briefly at this stage.

Again, as we had occasion to refer to the same matter at an earlier stage, it would appear to be vitally necessary to bear in mind the need for a contextual exegesis of the paragraph in which the Savoy’s properly chosen proof text is found. When it is said that

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us,” the first question to be resolved is who is the “us” who have been redeemed from the curse. To answer that question we note from Galatians 3:10 that “as many as are under the works of the law are under the curse.” So that in view at that point is the relation between those who had been given the law and the curse that followed from a failure to fulfill the demands of that law. That in itself is simply a reproduction of the statement in Deuteronomy 27:26, where it is said that “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them.” That contemplated the Mosaic law as it had been given in its complete codified form. Now it follows from the Galatian paragraph that those, then, who were liable to a curse for having failed to fulfill the law were those to whom the law had been given. They, of course, were the nation-church of Israel, those whom God had chosen as his separate people. It follows further that those to whom the law had not been given, the Gentile nations separate from Israel, could not have been subject to potential curse for they were not exposed to its precepts in the same direct way as were the Israelites. If they had not been in possession of the law they could not have been subject to any curse for not having kept the law.

Before we answer our question as to the identity of the “us” in Galatians 3:13, let us note a comment from the nineteenth-century Scottish theologian, John Brown: “I believe the more ordinary method among orthodox interpreters has been to understand the statement in the text as referring directly to all the saved – as a general statement of the way of salvation, and equivalent to, ‘Christ has delivered *us elect sinners*,’ or, ‘*us believers*, from the punishment which the Divine law denounces on us as sinners, by having sustained that punishment in our room,’ This, no doubt, is a truth. But it will

appear plain that this is not the apostle's meaning."¹⁸ Brown goes on to say that "The Gentile believers were, previously to their conversion, under sin and condemnation, as well as the Jewish believers; but not being subject to the Mosaic law, they could not be considered as exposed to *its* curse, and, of course, they could not be represented as redeemed from a curse to which they were never subject."¹⁹ John Brown's classic commentary is worthy of fuller notice.

Our answer to the question of the "us" in Galatians 3:13, then, is that the word refers to Jewish believers, those who had come to faith in Christ. Clearly, Christ had been made a curse of their behalf. Before we address further the state of the Gentiles, let us observe the reason stated in the Galatian context for that deliverance from the curse. The answer to that question is given immediately in the following verse. It was in order, it is said, "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (Gal 3:14). The blessing of Abraham as stated there refers to the blessing of justification by faith, through believing in Christ. It is necessary to see, therefore, a relation in the ordained ordering of God's redemptive decree between, first, the redemption of the believing Jews and second, the admission of the Gentiles to the blessing of Abraham.

What is being said, it can be suggested, is that in the implementation of the redemptive decree of God, a time would come when God's special relation to his special people, the nation-church of Israel, would be terminated. At that time the doors of the kingdom would be thrown wide open to the Gentiles. The promise of long ago, that "Japeth shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen 9:27) would then be fulfilled. Galatians chapter 3 provides us with precisely that. As has been said, at that point the doors of the

¹⁸ John Brown, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129–130.

kingdom were thrown wide open to the Gentiles and the one church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles came into being through, and as a result of, the redeeming work of Christ. The law, in its codified, institutionalized form, we have seen, was given to the nation-church of Israel, not to the Gentiles. At Galatians 3:24, Paul says, “the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.” Careful note is to be taken, of course, that a function of the law is to convict of sin and thereby point the sinner to Christ. Paul had said to the Romans that “by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). And he confessed that “I had not known sin, but by the law . . . but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died” (Rom 7:7–9). But the “schoolmaster” function of the law in the Galatian text may be seen to have a quite different significance. For the purpose of the law as it was given to Israel was to hedge them in and keep them pure from the grossness of sin into which the surrounding nations had fallen. In that hedging-in function, the law was to preserve God’s special people until, and for the purpose that, Christ the redeemer should in due time come from them as had been promised.

But were not the Gentiles, it must properly be asked, under a curse because of their failure to obey and honor the law of God? Of course they were. And the death of Christ redeemed the believing Gentiles from the curse they sustained. But a careful reading of Galatians 3 makes it clear that law relevant to the curse that the Gentiles sustained was not the Mosaic law of which Galatians 3 is eloquent. What, then, was the law involved for the Gentiles? Clearly, it was the law of God as it had been given to Adam at the beginning. From another perspective we may recall that the obligations under the covenant of works, the obligations that accrued from the creation ordinances that God had given to our first parents, were not abrogated or dissolved when Adam fell. The

covenant of works continued, and like all creation ordinances, simply because they were *creation* ordinances, remained obligatory on all people everywhere and at all times. The glory of the gospel is that, as we observed at an earlier stage, Christ came into the world to do for us what we were obligated to do under the covenant of works but could not do for ourselves. So that both the believing Jews and the believing Gentiles were redeemed from the curse they respectively sustained. The promise of Ephesians 2:15 was now fulfilled.

But what is to be said of the status of those who, in the respects now stated, are within the church of God? The Jewish Christians are no longer subject to the Mosaic law in its ceremonial and civil aspects. And the Gentile Christians have seen the obligations under the covenant of works satisfied on their behalf. But we must bring both the Jews and the Gentiles, all members of the church as it has now been established as the present form of administration of the covenant of grace, together to acknowledge a common obligation under law. While the Mosaic law in its ceremonial and civil aspects has been set aside and no longer provides criteria of behavior, the law in its moral aspect, or the moral law, continues to be the rule of life for the Christian.

Conclusion

What, then, is to be said in final response to the statement of the Savoy Declaration that we have addressed? There is a regal law that guides the Christian's life. It is the divine law of righteousness. And the recognition of it opens the way to the fullest examination of the Christian believer's responsibility for, and his progress in, growth in holiness and

likeness to the image of Christ. Christ has sent his Holy Spirit to convey to Christian believers the gifts and benefits that Christ purchased for them, to form them progressively to the pattern of holiness in Christ, and to conduct them at last to glory.

It is to the honor of the authors of the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* that their document has illustriously addressed all relevant necessities for the Christian life. But much that the Savoy has properly to say in relevant directions lies beyond our limits of our present objectives.